You: Why, Lord Ignis, I do declare, you are the finest Lord in all the land.

You: I’d go to the Lordphanage where all the unwanted Lords are, and I’d pick you because you’re the best one, Lord Ignis.

You: If you were a rapper, your name would be Tha Yung Lord Igni$

Ignis: I wish I were properly courting you so that I could end it over this.

—

You’re an unstable film student with commitment issues, and Ignis was the first person you’d ever left a party with who didn’t end up sharing your bed.

Which was, you realized the more you got to know him, a real shame.
Ignis is just this guy, you know?

Chapter Notes

Don’t take this too seriously; it’s meant to play out like a bad romantic comedy. I have no idea what I’m doing. ¯(ツ)_/¯

The air was cold, the leaves along the sidewalk were crunchy, and each person you passed stopped you to ask if they could pet the baby chocobo in your arms. By the fourth person attempting to stop you, you were practically running. Because it was too cold, you didn’t like people prodding at you, and you were in a hurry.

Prompto’s apartment was only two blocks away from your own, yet it felt much more distant with all the attention you were getting because of the chocochick. Which was another reason to hurry; it was actually pretty heavy.

“I thought birds had hollow bones,” you murmured to the chick as you rushed through a crosswalk. It kwehed softly, looking up at you, and you held it a little closer. It was far too cute to be annoyed with. Though only a rental, it was going to be a killer present for your friend.

Prompto’s apartment building came into view, and you smiled in relief. Five flights up —how could such a tall building not have an elevator— and you were panting outside his door. You caught your breath before knocking, telling yourself that being an hour late was still fashionable.

The chick tugged at the drawstring of your jacket as you knocked. Deep breath in, deep breath out. Prompto had said a birthday present was optional but strongly suggested you to just be cool when you get here, whatever that meant. He shouldn’t be one to talk about being cool. You were bringing a pretty good gift so he’d better not complain about the lateness. You’d work on the being cool part.

As soon as the door opened, you grinned, the usual, “Hey, Prom, ready to get trashed!” coming out of your mouth. But standing in the entrance, halfway blocking your path, was someone you didn’t recognize. Someone who looked far too well dressed to be attending one of Prompto’s parties, at least. He gazed at you, confusion clear on his face, hand on the door as if he were ready to close it on you any moment.

So much for being cool.

“Uh, hi,” you said, trying to look past him. He was too tall, though, and you found yourself standing on your tiptoes, looking for a familiar face in the apartment behind him. “Is Prompto home?”

It was a dumb question, and you knew it was a dumb question. But a small part of you worried you’d gotten the date wrong. Even as you heard the music coming from the apartment, even as you caught glimpses of party decor behind the man, you let that little thought bother you. Prompto was one of your only friends, and you liked to think you were pretty close to him, but he’d never invited you to meet any of his other friends until now. What if he’d changed his mind and didn’t want you to come?

“You made it!”
As if sent by the gods to get you to just stop doubting yourself for once, Prompto pushed lightly past the man at the door, who had yet to speak but gave you a scrutinizing look through his glasses. It made you appreciate the way Prompto put an arm around your shoulder, ushering you into his apartment, away from the stranger.

“I almost thought you’d bail on me,” he said, looking from your face to the chocobo in your arms. His eyes lit up, realization dawning on him so clearly you almost laughed. “Is that—!” He looked like he didn’t know what to do with himself, putting the drink in his hand on his coffee table to take the bird from your arms. It kwehed, and he laughed, snuggling it to his chest. Was he crying?

You slid your amused gaze across the room, feeling successful in your birthday gift to him, and tried to assess the situation you’d be dealing with all night. Your anxiety couldn’t handle too many new faces. Thankfully, not too many. Like, only three, actually. All dudes from what you could tell. Oh, Prompto.

The man with glasses was leaning toward another, speaking too quietly for you to hear. You pretended not to notice the way Glasses motioned vaguely toward you, making the other one—a large, tattooed man—look your way. They seemed strangely familiar, probably some friends of Prompto’s in the photography program? Prompto was kind of weird about you meeting his other friends for some reason. Maybe this was why; they seemed…judgemental just based on the few minutes you’ve been here.

You looked around, seeing the two guys from before and finding the third one sitting alone on the sofa with his nose in his phone. You’d walked into a very small sausage fest.

Prompto handed you a drink in a plastic cup, the only certainty of its contents being that it was alcoholic. It seemed birthday boy made a disastrous drink for everyone to equally suffer through.

The drink made you grimace, and you directed your gaze at the one person who hadn’t so much as looked your way. He was slouched down on the sofa. Really, you could barely tell anything about him from where he was sat. It was almost as if he were trying to hide in plain sight.

Downing a much larger gulp of the abomination Prompto had decided was the night’s drink of choice and trying not to die in the process, you walked over to the sofa and sat next to the guy.

“Hi,” you said, putting your cup on the coffee table next to Prompto’s. “How do you know Prom?”

He didn’t look inclined to answer, not that it mattered because Prompto decided that was the moment you guys were going to begin a tour of his favorite video games. Encouraging everyone to join, he began to set everything up. The guy next to you perked up at that, standing up and joining Prompto in the setup process. You blinked, realizing where you’d seen him before.

You watched with surprise as prompto elbowed the prince of Lucis, the chocobo in his arms kwehing excitedly, both guys snickering about something you couldn’t make out.

Suddenly the suggestion to be cool made total sense.

The sofa slumped heavily as someone sat where Noctis had been. Looking over, you weren’t terribly surprised to see the tattooed man. Now you knew why he seemed familiar; he was an important Crownsuard member. You’d seen him in the background of most televised political events. You tried your best to be calm near someone who could probably snap you in half.

“Uh, hey,” you greeted, introducing yourself while reaching for your terrible drink. “How do you know Prom?” You decided giving him the same lines as Noctis would be best.
The guy smirked. “Friend of a friend. Though he’s really grown on me.”

“He does that,” you said, taking a generous drink from your cup. Another wince, and you were done. Prompto loved to mix drinks for his parties, and they were always a nightmare on the senses. Usually you humored him with a drink or two but this was hard to choke down.

The tattooed man chuckled, and you struggled to remember his name. You didn’t care much about politics unless it involved some juicy drama. Like the time Prince Noctis had apparently run away from Insomnia to live on a chocobo farm a few months ago. Obviously not true, but hilarious nonetheless. You looked at the prince again, blinking when you realized he was leaning over the coffee table to hand you a controller. You thanked him as you took it, and he nodded.

“I’m Gladiolus,” said the guy next to you, regaining your attention. He’d managed to rest an arm on the sofa behind your shoulders without you realizing it. “How do you know the pipsqueak?”

That had to be Prompto, and though you didn’t appreciate the sudden closeness, the moniker made you laugh. “We met last semester. Had a class together.” You shrugged, turning on your controller. You felt the barest touch of his arm above your shoulder, fighting an eye roll.

Prompto used a foot to push the coffee table out of the way and sat on the floor in front of you. You hurried to place your cup on the table and join the game, taking that opportunity to get away from Gladiolus. When you returned to sit beside him, he’d dropped his arm to his lap, his own cup of Prompto’s special nightmare drink in hand.

“He’s always torturing us with new drink ideas,” you said, nodding at the cup in his hand.

Drinking it easily, he frowned. “Prefer wine myself.” He toed at Prompto’s back. “What’s in this?”

“All my favorite drinks,” Prompto replied, not turning around.

“Prompto-themed party, apparently,” Noctis said with a snort.

You snickered, asking, “Have you guys not suffered Prompto’s drinks before?”

Prompto elbowed your leg, but Gladiolus chuckled. “He made a meat pie drink once. Used three different steaks and broke Noct’s blender.”

“I said I was sorry about that!” Prompto defended as he went through the menu screens. “You liked it, right Noct?”

“Yeah,” Noctis said, looking over his shoulder at you while shaking his head slightly. You snickered again, joining the game. Maybe they were cool after all.

The only people not playing were Gladiolus and Glasses, who you definitely recognized as another important member of the prince’s retinue, but couldn’t place his name. He sat on the other side of Gladiolus, watching everything quietly.

At some point, the chocobo in Prompto’s lap decided it wasn’t getting enough attention. It clawed its way up to you, past Gladiolus and into the guy’s empty lap. He seemed surprised, but ran gloved hands across its soft feathers after a little hesitation. No one could resist a baby chocobo, not even someone who looked like the most uptight guy on Eos.

Prompto pouted, looking over his shoulder, briefly distracted by the abandonment. The rest of you used that moment to gang up on his character, and you giggled when he quickly realized what was happening, attention snapping back to the screen.
When it was time to choose the next level, you gave Gladiolus the controller, excusing yourself to go outside. This party was so much smaller than any you’d ever been to, for which you were eternally grateful to Prompto. But the sheer importance of the few people there kind of wigged you out. Prompto had occasionally mentioned his best friend in a vague sense for as long as you’d known him, and his hush hush attitude about it always made you suspicious of its validity. You’d thought he was embarrassed that his best friend was actually his mom or someone imaginary, not the prince of Lucis himself.

No one seemed to care when you stepped out onto the fire escape, lighting up a joint you’d picked up while on campus. It was the only way you knew how to relax. Leaving the window cracked just enough so that the smoke wouldn’t waft into Prompto’s apartment, you leaned against the railing and watched people pass by below. The wind picked up a little. You pulled your light jacket around yourself tighter, not that it made a difference. The sun was setting so it was about to become even colder.

A group of teens walked along the sidewalk across the street. You watched them smash a pumpkin on someone’s stoop before running away, rounding a corner. Did you just witness a crime? Probably not. Unless being a complete jackass was a crime. You took a deep drag, not wanting to think about it. It was your best friend’s birthday for Shiva’s sake.

“Excuse me.”

You turned, joint caught between your lips as you noticed Glasses at the window, chocobo in his arms. He was leaning down slightly, peering through the glass just inches from you. It would’ve been funny if you weren’t a bit startled by how handsome he actually was up close like this. He lifted a hand to adjust the glasses on his face, the chocobo’s feathers ruffling as it shifted in his arms.

You took the joint from your mouth, licking your lips absently. “Yeah?” His name was on the tip of your tongue. You’d read something really funny about him recently in a tabloid. Or maybe it was some other royal retainer? The curiosity of it bit at the edge of your mind, but it was easily pushed aside as you took another drag, enjoying the waves of calm covering you.

“Would you mind being responsible for your gift?” He lifted the chocobo, as if you wouldn’t have known what he meant.

The waning sunlight glinted off of the glass between you, and you could see your reflection over his frustrated expression. You looked tired, as always, and hated seeing the reminder. Looking away, back out at the neighboring buildings, you said, “Sure, one sec.”

A final pull of the joint, and you put it out against the brick siding. You heard the window sliding open, and turned to help him get it up. Prompto lived in an ancient building, everything creaked and things like windows and door hinges were known to be stubborn. The guy would have a hard time getting it open with only one hand.

You expected a thanks or at least some kind of relief on his face when you helped him slide it open, but he only continued to look annoyed. He visibly stilled at your proximity, both of you sharing the window space, no longer separated by a layer of glass. You held your hands out for the chocobo, but he was looking at you carefully, unmoving.

“Were you smoking marijuana?” The question was sudden, his tone disapproving. The chocobo kept shifting in his arms, reaching its beak up to his face to nip at him. He barely seemed to notice, intent on scolding you.

Mind lulling from the pleasant high, you shrugged. “Uh, yeah?”
His mouth a straight line, he shook his head. “That’s a criminal offense,” he began. “I suggest you —” He was cut off abruptly when the chocobo snatched the glasses from his face, hopping from his arms into yours.

You gasped, falling back several steps as you caught it in your arms. Glasses stumbled over his words, an arm reaching through the window to get his spectacles back. His fingers softly brushed the chocobo, then your arms, not quite reaching. He looked so startled, acting quickly and stepping out through the window after the bird. It was enough to make you laugh, though you found yourself surprised as well when the chocobo jumped from your arms and glided right down to the sidewalk below, glasses still held firmly in its beak.

He cursed under his breath once he was next to you a moment later. You watched the chocobo wander down the sidewalk for a second before you bolted down the fire escape stairs. This was bad; the chocobo should not be loose in the streets. You struggled against the relaxed state of your mind, checking on the chocobo after each flight of stairs you descended. This wasn’t the best thing to be doing while high.

At the bottom, you had to kick the ladder down using all of your weight. At each rung as you climbed down, you called for the chocobo to come to you. But it wandered further, completely ignoring you in favor of literally anything else near it—a leaf in the wind, some colorful trash on the ground. By the time your feet hit the pavement, it had disappeared.

“We must hurry.” Glasses stepped down from the ladder, eyes slightly narrowed in the direction the chocobo had went. You nodded, a little surprised at his intent to join you in the pursuit. Without his glasses, he looked just as serious but less intimidating.

You walked down the street, the man at your heel, and surveyed the area for any sign of the little yellow ball of feathers. It was nowhere to be seen, which seemed impossible. It couldn’t be that fast, could it?

Oh, but wait. What’s that?

“A clue!” You pointed at a yellow feather, nestled between some autumnal decor on someone’s stoop. Picking it up, you showed it to the man before walking farther. It didn’t seem to lead anywhere, but you had to continue on. You hated the thought behind it, but you kept checking the road for any sign of the little bird just in case the worst happened. Not that you’d seen any cars pass recently.

“Not so much a clue, really,” the man spoke up, steps behind you.

Stopping at a crosswalk, you spared a flat look at him over your shoulder. But he wasn’t looking at you. Instead, he’d noticed something along the sidewalk around the corner and turned to keep walking rather than stop and cross the street with you. Curious, you followed him past a few shops before he bent down to retrieve his glasses. While he inspected them, you searched for the chocobo again. It had to be nearby.

“You ought to make better choices,” he said as he slid the glasses back into place.

Your gaze went to him, confusion clear on your face. “What?”

“Of all the birthday gifts,” he said, eyes suddenly very scrutinizing. “You had to choose a live chocobo. It’s not a children’s party.”

“Prompto loves chocobos,” you said with a shrug, thinking that explanation should be enough.
“Even so.” With the glasses on again, his intimidating demeanor returned. Not in a threatening sense. More like you felt you needed his approval. It was a gross feeling that your hazy mind rejected. He dusted some imaginary lint from his jacket. “It was a poor choice.”

Crunching a few leaves beneath your feet as you shifted your weight, you kept your gaze steady to his and asked, “What’s with you, Glasses?”

“Pardon?”

You raised a brow. “You’re reprimanding me like I’m some kid you have to babysit, and you haven’t even introduced yourself yet.”

His eyes widened in realization. “Oh,” he said, looking away, not in embarrassment but in confusion. “My apologies. I’d forgotten in our haste…”

You held a hand out, and he trailed off, looking down and taking it in his for a quick shake. Never in your life had you shaken someone’s hand like that as a greeting. But something had you thinking he would appreciate the gesture. His hand was too soft and too warm, and it wasn’t until he let go that you realized how cold you were.

“Prompto’s mentioned you,” he said once you’d introduced yourself to each other. The comment itself didn’t seem to imply anything negative, but the way he’d avoided speaking to you at first meeting had you thinking this Ignis person didn’t think highly of what Prompto had said of you. Instead of thinking about that you suggested furthering the search before you lost hope. Plus you were freezing.

“There are typically trackers placed on such rentals,” he said, giving an alleyway a cursory glance as you both passed.

“I don’t want the rental place to know I lost their chocobo,” you told him. You pulled your jacket around you a little tighter, but, like before, it made no difference.

“They’ll likely charge you a fee,” he continued. He sounded entirely unsympathetic and almost as if he’d already given up the search.

Thoughts were conflicting in your mind — missing chocobo, handsome man saying dumb things, Prompto wanted you to be cool — and you tried your best to sift through them with some effort. It was hard to focus. The itching at the edge of your mind returned, the question of where you’d heard of this guy coming back to the forefront. Ignis Scientia. You’d definitely heard that name recently.

Then it clicked.

“You’re the count with the dark secret,” you said, stopping mid step and pointing at him. “Last month, the Insomnian Enquirer wrote an article about you.”

He looked surprised again, for only a moment before his expression morphed into chagrin. “Why am I not surprised you read such tripe?”

Thinking back on the article, you walked forward again, eyes roaming the street. The title had been “Count Scientia Harbors Dark Secret” only they’d made an extreme typo and left out the ‘o’ in count. You let his comment pass because it was a pretty embarrassing thing to happen to a person; of course he’d hate you bringing it up.

Okay, you thought as you stopped at another crossing, you needed to focus. Just be cool and focus, and you’d find that damn chocobo.
At the end of the block, a group of people in costumes stood outside a nightclub that was absolutely bumping with music. They filtered in slowly, a few staying behind to smoke or talk. A bouncer at the entrance eyed you and Ignis as you stopped in front of the club. You approached him first, smiling though he only deigned to look at you blankly.

“Have you seen a baby chocobo come by?” You asked, lifting your hands up to gesture. “It’s, like, this big and it’s yellow.”

The man slid his gaze between you and your temporary companion before speaking. “I saw a couple take one inside a few minutes ago.”

Your jaw dropped a little. Someone had the audacity to actually steal the poor little chocobo? “But that’s my chocobo! Can I go inside and get it back?”

“The fee’s ten gil,” he said, crossing his arms.

You slapped at your pockets, frowning. You’d left your bag at Prompto’s. All you had on you was your phone. Pulling it out, you noticed you’d gotten a new message.

**Prompto:** where r u?

You didn’t open the text, sliding your phone back into a pocket and looking at the bouncer pleadingly. “I only want to grab the chocobo and leave. Please?”

“Ten gil,” the bouncer repeated. His gaze went from you to Ignis again. “Per person. Couples only.”

Standing back as a few more costumed partiers paid and entered the club, you looked at Ignis, feeling determined but probably looking haggard as hell. You were very cold and the ability to keep your thoughts straight was seemingly beyond you at this time.

“I’ll pay you back,” you started off. “We’ll just go in and get it back. It’s like two minutes, tops.”

Ignis pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Think reasonably for a moment,” he said, eyes flitting to the bouncer for a second. “He could be lying just to get money from us.”

You eyed the bouncer again, and he looked at you blankly. He didn’t seem all that clever. “He’s just doing his job,” you said, looking at Ignis again. “C’mon, it’s your fault the chocobo got lost in the first place.”

He started. “*My fault?”*

You smiled at how reactive he was before he quickly schooled his features. “Yes, you’re the one who held it out the window. Now, take responsibility for your poor choices and pay the man.” Catching the way his eyes narrowed behind his glasses, you tacked on, “Please.”

A long moment passed, then he pulled out his wallet to give the man twenty gil. He frowned at the band put on his wrist at the door, but you grinned at him as he waited for them to put one on you.

“Thanks, Ignis,” you said, looking at the colorful band. It was better than the stamps that some clubs put on your hands. Sometimes those took days to wear off. Stepping through the entrance, you heard Ignis grumble about the club not carding either of you. You weren’t going to complain. You were old enough to enter, but seeing as you didn’t have your ID on you, their low attention to legal practice was working in your favor.

The effects of entering the club were immediate. It was suddenly warm, then hot as you walked
between crowds of people. The change sent chills over your cold skin, grateful for the warmth, however intense. The bass from the music reverberated off the walls and floor, and you found yourself walking toward the dance floor. A hand on your arm stopped you just steps from the strobe lights, and you looked over your shoulder to see Ignis shaking his head. Sheepishly, you nodded and followed him toward the bar instead.

You leaned on the only open space of the bar, trying to get the bartender’s attention. He zoomed about, skipping over you in favor of people holding up empty glasses. You looked back at Ignis, who seemed to understand without you asking. He leaned into you, pressing you a little into the bar and casually raising a hand with a largely numbered note of gil between his fingers. The bartender suddenly noticed you, asking just over the music what he could get you.

“Two bourbon, neat,” Ignis said, pressing against your back as he handed the man the bill. His voice rang so clearly in your ear, over the bassline and the shouts of other patrons. “The finest that will get, if you will.”

You elbowed him, feeling uncomfortable by how nice he smelled, and he backed away a step. The bartender placed two glasses on the bar in front of you. As he poured the drinks, you asked, practically yelling, “Have you seen a baby chocobo?”

He pushed the glasses your way, nodding toward a doorway you could just make out on the far wall, obscured by costumed dancers. “One was taken to the lounge maybe ten minutes ago.”

You nodded, taking one of the cups, handing one to Ignis as you turned around. You guessed the other was meant for you, and even if it wasn’t, you were already holding your breath and taking a drink. Liquor was your go-to, less calories than beer and not nearly as bitter as wine, but you were used to the cheaper stuff. It burned going down. Holding your breath had been a good idea, keeping you from coughing at the sensation. Taking another drink, probably too soon after the first—you were young and getting crossfaded was nothing new—you stepped away from the bar, pushing past a few people as you made your way to the “lounge”.

On the way there, you were stopped by a sexy, feminine jester of some sort. It wasn’t lost on you that you and Ignis were the only people not wearing Halloween costumes. It was the Saturday before Halloween. Maybe Prompto’s party was so small because everyone else he invited had other parties to attend, like this one.

“Hey, sweetheart. Wanna dance?”

You leaned into the hand touching your upper arm, the person’s painted face drawing close to yours. Clowns weren’t even remotely your thing, but she had a sultry tone you kind of liked.

“No, thank you,” Ignis answered for you, putting a hand on your shoulder and steering you away from them.

“That was rude of you,” you said, though you were grateful. You needed to keep your thoughts on track, flirting was only a distraction. You finished off your drink with a grimace and put it on a table as you passed, amused at how bad you were at this. You’d just wanted to calm your nerves on the fire escape, as you often did at Prompto’s parties, and now you were trying to grasp some sense of control with no actual finesse.

You blamed Ignis. It had been hard when you were just high, but now there was music thrumming so loudly through you, the heat of the atmosphere making you unzip your jacket, a firm hand on your shoulder that slid down your arm to your wrist, and a buzz enveloping your mind as the alcohol settled in your empty stomach.
The lounge was quieter, though not by much, just through an open archway. Less people littered the open space, most patrons sitting at tables where cards were in hand and chips were being pushed around. You spotted the chocobo almost immediately as it sat calmly in the lap of a woman dressed like a vampire. Eyes widening at the audacity, you stepped forward quickly only to be held back by the hand at your wrist. Stopping, you looked back at Ignis and tugged your hand from his grip.

“What?”

“We must approach this carefully,” he said, plainly enough, though it might as well have been a whisper against the music. “I haven’t seen anything to signify that this is a legitimate gambling operation.”

You blinked, waiting for further explanation as to why he was trying to keep you from just getting the chocobo back. It wasn’t like you wanted to gamble. This was supposed to be a quick rescue mission, but already you were a little buzzed, veering off plan with each minute that passed.

Instead of saying anything further, he brought his glass to his lips, sipping the bourbon with little reaction to its sharp taste. He licked his lips, a quick, thoughtless movement that had you looking away. It was hot in here.

Looking at the chocobo again, and the woman who held it captive, you noticed the man she was sitting next to. He had an arm around her, wearing an ill-fitting suit, a toothpick flipping from one side of his mouth to the other like a bad movie villain. You could see the handle of a handgun sticking out of his trousers. How subtle. Maybe that's what his costume was meant to be. Or was he actually dangerous?

“You joining the table?” You realized too late that the dangerous-looking man was staring right at you, waiting for an answer.

“Yes,” you answered automatically, taking one of the empty seats. You looked up at Ignis, waiting to see what he’d decide to do. He clearly didn’t approve of any of this —what the hell he did approve of, you certainly wanted to know.

It was a moment before he took a seat next to you, setting his glass on the table and looking at you reluctantly. The rules were laid out for you, short and concise, and Ignis placed a bet—one covering you both, as this thing seemed to be a “couples only” occasion as the bouncer had insisted.

He didn’t say anything as the dealer on the other side of the table dealt out cards, the quick *fwip* of each one causing a little ball of excitement to rise in your stomach. You’d never gambled and had no idea what game you’d just entered. All that mattered was that you kept an eye on the chocobo.

A few rounds went by, and it didn’t seem as if you were doing well. Your excitement dwindled into mild distress. Ignis remained silent, keeping his expression blank. The chocobo thieves were consistent winners, the woman giggling whenever the man showed her his hand. The chocobo *kwehed* each time, and you found yourself checking on it often.

“You interested in my girl’s bird?” The man asked between hands. He chewed on the toothpick, staring at you with narrowed eyes and a hard frown.

You huffed out a breath, slapping your hand down on the table. “It’s not—”

Ignis placed a hand over yours, surprising you into pausing. “Yes,” he said. “Are you willing to bet it?”

Eyes snapping to him, you tried to figure out what his plan was. You’d been doing terrible so far,
there was no chance you could win the chocobo. Even if you could, why would you need to? It was your chocobo! Technically! You should snatch it right out of her lap right now and stop wasting time. What was the guy going to do, shoot you? You very much doubted the gun was real.

“Alright,” said the man, smirking at the woman, then at both of you. “What are you willing to match for it?”

Ignis took a moment to think, reaching into a pocket of his jacket with his free hand and pulling out a solid gold pocket watch. He pushed it toward the center where the chips were stacked neatly. You hated the way the man’s face lit up at the sight, the woman next to him giggling. They clearly approved.

Looking at the dealer and hoping for some kind of interference, you were disappointed at them just nodding their head, letting go of the outside betting.

Ignis leaned toward you, quietly saying, “Trust me.”

Trust him? Trust him? You jerked your hand out from under his, pursing your lips. You could hardly trust yourself in this state, let alone someone you just met. Someone with a supposed Dark Secret. “Why should I?” you whispered, raising your hand to your mouth to keep the conversation private. As if it mattered.

Rather than answer you, he let the dealer know he was ready, beginning the next hand. You kicked him under the table, and he grunted inelegantly, giving you a sharp side glance. There was about one drink left in his glass of bourbon from what you could tell. You eyed it, wondering if he was going to finish it. You were suddenly wont to drink until you were comfortably numb. Comfortable wasn’t a word you’d use for your time spent with Ignis so far.

While the hand quickly played out, you kicked at Ignis again. What was he doing? You guys should take the chocobo and run. He caught your foot between his own, his expression still blank even as you tugged against his grip. You rocked in your chair as you tried to get free, giving up when the woman with your chocobo gave you a funny look. Grabbing Ignis’ cup, you drank the rest of his bourbon, enjoying the burn and the annoyed little wrinkle that formed at his brow.

You hadn’t been paying attention to the game so when Ignis revealed his cards to the table, it didn’t occur to you that you had won until he finally set your foot free. The woman was practically sobbing while handing the chocobo over to you. Her partner glared at you and Ignis, who was up and pulling you with him by your elbow as he slipped his golden watch back into his pocket.

The chocobo kwehed softly, resting its beak in the warmth of your chest. It seemed tired, and you couldn’t help but feel the same. You let Ignis lead you back through the club, past the bar. The music resounded all over, so much louder than before.

Right out the door, cold hitting you like a wall, Ignis let go of your elbow and turned to you. The cute little wrinkle at his brow was still there. You felt the goofy smile growing on your face, too faded to be embarrassed or upset or any of the other various things you’d felt throughout the evening. He looked entirely unimpressed by you, but it only made you smile more.

“I guess I should’ve trusted you after all. How did you win?” you asked as you began your walk back to Prompto’s.

“Simple maths,” was the only thing he said. He was very skilled at giving unsatisfying answers.

The cold bit at your skin, wind blowing through your opened jacket. You juggled the chocobo
between arms, struggling to zip up your jacket with the bird inside. An attempt to keep you both warm that wasn’t working out. You stumbled a little over the uneven pavement.

“Oh, for Shiva’s sake,” Ignis said, taking hold of your jacket hem. You stopped, getting his help in the task. He zipped up your jacket carefully, only making it halfway as the chocobo was a bit too round to fit completely.

You looked from the snug chocobo to Ignis. “Thanks.”

“Of course,” he answered, both of you setting back toward Prompto’s. “Though, I can’t fathom why you wish to do something so silly as share a coat with a chocobo.”

“For warmth,” you defended as if it made perfect sense. “But I meant thanks for winning the chocobo back.”

He pressed the walk button at a crosswalk, the annoyed look on his face smoothing out. “It was the right thing to do. I was partially at fault,” he said quietly, keeping his gaze forward.

You stepped along the crosswalk with long strides, making sure to step only on the white lines. “So you admit some guilt.”

He didn’t respond, letting silence fill the space between you until your clouded mind produced another thought so strongly, it tumbled from your mouth. “Are you gonna report that place?”

At this, he did say something after looking at you for a moment. “No.”

“Huh,” you said intelligently. “But they were breaking so many laws.”

“To our advantage.”

You shrugged, not too worried about it. The motion made the chocobo squirm, and you calmed it with a few pats to its head. “Can't believe you ran so far away.”

Ignis looked at you again, peering down at the chocobo. “All the way to a nightclub no less.”

You giggled, body feeling light. “Maybe it just wanted to dance.” Without waiting for him to say anything to that, you realized something, looking at him quickly. “Are you worried people recognized you? I mean, in a place like that.”

It seemed he’d thought about this already as his statement seemed thought out. “I'm not that recognizable. Nor do I bear any fame. Even if that were the case, I wouldn't be recognized by anyone who frequents such a place.”

Chewing your lip, you considered his words. “I recognized you. Someone else might’ve.”

The corners of his mouth drew down, and you watched him pull out his phone, suddenly intent on something that you couldn’t see. You remembered Prompto’s message to you, the one you’d ignored, and lamented the position of the chocobo, keeping you from reaching into your pocket for the device. You’d see Prompto soon, anyway. He was probably going to laugh at you for this.

Ignis didn’t put away his phone until you were a block closer to your destination, the worried lines returning to his nice face. Only for a moment this time, though. Once he noticed you watching, he became expressionless.

“I’m surprised you recognized me, to be quite frank.” The words came out of him quietly, and it took
You’d blame it on your inebriety, but his willingness to talk delighted you. You smiled at nothing as you shrugged again. “I’ll be frank, too. You look much better in person. The Insomnian Enquirer is merciless.”

“Indeed,” he agreed, holding his hands in gentle fists at his sides as the wind blew past you.

“No pockets in those trousers?” you asked, realizing it sounded a bit weird after you’d said it. “For your hands, I mean.”

“I’m afraid not,” he said, not sounding too bothered by the fact despite how he shivered slightly.

As you both turned a corner, Prompto’s building came into view. You stumbled a little more, the alcohol warming you from the inside but making your thoughts impossible to discern. You kept looking at him, trying to guess what he was thinking rather than deal with your own mess of a brain. He had been so expressive earlier, but now he was a closed book.

He didn’t speak again until you were trudging up the stairs inside Prompto’s building. It was out of the cold, but the air was stagnant and chilly all the same. So when your fingers hesitantly grazed the freezing cold railing in your ascent, it sent a chill over you, making you stumble yet again.

“Mind your step,” Ignis said from behind you. Gripping your shoulders, he steadied you. His hands were cold. It wasn’t something you could feel but you could sense it in how rigid his fingers were around your shoulders. Reaching up your free hand, you grabbed one of his—just to confirm your suspicion—and weren’t surprised to feel the cold touch of skin and leather.

Turning around, you looked at him, eye line made even by your position on the stairs. His free hand fell from your shoulder, but he made no move to pull the other hand away. Curiosity was on his face. You saw it in the slight arch of his brow. He looked so nice up close, you thought for the nth time that evening.

You tugged at his glove slightly, asking, “May I?”

Immediately, he shook his head. “No.” He said this, yet his hand remained in your grasp and those curious little edges of his expression only grew.

Heeding his rejection, you didn’t try taking off the glove. But you did gently squeeze his hand before placing it on the chocobo, whose feathers ruffled in response. “Warm, right? Not such a silly idea now.”

He actually chuckled at this. “It remains silly, but I can see the merit.”

Delighted all over again, you grinned. The chocobo kwehed softly, and you were hesitant to continue the trek up the last flight of stairs to Prompto’s apartment. A window of opportunity was closing.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Ignis looked up from the chocobo, meeting your eyes. “Sure.”

“What’s your dark secret?”

He frowned slightly. “You believe that article?”

It had been purposefully vague, and you had stopped reading it once you realized it wasn’t actually going to reveal the alleged secret. You weren’t prone to believing that kind of thing, anyway, but
you were just a little crossfaded and felt that Ignis would only talk about it—if at all—while no one else was around. “No. That’s why I’m asking you directly.”

He drew his hand away from the chocobo, away from you, and used it to adjust his glasses. “What do you think it may be?”

You latched onto his words, your hesitation at the question melting away in light of his willingness to talk. “Based on tonight? I’d say… a gambling addiction.”

He adjusted a glove before crossing his arms, the hint of a smirk on his mouth. “I’d advise against such slander.”

“Either that or you’re an alien,” you said, your smile growing.

“I’ve no doubt the article implied as much,” he said. His gaze was unwavering. “Why so curious, may I ask?”

Shrugging, you answered, “I’m always curious.” It had a lot less to do with him and whatever secret he might have and a lot more to do with your own inability to keep your nose out of other people’s business.

Dropping his arms to his sides, he stepped around you. Over his shoulder, he called back, “We should return before the others begin their own search.”

—

Prompto looked between you and Ignis when he opened the door. “Where were you guys?”

“ Took the bird for a walk,” you said, going in first, unzipping and letting the chocobo jump down and skitter towards Prompto. He looked skeptical to say the least as he bent to pick it up. You felt kind of bad, guilt, as always, bubbling up in you at the look on his face. There hadn’t been time to explain before you took off, and it’d taken longer to find the bird than you could’ve guessed.

Ignis entered after you, shutting the door behind him as he spoke. “We walked the chocobo down the block and had a drink because the ones you’re serving are nightmarish.”

You were ready to correct him and explain what actually happened, but stopped yourself. He had bought you a drink so he wasn’t exactly lying.

“Didn’t wanna invite us?” Gladiolus asked from the couch. He was hanging a large arm over the back of it, dark eyes tracing a line between you and Ignis, similar to Prompto.

“No need to be jealous,” Ignis said, a smooth response, another one you hadn’t expected from him. “We merely had a drink.”

Kicking off your shoes, you glanced between the men, wondering if they were boyfriends and how you could’ve missed such a thing.

Noctis spoke up, standing from his place on the floor in front of the tv. “Wouldn’t be Gladio’s first time as a third wheel.”

Gladiolus laughed, agreeing with the prince. Okay, so they weren’t dating, you guessed? Still seemed like a weird line of conversation, but things were always like that between close friends. You just weren’t in the loop.
Wondering if it would be a big deal to just go back to the video games without much more
discussion of what you and Ignis had been up to, you looked at Prompto for guidance on where this
gathering was headed. Your mind was too hazy to deal with any of it. “Is it time for cake?”

His face lit up, blue eyes widening, and you loved the sight. “Yes!”

—

By the time everyone cleared out, sometime past midnight, you were almost disappointed to see them
go. The chocobo had made its rounds between everyone throughout the night, and it was held
closely in your arms as they made their way out of Prompto’s apartment. You were not taking any
chances on a repeat of your earlier adventure. Once you were alone with Prompto, you let the chick
down to roam a little bit, knowing what was coming next.

He pinned you with stare, sitting down next to you on the couch. “So, I gotta know what happened.”

You knew what he was talking about but weren’t sure what to say. Ignis had withheld information
about it earlier, which you weren’t sure the purpose of, and you didn’t know if he’d mind you telling
Prompto about it — the chasing, the gambling, the conversation in the stairwell. You’d sobered from
earlier, drinking only water rather than Prompto’s swill all evening. With a clearer head, you felt
inclined to keep details sparse.

“We went a few blocks east to some club,” you said, drawing your knees up, a shrug rolling over
your shoulders. “We each had a drink and came back.”

Prompto didn’t look convinced. Not because you were so obviously hiding something, but because
he so clearly wanted there to be some juicy information to be had. Even if you told him everything,
he would’ve been disappointed. “You were gone for a long time. We didn’t even see you leave.”

“Uh,” you hadn’t thought about that. You’d been in such a rush down the fire escape that it hadn’t
crossed your mind. The chocobo marched across the room in front of you, finding interest in
anything and everything it passed, pecking here and there. “The bird took us for quite a walk, if you
wanna know the whole truth.”

He snorted, bending down to pet the chocobo. “I bet.” When he looked at you again, it was your
turn to fix him with your gaze.

“So, more importantly…” you began, stretching out your legs and kicking at him lightly. “Your best
friend is the Prince of Lucis?”

Prompto grinned, picking up the chocobo to pet it more easily. “Yeah, I was waiting for that.”

“I can’t believe you kept that a secret from me for months.” You hadn’t thought he could keep a
secret at all. The rest of that night was spent listening to him explain how he befriended Noctis and,
by extension, the other two. He tried to glaze over his stint with joining the Crownsguard, admitting
he’d decided not to in the end. You were glad he hadn’t, though you didn’t say so. You wouldn’t
have met him if he’d joined.

Noctis may have been his best friend, but Prompto was yours.
It sucks to be me right now!

Chapter Summary

You're a loner, baby.

It was only a single train ride from your apartment to campus, and you took it later than Prompto because he overworked himself with early work shifts. He’d say you were the one guilty of overworking, but you weren’t the one with three part time jobs and a full time class schedule.

Like you, he wasn’t from a particularly well off background so overworking came as easily and naturally as breathing.

Unlike you, he actually needed the extra money because he hadn’t spent all of high school creating a portfolio good enough to earn a full ride to the Insomnian University of Fine Art. It was a wonder he could afford it at all, even with his jobs.

You weren’t above wondering if Noctis had any help in that, though, now that you knew they were so close.

Biting the inside of your cheek, you stopped that line of thought before it could begin to fester. Don’t be bitter, you told yourself. Why you couldn’t control stray thoughts like that was beyond you.

The train halted at its next stop, tipping you forward in your seat. More people shuffled in, and you were a single sardine in a supersized can.

You held back a sigh, reminding yourself it was a short ride.

—

**Prompto:** have any plans 4 halloween??

He was absolutely out of control with the emojis. There were pumpkins, ghosts, skulls, and, gods bless the guy, a single eggplant buried in between a few monster faces. He knew you so well.

**You:** A date with the Boy.

**Prompto:** cool. same boy?

Always, he asked, and always, the answer remained the same.

**You:** No, new Boy.

**Prompto:** ditch him & cum w/me to a haunted house

**You:** Invite Noctis instead.

**Prompto:** hes cumin 2. it’ll be the 3sum u always wanted

**You:** Don’t promise me a good time.
**Prompto:** ugh no! u sound like gladio

**You:** You brought it up and you keep saying cum! Will Gladio be there, too?

**Prompto:** idk

**You:** I’ll be there if he comes and flexes the whole time.

You let the conversation drop from there, your last class of the day beginning. Prompto’s behavior over the past couple of days had been weird in that he kept bringing up the prince in any context of a hang out. *Come over to play games with me, Noct’s here! Or Noct has the new edition of that comic you love, wanna meet us at that cafe on east and caelum to check it out?* Turning down each offer to get to know the prince further was easy, the anxiety of trying to befriend and impress someone like the Prince of Lucis wasn’t something you wanted to deal with.

You had nothing against Noctis. If Prompto liked him so much, he had to be a good guy. Right? The problem lay somewhere within you.

Out of class, you adjusted the bag at your back and read down the list of messages from Prompto that often awaited you when he was being particularly stubborn about something.

**Prompto:** he will prob b there 2 but NO flexing

**Prompto:** he usually sticks w/noct

**Prompto:** it’ll be fun if u cum! i kno u love scary stuff! noct does too

**Prompto:** i just kno u 2 will get along...

He really wanted you and Noctis to be friends. You really wanted a smoke. Seeking relief, you stole away in between buildings on the smoke free campus and wondered why he was being so persistent.

**You:** Titan’s balls, Prom. Count me in.

——

You were, arguably, the only one dressed practically for the occasion. The cactuar costume you’d chosen covered you from toe to tip so you were warm when you waited in line outside the haunted house.

Prompto and Noctis had—it was adorable, really—decided to wear matching outfits as assassins. The costumes hung off their frames, leaving much uncovered, and you almost felt bad at the sight of the goosebumps across Noctis’ arms in the chilly night air.

Gladiolus wasn’t wearing a shirt at all and looked completely at ease. If that was his idea of a costume, you weren’t impressed. Cool tattoo, though.

When it came to the actual haunted house, the big guy practically ruined every scary moment by laughing. You casted him annoyed glances through the dark that went unnoticed as the four of you made your way through the building.

Once through the exit, you opened your mouth to voice your complaints, but a scream escaped instead as a last second scare jumped at you. Nothing creative, just a masked man with a chainsaw. Before you knew what was happening, though, Gladiolus had pushed Noctis—and by extension, you and Prompto—behind himself.
Then he punched the poor guy in the face.

"I think you got scared," you said, smirking at the way Gladiolus casually rolled his shoulder. He sat across from you in the booth at a diner, elbowing Prompto in the head as he stretched. Next to you, Noctis shoved fries into his mouth, not saying much.

Gladiolus shrugged, grunting. "It was instinct."

You snorted. "To punch him?"

His eyes met yours. "I could’ve killed him."

The smile on your face dropped, and your gaze darted to Prompto in alarm. He was too busy fixing his hair from when Gladiolus had elbowed him to notice.

You looked to Noctis instead, but he didn’t say anything. He was a little pink in the face, embarrassed at what had happened, you guessed, and wasn’t willing to save you. You joined him in stuffing fries into your mouth as Gladiolus laughed loudly into the din of the diner.

After months of obtaining copies of the change of address form and sliding them under your landlady’s door only for them to go ignored, you had finally gotten Aranea to sign one. She’d left it on your fridge after oh so kindly taking some of your food.

Standing in line at the Royal Mail department of the Citadel, you made a mental note for a grocery stop on the way home. And maybe a place that sold padlocks. You needed to lock everything, or she’d soon be sharing your toothbrush.

It was his lilting voice that you picked up first, coming from a connecting hall. His accent was matched with another, the same lilt but older, more clipped. You peeked over the people waiting in front of you, spotting him almost instantly as he strode through the archway that led from the hall to the larger room where you stood in line. Next to him was an older man with a similar air of discipline, and your mind immediately placed him as his uncle.

You’d Moogled both Gladio and Ignis after Prompto’s party. It would’ve been weirder if you hadn’t. So you knew his only family was his uncle, and that the slightly shorter man with well groomed but graying hair happened to be just that.

They stopped short of cutting through the line, Ignis turning to his uncle with a sharp frown. “That’s an impossible expectation.”

His uncle, for all of his austere put-togetherness, blinked before sighing. “Perhaps.”

“Is there no consideration for my preferences or—” Ignis began, the careful brows on his face furrowing behind his glasses.

“It’s neither the time nor place,” his uncle interrupted, voice suddenly sharper. It was not unkind, but you could see even from six feet away that Ignis stood a little straighter at the interruption.

“Apologies.” He gazed at the line, eyes following it up to the person lucky enough to be at the head,
talking to someone behind a counter. “Is *this* what Dulcis has to contend with each day?”

—

Your hand lifted of its own accord. Those stressed points of his face, the fine line of his mouth as it pursed, it all bade your body in a direction that your mind slowly followed, seconds behind.

“Ignis!” You stepped out of line. It was an awful decision that made your anxiety spike, but that was quickly swallowed by the sight ofIgnis’ brows raising, the lines on his face disappearing into mild surprise.

“Good afternoon,” he said, sounding automatic, as if he weren’t quite sure what else to say.

You stopped in front of them, gathering your papers into one arm to hold out your other hand to his uncle. He looked at it briefly before taking it in his own.

“Nice to meet you,” you choked out, the anxiety catching up with you once he let go of your hand. What the hell were you *doing*?

“Likewise,” his uncle said, looking at Ignis in confusion. “Care to introduce me to your friend, Ignis?”

“Ah,” Ignis hesitated, still looking at you. Then, it hit you. He didn’t remember who you were.

—

He recovered well, telling his uncle you were a new friend.

“Through Prompto,” you supplied along with your name, a smile slipping onto your face.

“Yes,” he nodded appreciatively. “He introduced us.”

“I see.” His uncle looked at you carefully before turning to Ignis. “Should I recruit Mister Argentum in the effort, then?”

All at once, Ignis was frowning again pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Absolutely not.”

“What effort?” you asked, knowing it wasn’t any of your business.

“It’s nothing of note,” Ignis answered before his uncle spoke. He nodded at the papers in your arm. “What brings you to the Citadel?”

Lifting the stack slightly, you shrugged. “Change of address. I’m surprised to see you here.”

“I work here.”

You raised a brow. “In the Royal Mail department?”

Ignis’ uncle made a noise that sounded almost like a laugh, clearing his throat.

Frowning yet again, Ignis held out a hand. “I’ll turn those in for you. My assistant usually handles such things, but she’s been ill this week.”

“Flu season,” you said awkwardly, not sure what else to say. There was a moment of hesitation before you handed him your papers. “Uh, thanks, Ignis.”
He placed them on top of the file he already held and finally graced you with the smallest of smiles. “What good is a friend in the Citadel if it doesn’t grant you shorter wait periods?”

You looked at the line again, at all of the busy, somewhat impatient, people with their folders, forms, and briefcases. It hadn’t moved since you’d stepped out, though your spot was certainly gone.

“Ignis, we must go,” his uncle said, turning careful eyes on you. “It was nice meeting you.”

Ignis bypassed the line, handing everything to a person behind the counter. He nodded a goodbye to your small wave, and left you to wonder what to do with the extra bit of free time you now had.

—

“Your friends hate me.”

Prompto gasped. “What? No!” He didn’t bother looking up from the case of pistols as he said this.

You rolled your eyes, pointing out which target sheet you wanted to the range master. She rolled it up, handing it to you.

“No tricky maneuvers this time, kid. If I see so much as a gun twirl on your finger, your ass is banned,” she said, looking pointedly at Prompto. “I don’t care how good you are.”

He righted himself, laughing sheepishly. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

—

You relaxed your elbows just a bit, squeezing the trigger. Three months of doing this with Prompto and the recoil of even the smallest guns still took you by surprise. You hit the edge of the target, feeling incredibly proud despite how mediocre your aim was. You were awful, and your personal moral stance on guns was shaky at best. Prompto, on the other hand…

He was a natural.

Finessing his way through his target, he leaned back past the divider between you to smirk. He’d given his target—a vague human shape—a smiley face.

“You sure you don’t wanna be a Crownsguard?” You asked. It was mostly sarcastic, but he tensed anyway.

“Hey,” he said quietly, pulling down his hearing protection. “Why do you think they hate you?”

A subject change. Squaring your shoulders, you took another shot, hitting just on the edge again. “Noctis refuses to talk to me.”

“He’s just awkward,” Prompto said. “He doesn’t have a lot of friends.”

“Oh, so you think he’s like me?” You lowered your gun to frown at him. “Trying to be friendship matchmaker for two losers with no other friends besides you?”

“No!” He was quick to respond, scrambling as he often did when you were purposely missing his point. “Is it so bad I want my friends to be friends?”

“Yes,” you said, turning away to take another shot. “It’s embarrassing. Friendships have to come naturally.”
“What about Gladio and Iggy?”

Your shot ripped just the corner of the paper, missing the target. Sighing, you looked down at your hands, willing them to coordinate better with your eyes. “Gladiolus is kind of scary, and Ignis has already forgotten me.”

“Gladio is mostly harmless” His voice was much quieter, and you looked over only to find him gone. It was your turn to lean into his area, watching him reload as he continued. “He’d never purposely attack a citizen so I think you’re safe.”

You tugged your hearing protection down, doubt on your face. “So Halloween was a fluke?”

He chewed on his lower lip, examining the pistol in his hand absently. “I dunno. He seemed pretty embarrassed.” His gaze flitted up to you, a smile growing along his freckled face. “He asked if you were seeing anybody.”

Both of your brows rose. Because woah. He wasn’t your type at all, but if Prompto was being serious, you were kind of flattered.

“What did you say?”

With a shrug, he said, “That you’re off limits.”

Your jaw slacked. “That’s pretty creepy, Prom.”

He snickered, pulling the ear muffs back over his ears. “I actually told him you weren’t into dating.”

As he fired a quick succession of shots into the chest of his target, right at the heart, over and over, you thought about his words. He wasn’t exactly right; you liked dating. Just not generally the same person for very long. You understood his reluctance to set you up.

—

You left the shooting range not feeling like you’d gotten any better. But you knew how much Prompto enjoyed it and endured. For friendship. Also, it was oddly satisfying to hold something so small and powerful in your hands, even in such a controlled setting.

Setting off in the direction of the cheap theater on your shared end of town, you both avoided a large puddle by jumping over it. He made the leap, but your heel caught in the water. You waited for the tell-tale feeling of a wet sock, distracting yourself by looking at Prompto’s cheerful face.

He was grinning when he asked, “Wanna tell me why you think Iggy hates you, too?”

Hefting the bag hanging from your shoulder, you shrugged. “I ran into him at the Citadel a few days ago. He didn’t remember my name.”

The grin waned on his face, and he scratched his nose. “Yeah, that’s kinda weird, but I don’t think it means he hates you, dude.”

You puffed up your cheeks, blowing out air to mask a sigh. “You know me. Just being dramatic.”

—

You were running late. Or rather, you were late, and that had you running. The turnstile slowed you down for only a moment, anxiety prickling along your skin and deep in your stomach unpleasantly. An announcement told you that your train was about to leave. You pushed past people as you rushed
down the escalator and slipped into a car right before the doors closed. Relief washed over you, calming the anxiety like a balm.

It was as you were looking for a seat that you saw Ignis standing on the other end of the car, one hand gripping a pole for stability. He was staring at his phone, unaware of you. This time, you fought the instinct to approach him. He didn’t even remember you! It wasn’t fair how charming he was, and then to be so rude!

Latchng onto the nearest metal post, you made yourself ignore him.

—

At the next stop, you couldn’t help but check to see if he got off. Instead, your eyes met his from across the car, the space between you filling with people. The doors closed, and the train continued on. You made no move toward him. It took you by surprise when he put his phone into a pocket and navigated through the crowded car to stand near you. His hand rested above yours on the pole, something akin to cheer on his face.

“Hello,” he said simply. “How are you?”

Overlooking his question, you asked, “What has you on this train?” He couldn’t possibly live on your end of town.

“Straight to the point, then,” he said quietly, nodding. “I’m looking for Prompto. He hasn’t answered my messages and wasn’t at home.”

You snorted. “He’s at work. He never replies when working.”

He shook his head. “I already checked the cafe.”

“He doesn’t work at the cafe on Thursdays. He’s at the supermarket; the one at the corner of Primis and Pelagus.”

Ignis looked at you in confusion. “He has two jobs?”

“Three,” you said, seriously wondering what kind of friend Ignis was that he didn’t know this about Prompto. “He also works with me at the discount theater.”

His confusion morphed into muted surprise. Despite a solid effort not to, you found yourself pleased once again at how easily you could read him. He pursed his lips, gently, a quiet seriousness about his entire face as he thought for a few moments. His eyes had yet to leave yours, which was a little unsettling.

That is until the train made its next stop, and you were pulled into him by the sudden inertia of the car. Your free hand pressed against his chest to keep from head butting him. The car jerked to a stop, someone announcing the destination as the doors slid open and passengers filed out. His eyes were so wide, then. You could see every bit of beautiful green he was hiding behind his glasses.

He reached a hand up to your wrist, gripping it lightly as he pushed your hand away from his chest. “I suppose I should check the market,” he said, finally looking away as he let go. You nodded, though he didn’t see it, dropping your hand awkwardly. His hand on the bar had slid down to cover yours, something you hadn’t realized until you felt the loss of its warmth as he abruptly let go. He stepped off the train, looking back to offer you a small smile. But the split second gesture was lost in the crowd as people shuffled in and the door closed with a shhhch.
You wrapped your arm around the metal bar, hooking it at your elbow, and got out your phone to warn Prompto just in case the texts from Ignis weren’t enough.

**You:** You’ve got an Ignis inbound. Coming in pretty hot.

To your surprise, he answered almost immediately.

**Prompto:** wat! NO!!!

**You:** No to him coming or being hot?

**Prompto:** ew both

**Prompto:** idk how he found u but did u rlly have 2 tell him where I am??

**You:** He visited your house and we ran into each other on the train.

**Prompto:** shit

**You:** What’s going on?

**Prompto:** y is he even cuming in person? he has an assistant

**You:** She’s sick.

**Prompto:** ok idk how u kno that but im mad at u

**You:** For what?

**Prompto:** bcuz u told Iggy about this job

**You:** I didn’t know it was a secret.

**Prompto:** it’s not but he’ll ask y i have so many jobs. u kno i hate that

**Prompto:** he’ll just point out how much more I woulda made as a crownsguard

You stared at the string of crown, gun, and sword emojis with a frown.

**You:** Sorry. ;(

**You:** Shouldn’t you be working instead of texting me?

**Prompto:** im in the back stocking supplies so no1 cares lol

**You:** Hiding?

**Prompto:** ya thx 2 u

You knew he wasn’t going to tell you why Ignis was looking for him, so you let the conversation drop. Your first class of the day was beginning anyway.

—

Fingers meeting and twisting together, you led your newest partner into your apartment. She was a
musician with a soft voice and a guitar. She seemed to hold the entire world’s supply of chill within her small frame; your opposite, in a way.

She liked the sparse nature of your place. The lack of anything on the walls was the sign of a minimalist, she told you, slipping her hand from yours to take off her coat. A minimalist was, according to her, a perfect lover because it meant not wasting time on unimportant things. You didn’t tell her that your walls were bare because you were poor and refused to take money from your parent.

Together, you unspooled, all soft hands and caresses. Her voice was a wavering song in your ear, making you feel special as she told you sweet nonsense.

Within hours, you were alone, making dinner for one. She’d left when you hinted, something you appreciated. But not before letting you know where she would be performing for the next couple of weeks. The names of the venues were lost to you almost immediately. Unsurprising.

Spending every night by yourself was preferable to putting energy into a relationship that would inevitably fail. You worked on film projects—you had so many unfinished, it was embarrassing—and spent the rest of your time working or in class.

Being alone was comforting and safe.

Consumerism was something you liked to joke as being a plague on Insomnia. The crowds of desperate people waiting for the newest smartphone that would be obsolete by the next year, the marketing ploys that made people spend money they didn’t have on things they didn’t need, it was all a racket that you actively and consistently contributed to. What could you do, you loved stuff.

And, luckily for you, so did Prompto and Noctis.

When you were invited in late November to join your friend and the prince in waiting for a new gaming console on opening night, you readily agreed despite your reservations about said prince. You’d never have the money to preorder such a thing, but you wanted to be one of the first to break it in once you all unpacked it at Prompto’s place.

You sat huddled in a tent with both of them and Gladio, who’d been the one kind enough to lend his tent to protect you from the wind. You could hear the groaning complaints of the people sitting outside when a particularly strong gust shook past the tent and felt grateful for the cover. Even though it did nothing for the cold.

You were bundled to the extreme, unwilling to risk getting sick. You had too many things to do; an illness was not an option. You’d also suspected Prompto and Noctis, based on your previous experience with both of them, wouldn’t be as prepared for the weather. So you’d arrived to the tent set up outside the store with extra scarves and hats. They let you put the scarves around their bare necks, but both refused the hats.

“You’ll mess up my hair!” was Prompto’s excuse. Noctis nodded along, touching a lock of his own hair carefully. You snorted along with Gladio, who was nice enough to pull one of them over his own head, giving you a wink.
It was a short walk from the tent to the beginning of the line, Prompto and Noctis having been proactive enough to get there early. You walked along the sidewalk, shooting pointless b-roll with your phone. It’d probably look terrible depending on how you used it, but there weren’t enough opportunities to get shots of large unmoving crowds like this. You’d had to take off your gloves for it, but the brief nature of the walk made enduring the cold bearable on your fingers.

You’d volunteered to get everyone something warm to drink, needing to stretch your legs and do something slightly productive. Filming the entire walk to the cafe a block away, you caught the fall leaves and the trees growing bare between rustic buildings. The cafe wasn’t as warm as you expected when you got there.

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The barista leaned on the counter, seeming far too interested in your description of the console you guys were waiting for. She giggled at a pun you made and complemented your eyes. It was all very cute, and you liked how your conversation was distracting her from making the drinks.

Her coworker gave you both annoyed looks, bustling around behind her, moving round carafes and pouring espresso expertly. You made sure to smile at him when he leaned past the girl to place each drink on the counter between you. She placed them in a cardboard carrier, unapologetic in her inattentive attitude. The cafe was empty so you didn’t blame her.

—

The other barista was working on the last drink —Prompto’s ridiculous order— when the door swung open, cold air rushing in a soft gust. You looked over your shoulder, a little surprised at the sight of Ignis letting the door close behind him. He was frowning at something on his phone, placing it in a pocket before he approached the counter.

The barista smiled widely as she greeted him. He ordered a coffee, apparently not noticing you standing only a few feet away. You dug into your bag for a chapstick or something, watching as the other barista —the unamused one— walked to the window to turn off the open sign.

They were going to close soon and if you caught Ignis’ attention in time, he might take the drinks to the guys while you finished your conversation with the cute barista. Your lips were so chapped; not ideal for the kind of conversation you were hoping to have with her.

“Oh,” Ignis finally said, facing you while the barista poured his coffee. “Hello.”

“Hey,” you said, distracted with your arm rummaging through your bag. You found what you were looking for, pulling it out with an “ah-ha!” and applying it as you nodded toward his coffee, the cute barista writing something on the side of the cup. “Ebony is the best.”

“Indeed,” he agreed. “How is the camping?”

You shrugged, tossing the lip balm back into your bag, not in the least surprised that he knew what you were doing. “Cold and boring, but it’s gonna be worth it.” You directed your attention back to the barista but she was still looking at Ignis. He picked up his coffee, thanking her, and she practically swooned. Gazing between them, your eyes narrowed. Seriously?

“Are you coming to join us?”

He nodded at the coffee cups in the tray. “Yes. Are these yours?”

You picked them up with a small amount of chagrin. “Yeah, let’s go.”
On the walk back to the others, the cold air was quiet between you. Every time he took a sip of his coffee, your frown deepened ever slighter. The barista had written her number on his cup. All she’d given you was a smiley face.

“You don’t even have to try,” you said, maybe a little envious. You thought he was gorgeous, too, but he hadn’t so much as smiled at the barista, and you’d been chatting her up for a good few minutes. People were fickle.

“Pardon?” His breath came out in little clouds as he gave you side eye.

“Did you even notice she gave you her number?” You balanced the drink tray in one hand as you pointed at his cup.

He looked down at it. “I did.”

“You gonna call her?”

Lifting the drink in another sip, he replied, “Unlikely.”

You scoffed. “She was really cute.”

“Do you want the number, then?” He asked it immediately, actually looking at you this time.

“No,” you said, rolling your eyes. This was dumb. He was dumb. “She gave it to you, not me.”

He sighed. “If you’re truly interested, I’ll gladly help you—” He paused as a leaf blew into your face, getting stuck in your hair. Before you could get rid of it, he reached up, plucking it out and letting it go in the wind as he continued, “I’ll give you the number so—”

It was your turn to sigh. “Oh, just leaf me alone.” You wrestled slightly with the drink tray, tugging out your coffee to take a drink and warm your hand for a moment. When you put it back, balancing the tray in a hand just a bit precariously, you noticed he was still looking at you. Shrugging, you raised a brow in question.

“You’re unbelievable,” he said.

After a second of processing his statement and the deadpan look on his face, you found yourself snickering. “You’re a dork.”

A slow smirk grew along his lips. “Don’t leaf me hanging, now.”

Your laughter had less to do with the low quality of his puns and more with the way he delivered them so dryly. He offered to hold the tray so you could put your gloves back on, and nearly tripped over a mushy pile of leaves on the sidewalk. Then he made another joke about how autumn always seemed to have him falling.

You flexed your hands in your gloves, relishing the warmth and ignoring the fact that you were becoming just a little smitten.

The overwhelming smell of butter was beginning to make you feel sick. When you’d first gotten the job at the theater at the suggestion of Prompto, you’d eaten enough popcorn to feed a small army each night. But the thought of that now made your stomach roil.
You slumped on the counter, taking a short break to rest your eyes. The theater lobby was empty save for a couple who lingered near the single claw machine by the exit. Jingling and ringing, the bright box of stuffed animals played the same incessant tune for hours. It was more annoying than usual tonight. Even the muted *zzzzzz-kachink* of the mechanical claw grated on your nerves after the couple tried several times to win a moogle plush.

“Not getting any sleep?” Prompto asked.

You lifted your head to see his smirk and rolled your eyes. “No, I’m too busy stressing over the last details of my final project.”

He stopped his ministrations of refilling the napkin dispenser to give you an encouraging look. “It’s gonna be great.”

You huffed, the doubt already in your mind growing just a little more. Weeks of work had went into it, and recently you’d begun to worry you’d overthought it. What if it seemed like you were trying too hard? You were a junior; it was too late for you to change majors!

He frowned, leaning on the counter in front of you, knocking your elbows with his own. “Tell me what’s up.”

You shook your head, looking away while fighting a yawn. “Just the usual. Sorry, Prom.”

Letting out a long breath, he pushed up from the counter and came around to make more popcorn. Over the quiet *pop pop popping* of the kernels against the glass, he asked, “So how’s the current Boy?”

Slowly, you rose from your slump to face him, back against the counter. “Which Boy?”

Raising his brows, he shrugged. “I dunno, dude! You never tell me about ‘em.”

You copied his motion, shrugging. “I’m with an artist right now. Really good with his hands, if you know what I mean.” You were trying and failing to lighten the mood.

“You seem interesting,” he nodded, sounding sincere, though you knew how he felt about your dating habits. It was the only point of contention in your friendship, the one thing he didn’t really get about you. And you hated that because you felt he should be the only one on Eos who should get it because he had *been there* for the worst of it.

You were grateful he didn’t shame you —your friendship would’ve ended immediately— and only questioned when he was particularly confused about your love life. Sometimes he encouraged you to ditch the faceless Boys or Girls or Persons you were temporarily intimate with, and other times he dug for information, encouraging the opposite. You didn’t let it affect you either way.

You hated being told what to do.

—

The trip from your apartment to your childhood home was a four hour bus ride and a two mile walk down a gravel road. It was only just over an hour by car, but you didn’t even dream of owning one. You were two hours into the bus ride when your phone beeped, waking you from your nap against the foggy window.

**Unknown:** hey are you at Prom’s right now?
You: No. Who’s this?

You watched the three dots blink in and out of existence as the stranger typed a reply. If Prompto had given your number to Gladio, you were going to kill him.

Unknown: oh sorry it’s Noctis

Staring at the message for a moment, you chewed on the inside of your cheek. The prince had your number. Sure, you’d finally opened up with each other during the night of the console release almost a month prior, but each of your conversations since then had remained short and slightly awkward. You knew it was your own fault, your nerves at talking to the prince more than you could handle at times. Though, you were getting better. He was still just a person underneath his title, after all.

You: What’s up? Looking for Prom?

Noctis: no just making sure he isn’t home

You: Can I ask why?

Noctis: Iggy’s helping me setup a new tv for him

Noctis: Gladio’s supposed to keep Prom busy but I don’t know if he’ll have the patience for long

You: Why the new tv?

Noctis: holiday gift?

You: Oh, right. That’s nice of you.

Noctis: i guess so. it’s from all of us.

Noctis: want me to add your name?

Getting anyone a gift aside from Mom hadn’t even crossed your mind. You smacked your forehead. The person sitting next to you gave you a look that went ignored as you replied.

You: Yes! I forgot to get him something.

You: You’re a lifesaver.

Noctis: want to join us? Iggy’s doing all the work

Noctis: when Gladio and Prom get here we’re ordering pizza

You: I wish! I’m on my way home for the holidays.

Noctis: nice have fun

It was as much of a dismissal as any, but you felt the need to respond. With what, you didn’t know. You didn’t get the chance, though, as a new message came in that made you smile.

Noctis: we’ll save you some pizza

He’d noticed your hesitance. The three dots had probably been blinking on his screen for some time as you had remained uncertain, writing and erasing over and over.
You: Yum, stale pizza.
You: Happy holidays, Noct.
Noctis: you too

You were back in the city for less than a day when you got the email. One of the actors for your short film was backing out on you at the last minute. Well, it wasn’t the last minute, but you were only a few days away from actually shooting the thing. That wasn’t enough time to reasonably find a new actor.

“Promptoooooo,” you whined as soon as he answered the phone. “I’m fucked.”

The background noise was cheerful music among various silly sound effects. He couldn’t even pause his game in your time of need?!

“What’s wrong?”

“Actor two bailed on me,” you said, falling back onto your bed.

He snickered. “Is it because you call him actor two?”

“Oh my gods,” you sighed. “You’re not very helpful.”

“Don’t we have a standby?”

“We did, but…” You ran a hand down your face. “He was the Boy from two months ago, the one I stood up on Halloween.”

On the other end, the obnoxious soundtrack to Prompto’s game cut off, a quieter melody taking its place. “Come over. We’ll figure it out.”

“Thanks, Prom,” you said quietly, feeling guilty.

His laugh was tinny on the line, cutting in and out a little as you gathered things for an impromptu sleepover. “Bring the gingerbread cookies your mom made.”

Finding a replacement was a process of biting off each of the gingerbread heads and taking a dip into the shared alcohol cabinet. Prompto’s roommate wouldn’t miss half a bottle of Baileys, would he? It made the hot cocoa sweeter and was something Prompto would actually partake in with you.

“What about Stultus?”

You shook your head. “No, he’s doing musical theatre only now. Has a stage name and everything. Goes by Steve now.”

“What kinda name is that?”

Chewing on a gingerbread arm, you continued to brainstorm. Prompto’s phone went off, emitting a chirping sound that pulled you from your thoughts. Instead of immediately answering, he stared at his phone for several seconds before lifting it up to your face. “I have an idea.”
On the screen was a picture of some kind of chicken dinner, above which said ‘Ignis Scientia’. It disappeared after a few seconds, a ‘missed call’ notification appearing in its place.

Prompto called Ignis back while you got more to drink. When you returned to your seat next to him on the sofa, you realized they were video chatting. On Prompto’s screen, Ignis looked unamused.

“Hello,” he greeted, apparently seeing you come into frame. “I hear I’ve been volunteered to be in your film. I’ll have to politely decline.”

You snorted, looking at Prompto. “That’s what you meant?”

He just laughed. “Yeah, Iggy would be great!”

Narrowing your eyes, you looked at Ignis again. “Can you act?”

Ignis was all seriousness, his mouth a flat line of displeasure. “I assure you I cannot.”

You sipped the spiked hot cocoa, blinking lazily at the man on the screen. He looked pouty like a model without even trying. “I think you’ve got what it takes.”

Prompto agreed with you as Ignis sighed. “I called to have a word with you, Prompto, about something important. And private.”

Your mouth gaped, dramatic in your drunkenness. “No way! You can’t take Prompto even for a minute. I need him. We only have one day of shooting, and it’s in three days!” You weren’t sure how much of what you were saying made any sense, but Ignis seemed to understand.

“Three days?” He suddenly looked thoughtful, the pout disappearing into a considering frown. “Your film crew is willing to work on New Year’s Eve?”

You nodded. “It’s the only day I was able to rent the film equipment.”

“And the crew is just me, her, and a couple of actors,” Prompto added unhelpfully. You shoved him lightly. Ignis didn’t need to know your crew was so pathetically small!

“I’ll do it.”

The sudden answer had both you and Prompto blinking in silence for a long moment.

“What?” you blurted, grabbing Prompto’s phone and drawing it unnecessarily close to your face. “You mean it?”

“Yes,” he said, sounding resigned.

“Why the change of heart?” Prompto asked, taking the phone back from you.

Ignis removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Remarkably, there are things on that day I’d like to do even less. If I’m to make a fool of myself, I’d rather it be among friends.”

Prompto whooped loudly, throwing a fist into the air. It shook the phone so you took it from him again. You made sure Ignis could see your grin. “Thanks, Iggy.”

Surprisingly, he didn’t hang up on you until Prompto began to beatbox and you freestyled along, making sure every other word was ‘Iggy’ or at least rhymed with his name. He didn’t seem to like your appreciation rap. Some people just didn’t get art.
In the middle of fighting the hangover, mid morning the next day, your phone rang from an unknown number. You looked at it blankly, sipping on a hastily made Bloody Mary.

“Turn it oooooffff,” Prompto groaned from his place slumped on the couch.

You answered and the first sound out of your mouth was a burp. “Oops. Hello?”

“Charming.”

Placing your cup down, you wiped the sleep from your eyes. What was Ignis doing calling you? How did these nobles keep getting your number? “Uh, hi.”

“I apologize for such an early call.” He wasted no time. “But I am busy up until New Year’s Eve, and I wanted to be sure I knew the full extent to what I agreed to last night.”

Oh. “It’s just a short film for a project I’m— y’know, don’t worry about it.” You picked up the dry erase marker to write on the board Prompto kept on his fridge. “I’ll send you the script. What’s your email?” You scribbled it down and hung up.

Then, you stared at your phone blankly again for several beats. Shit.

You flopped over the back of the couch, landing halfway on Prompto who grunted in response.

“I just hung up on Ignis.”

He had the audacity to laugh. “If he didn’t hate you before, he might now.”
Shut up, please. I am very busy and important.

Chapter Summary

Time for to making a movie.

Chapter Notes

This thing will become Ignis-centric in a few chapters, but ya have to deal with the achingly slow bits first.

Anyway, here’s the chapter, byeee.

The short film was being shot entirely inside the empty bedroom of a dorm you used to live in. It was usually the display room, but you’d gotten the housing association to let you use it under the condition that nothing get damaged. It was a risky move, keeping the film to one location, but the plot was pretty singular.

Gladio arrived at the scene before anyone else. You didn’t even know he was coming or how he’d found the place, but there he was at seven in the morning on New Year’s Eve, coming in as you worked on rigging the lights. He helped without being asked, though you had to guide him a little to get everything set up right.

Prompto was at the library getting the camera, and Actor One and Ignis had yet to show up. The other few people helping out were milling about so the small space felt crowded already.

It was surprisingly not too awkward with the sudden extra pair of hands. He played along when you asked him to dirty up the place to make it seem lived in, wadding up clothes and tossing them on the floor. By the time Actor One appeared, you were both crushing empty beer cans and placing them just so in various parts of the room.

“Oh my.” Actor One stared at Gladio. “Is that the replacement for Brian?”

They both looked your way, and you shook your head quickly. “The replacement is coming. This is, uh, the best boy.” You introduced them quickly, not explaining to Gladio that best boy was equivalent to a stagehand and that you weren’t actually saying he was the best boy. Then, you excused yourself to take a breather in the hallway. A few adderall down, and you took a deep breath. This film had to be perfect.

“Good morning.”

You jumped a little, the case of pills jingling in your hand. Looking down the hall, you spotted Ignis, who seemed mildly distraught despite the pleasant greeting.

“Hey, morning,” you replied, shoving the pills into a pocket. “What’s wrong?”

His careful brows arched as he approached. In one hand he had a coffee and in the other a small
stack of papers stapled together. The script, you guessed. He lifted it when he spoke. “Must I be nude?”

You blinked, gaze going from the script to his face. “What? When are you nude?” You reached for the script, but he handed you the coffee instead.

He flipped through the papers and stopped to point at a page. “I assume the highlighted parts were for me to either memorize or use to get into character?”

You nodded because of course.

“Right.” He sighed quietly. “Scene seven. I’m meant to be shirtless.”

A slight lean to look at the script, you nodded again. “Yeah, shirtless. That’s not nude.”

The appalled way he looked at you was a delight. You smiled for the first time that morning and mindlessly took a sip of the coffee in your hand. It was satisfying; he liked his coffee the same way you did.

He rolled the script into a hand. “I’m not comfortable with revealing so much of myself. Especially in front of strangers.”

You looked him over, uncertain as to what he could be hiding underneath his pressed suits. He didn’t seem out of shape, but fine clothes could make any kind of body look good. Someone who worked in the Citadel like Ignis probably had a soft squishy body from sitting in an office all day. But those kinds of bodies were very real and nice, and the more you thought about it, the more determined you felt about making him shirtless.

“Don’t be a drama queen, Ignis. There’s only enough room for one of us.” You took another drink of the coffee, and he practically snatched it from your hand with a frown.

Actor One poked his head out of the dorm room. “Could you get me a—” He paused, staring at Ignis.

Before he could ask, you nodded. “This is the replacement.” With a quick look at Ignis, you told Actor One, “I wanna see if you guys have any chemistry. Do a physicality test on him, if he lets you.”

Ignis couldn’t have frowned any deeper. "Physicality test?"

"Yeah." You shrugged. "He's gonna see if your body reacts to his. He's a little grabby so be careful."

Actor one laughed as you walked further down the hall away from them, burying your attention into your phone. Where the hell was Prompto?

As if on cue, he turned the corner at the end of the hall, overloaded with equipment. You deleted the impatient message you were about to send and walked toward him to help lighten his burden.

“Did you tell Gladio about today's shoot?”

He looked at you over the camera in his hands. “I mentioned it to all the guys. Why?”

You both carried everything toward the room, Ignis and Actor One no longer by the door. “He’s taking up like half the space right now. I feel like we won’t be able to avoid getting some part of his broad shoulders in every shot.”
Prompto seemed surprised. “I swear I didn’t invite him.”

You shrugged. “His muscles have been pretty helpful so far.”

He followed you inside and the room really was overcrowded. You had to shove past the Costume slash Makeup slash Everything-you-couldn’t-do Person in order to place the equipment on the right spot.

You were only halfway through the process of setting it up when Actor One came to you with a whine. Oh my gods, it was going to be one of those days.

“Ignis isn’t coming out.”

Prompto snickered a little, but you really weren’t in the mood. “What? Where is he?”

“In the bathroom.” Actor One had a hand over his eyes dramatically.

You sighed. “Just go over your lines. I’ll be right back.”

Maneuvering through the room, you stopped at the bathroom door. Gladio stood next to it, looking incredibly amused.

“Can you talk to him?” you asked. Putting Ignis in your film had seemed alright while drunk —for the prestige at the very least— but this had probably been a bad idea.

“He has been.” Ignis’s voice carried through the door. “I’m sorry. This was a mistake.”

Gladio didn’t even have the grace to look sheepish for whatever he’d said to make Ignis so uncomfortable.

You tried to open the door, but it was locked. “Let me in, please. We can talk about this.” You were not losing another actor on the day of filming. Another attempt at the door to no success had you raising your voice. “C’mon, Ignis. You’re a reasonable adult. You’re among friends, remember?”

That did the trick. The lock clicked, and your hand shot to the door handle quickly before he could change his mind. You only opened the door slightly to give him the privacy and squeezed through.

Standing in the small bathroom, Ignis wore nothing but a pair of jeans that didn’t quite fit him. Slightly too short for his long legs and maybe a little too tight. The original actor had been a little smaller. He had his arms crossed, and his gaze directed pointedly away from you.

That much you were grateful for because he didn’t have a soft squishy body underneath the suit. Lightly defined, lean muscle layered his stomach and chest. It was disturbing. Where could he find the time? Glad he hadn’t noticed you briefly ogling, you turned around and cracked the door open to bark an order at Costume Person. They brought you the baggiest t-shirt they had.

Shutting the door and locking it for good measure, you tossed the shirt to Ignis. “Wear that. I can’t have you being so uncomfortable that you can’t work.” You also couldn’t have someone so fit in your film. It was unrealistic.

He eyed it in distaste but put it on all the same. It made him look shapeless over the too tight jeans. Perfect.

“That should work.” You gave him another once over before asking, “Are you okay now?”

He adjusted his glasses, meeting your eyes for the first time since you’d come into the room. “Yes. I
apologize for my behavior.”

“Don’t worry about it.” You made your way out the door, already forcing away the image of him being pouty and shirtless. And alone with you in a bathroom. You needed to focus.

Prompto, sweet boy, had set up the camera while you were dealing with Ignis. You sent him a grateful look and double checked that everything was in order.

The first few scenes went by surprisingly well. Actor One was chewing the scenery a bit, acting increasingly over dramatic, but you were just glad he was taking it seriously. Prompto stayed behind the camera, directing the angles. It wasn’t a big production, but everyone had their own moving part.

You had to force Gladio from the room entirely at some point because he kept getting into shots somehow. It was time for lunch anyway so you gave him enough gil to cover food for everyone.

When he came back with not only food but a prince at his side, you felt like you were going to go just a little crazy. Noctis’ unexpected arrival had everyone besides you in a tizzy. Full stop, no more work was getting done.

“Lunch hour, I guess,” you sighed as you ran your hands down your face. Noctis looked regretful at having shown up once everyone on set began to crowd him. Served him right. You left the room to gather your thoughts. It was overwhelming, trying to micromanage everything.

You briefly considered going to the old spot where you’d hide to smoke back when you lived there, but it only brought up bad feelings associated with bad memories. Best to keep a level head and stay far away from that shit. You didn’t need to smoke, anyway, when you had the bitter taste of adderall on your gums.

—

The concrete stoop outside was bitingly cold through your jeans when you sat. Each breath came out in a little white cloud, and it made you hyper aware of how quickly you were breathing. As you made yourself draw a long, slow breath, the dormitory entrance opened behind you. The door slammed shut and a whoosh of warm air passed but no one walked by.

You looked back to find Ignis standing idly, hands in the pockets his coat. He was looking at you uncertainly. Gods, how could a person like him—normally so confident—embody the very definition of uncomfortable? He was clearly a man of many layers and talents, you had to give him credit.

“Another problem?” You weren't trying to be bitchy, but if it happened to come off that way, you didn’t care.

He shook his head and looked away. “Simply needed a moment to clear my head.”

What could he possibly have to clear his head over? He hadn’t done anything yet besides hide in a bathroom and sit behind the scenes, writing into some little black notebook and playing on his phone. Though, you suspected he’d probably been writing down important information he needed to remember or sending emails or some other boring work thing. When you turned forward, he spoke again.

“It has an interesting premise, your film.”

You didn’t look back at him, your posture growing rigid. “Um, thanks.”
“Thank you, by the way.”

This did make you look over your shoulder. He hadn’t moved, but wasn’t looking down at you awkwardly anymore. “For what? You’re the one helping me.”

When his eyes flicked down to you, his expression was hard to read. Strange because you felt like he was unintentionally an open book around you most times. “There were very few things short of death that I could do to get out of my obligations today. This happened to be the best option.”

You placed a hand on the stoop to lean and get a better look at him without actually getting up. “What obligations?”

“Always curious, aren’t you? Just know that you’ve saved me a world of trouble today.”

Many things came to mind at the mention of obligations —diplomatic meetings, royal dog walking—but you suspected it was something simpler. Like, say, a New Year’s Eve ball.

A couple of weeks prior, you’d received an invitation in the mail to one being held at the Citadel. You could only guess it came from Noctis. Even if you hadn’t had other plans, you wouldn’t have gone. A highbrow party like that would have turned you into a walking ball of nerves. But the invitation, though old fashioned, had been very pretty so you’d put it up on your fridge. So that the next time a Girl or Boy came over, you could pretend you were someone important.

You were about to mention the ball when one of the dormitory doors opened and smacked right into Ignis. The person leaving didn’t even notice, passing you on their way down the stoop. You stood and approached him to see if he was okay.

The sight of his crooked glasses and startled expression had a laugh tumbling out of you. Then another. And suddenly you weren’t asking him if he was alright, you were leaning on one of the building’s columns and laughing aloud for the first time in days.

He straightened his glasses, frowning carefully. He took himself too seriously. You wanted to tell him to lighten up but had a feeling it would be pointless.

“Do you think they’re done drooling over Noctis yet?” You headed back inside and he followed. The air in the building wasn’t that much warmer than it was outside.

“If not, I can send him away with Gladio. I noticed you’ve had a few troubles.”

“Maybe.” You considered the offer seriously. “If you do that, I’ll credit you as a producer or something because I have to get everything right and—and I just can’t with Gladio’s huge everything getting in the way.”

He pressed the button for the elevator and you walked past to take the stairs. It was faster. You’d lived in this building for two years so you knew. The elevator was ancient. May as well have been an old fashioned pulley system that the occupants pulled themselves. Even that would’ve been faster. Ignis surprised you by following you into the stairwell and up the first flight.

“What am I currently going to be credited as?”

The railing was ice on your hands, and you rubbed them together as you ascended. It reminded you vaguely of the last time you’d climbed cold stairs with Ignis behind you. “Right now? You’re Lover.”

“Lover?” He sounded less appalled and more curious than you expected. “The script said Actor
“That’s because I have no idea what I’m doing,” you admitted. “You don’t have a name, and your sole purpose is to help the main character get past his fear of boners. Through the power of love, I guess? So you’re Lover.”

The idea had seemed brilliant at the time. A story of a man who overcomes his irrational fear of erect dicks. Even his own. Edgy.

“I can manage with that, I suppose.”

You opened the door to the hallway and shot him a smile. “You don’t really have a choice.”

—

When it came down to it, Ignis said his lines perfectly. Of course he’d be a natural. He was a politician by birthright. You fought the mental image of him practicing them somewhere in the Citadel over the past couple of days. Of him sitting in an ornate office, quietly reciting lines that you wrote over a coffee.

You swallowed hard, looking at him through the display on the camera rather than the man himself. Shoulder to shoulder with Prompto, you let yourself fall into the vision you had and ignored everything else. Gladio and Noctis did leave at some point, returning with dinner that you didn’t give them money for. Noctis brushed off your offers to pay him back, and, really, you weren’t going to fight him on it too hard. You hadn’t asked him to help, but you were going to take every bit of it.

Most of you lined the wall of the hallway as you ate, the dorm room door propped open with a box. Ignis declined sitting on the floor, standing a distance away. The more you looked around at the small team of people, the more you began to suspect that these boys were almost certainly using this film project as a way of getting out of that New Year’s Eve ball. You’d wonder why if your mind wasn’t already preoccupied with a million other things.

Actor One disturbed your thoughts with a sudden question. “So which festival is this for?”

You chewed on your food as you thought, answering after a swallow. “None. It’s for an internship application.”

“Oh.” He was clearly disappointed and seemed ready to let the conversation drop, but Prompto spoke up.

“The one for that production company based in Altissia, right?”

You shrugged because Prompto knew exactly which company and where you hoped to spend your summer. You looked up Altissia travel sights all the time, fantasizing about the things you’d see while working there. You’d dreamed of going to Accordo most of your life.

“You’ll definitely get it,” Actor One told you confidently. Maybe he was just being nice, or maybe he was a bit full of himself since he was the star. Either way, you hoped he was right.

You certainly didn’t feel confident about it with how the day had been going so far. Things were only halfway done, and it was getting a bit late. The lighting would have to be changed soon and the set wasn’t ready for the next scene.

You shoved the last bite of food into your mouth and quickly stood, pushing past Ignis on your way back into the room. How could you have wasted time sitting around like that when you were on such
You practically twisted your neck to see Ignis holding out a bottle of water. Taking it and twisting off the cap, you muttered a quiet thanks.

“You shouldn’t overwork yourself.”

Your eyes narrowed at him as you took a drink and wiped your mouth with a sleeve. “You’re one to talk. Noct has told me stories.” That was a half truth. Noctis had complained many times nonspecifically about Ignis being an overworking busybody in general.

He crossed his arms, unbothered by the statement. “Perhaps. Is there anything I can do to help?”

You continued to look at him suspiciously. He seemed completely at ease, unlike earlier in the day. “You’re being very insistent on helping today.”

He rolled a shrug over his shoulders, a casual movement that seemed odd for him. “I feel as though I owe you.”

“For getting you out of that New Year’s Eve ball at the Citadel?” You were hedging a guess, and since you were alone, you hoped he wouldn’t be secretive about it. Whatever juicy details — avoiding an ex lover, perhaps — you wanted to know everything.

His brows arched above glasses, careful face slipping into surprise. There was that open book you liked so much. “How do you know about that?”

With your own bit of surprise, you recapped the water bottle. “I received an invitation in the mail like two weeks ago.”

He looked away, a frown on his face. His eyebrows furrowed, and you caught the confusion for several beats before he looked at you again. “Do you know who sent it to you?”

Becoming confused yourself, you shrugged. “Noctis, I guess. Who else would?” Though, now that you thought about it, why would Noctis send you an invitation when he didn’t seem to want to attend either?

Ignis left the room without saying anything more. Rude. When everyone began to shuffle in a few minutes later, Gladio and Noctis weren’t with them. Prompto said they’d wanted to check out the town square. Which was honestly great news because they had been super distracting for the crew.

—

Titan help you, midnight was approaching and even Actor One was beginning to phone it in. You didn’t feel like you were asking for much. Just one more take of the last scene. Ignis pulled uncomfortably at the neck of the baggy t-shirt, and Prompto kept yawning.

“C’mon, guys,” you tried to rouse everyone. It wasn’t really working. All eyes were on you as you paced small circles and addressed them. “It’s the last one. Forever. You’ll never have to think about
erections ever again. Unless you want to. That's your call.”

Actor One and Costume person began to cheer, and you thought your speech had worked until you realized Gladio and Noctis had returned and were standing in the doorway behind you.

The last shot was filmed in a hurry as Gladio had brought something for everyone to drink. Champagne. Of course. He began to fill up the plastic cups —classy— and you shot Prompto an alarmed look. He just scratched at his head and shrugged. Next to him, Noctis looked apologetic. It didn’t help the annoyance you felt.

Really, shouldn’t there be at least one friend in every group to reign in the others? You couldn’t be that friend because you’d only known them for like two months. That was too much responsibility.

“It’s almost midnight,” Gladio explained, catching your confused glances around the room as the others began to drink. He handed you a cup before drinking from his own. You’d never had champagne before so why the hell not?

A hand snatched the cup away, and your eyes followed it up to Ignis who sipped from it calmly.

“Uh, why did you do that?” It was a mystery how he could be so helpful one moment and then the bane of you the next.

“I don’t know what medication you’ve been taking today,” he said, voice low. “But I doubt it mixes well with alcohol.”

You kept yourself from admitting that it wasn’t a prescribed thing, that you’d only gotten them from a classmate at the last minute because you needed the help. Ignis was right, though. Mixing alcohol and pills was a decision even you weren’t careless enough to make lightly. So you nodded, appreciating that Ignis seemed to be the friend that reigned the others in. Even you.

Which was kind of nice.

—

The library was open at all hours, even on holidays. It seemed like insanity when you were a freshman because you couldn’t imagine being there when you could be out celebrating. Now you were just grateful. You passed through the first level of the building with Gladio who’d been kind enough to carry everything.

Prompto straggled along with Noctis several paces behind you. Ignis walked even further behind them, with his nose buried in his phone and wearing his absurdly formal suit again. It really confused you how much time these four boys managed to spend together. And for what? You suppressed a sigh. This day needed to end already. Your brain was working overtime thinking about the most pointless things.

“Hey, why don’t you stick back?” A hand touched your arm, and you stopped outside the media drop off room to look at Prompto. He gave you a gentle smile, his hair looking flat. “You gotta be tired, and I was the one who checked it out so they’ll need my ID anyway.”

You didn’t fight him on it even though you thought it was weird. Gladio followed him into the media department with Noctis. You waited for Ignis to join them, but he let the door shut and began eyeing the nearest shelf of books. It was beginning to seem as if you weren’t allowed to be left alone, and Ignis had been the one to draw the short straw.

“You’re a better actor than I expected,” you said, catching his attention.
He adjusted his glasses, and you could read his discomfort easily. “Ah. Thank you.”

You worried your bottom lip, trying not to smile. It was satisfying to see how reactive he was to the simplest things. Before you could think of another thing to say that would inspire a new reaction, a familiar voice interrupted your thoughts.

It was startling, a voice you hadn’t heard in months. It sent your stomach to your feet within seconds, and it was only growing closer. You scurried around a bookshelf to hide, peeking through the spaces between books.

Ignis rounded the bookshelf after you, asking quietly, “Is something the matter?”

You shushed him, and within seconds the owner of that familiar voice passed by. That despicable person. Walking human waste. You bit down on your lip so hard it began to hurt. He walked into the media department with another person, someone you didn’t know. Who were they, and did they have any idea how terrible that person was? Once the door to the media department shut again, you let out a breath.

At your side, Ignis was quiet. You looked up at him, too startled to be sheepish over your behavior. You had to get out of there and far away from that person. Thoughts raced through your brain, and an idea formed as you dug your phone from a pocket.

“Let’s go upstairs.” You checked the time. 11:51 “Shit, uh, let’s hurry.” Shoving your phone away, you walked to the end of the aisle of bookshelves and looked back at him. He hadn’t moved and looked at you like you were being silly. That may have been true, but that was besides the point. You waved for him to follow, and quickly made your way toward the large spiral staircase in the center of the building.

On the fourth floor, you were out of breath and alone, but the distance you’d put between yourself and that person you hated put you at ease. You walked past Craigory, a guy from your department and part time librarian you’d often seen when you used to live on campus and camped out on this floor of the library to study most nights. He nodded, not taking off his headphones. What a true friend, to know you didn’t want to be bothered.

You sat on one of the oddly shaped couches in front of the large windows that lined the outer wall. The fireworks would start once midnight hit, and the view from there had to be great since it was facing the city square several blocks away.

Ignis sat next to you —knew it was him by the fancy cuffs in your periphery as he offered you a takeout cup. It was warm to the touch when you took it, the lid hiding the contents though you recognized the Ebony logo in the corner.

“You found the dispenser on the third floor?” A sip of it warmed you, and you gathered the energy to meet his eyes. Brilliantly green. Huh. You anchored yourself to them, using the cup to hide half of your face. You felt so ugly and gross. Seeing that awful person from before always made you feel that way. How could he be at the library, of all places, on New Year’s Eve, of all days? Bullshit. The gods were playing with you.

“I was quite surprised,” Ignis said, a corner of his mouth pulling into a half smile. “It’s a wonder people use the second rate cafe on the first floor at all.”

“Because Ebony is expensive.” You enjoyed the coffee, finding it a little sweeter than you remembered. He must’ve put something in it, assuming you didn't like it black. It reminded you of long nights writing papers and studying. You’d used the dispenser more times than you could count.
Not because you particularly liked Ebony more than the cafe’s coffee, but because using the dispenser meant you didn’t have to interact with another person. You’d wasted a lot of gil to that machine.

Ignis didn’t respond so you contentedly sipped at the coffee and waited. And waited some more.

“What time is it?”

From a coat pocket, he pulled out that same golden pocket watch he’d used to bet at the club months before. The elegant design on the outside caught your eye even now. It seemed familiar with its bird and fancy… leaves etched into the gold. He opened it, and you didn’t get to examine it closer.

“Eleven fifty nine.”

You were nodding and taking another drink when the fireworks began. They were much louder than you’d expect from this distance. And you were indoors, no less. It made you jump, spilling the coffee down your chin and on your shirt. Just great.

Ignis stopped you from using a sleeve to wipe your chin, holding out a handkerchief. It was black and soft and when you wiped your chin with it, you couldn’t begin to guess what it was made of. Not knowing the rules of what to do when offered a handkerchief—because who carried those anymore besides old men—you shoved it into a pocket. Ignis didn’t protest or ask for it back so you assumed that was the right decision. You’d wash and return it. If you didn’t forget about it first.

The fireworks were interesting. A few star and moogle shapes. When a chocobo blasted across the sky in bright yellow, you turned to Ignis. He hadn’t been watching the fireworks. His eyes were lowered to the coffee in his hands, fingertips tapping idly. You caught the lines between his furrowed eyes for a moment before he looked up at you.

Instead of asking what was clearly wrong, you said, “I have a chocobo. Back home, I mean. Not here in the city.”

“Do you?” He seemed to perk up just slightly, but you could tell it wasn’t genuine interest. “What’s its name?”

“Her name is Bokeh.” Your eyes went back to the fireworks. “She used to be really fast, but she’s getting kind of old and lazy.”

You’d tried to take her out when you’d visited Mom for the holidays just a week before, but the old bird hated the cold and you ended up spending half a day giving her gysahl greens just for her to take a damn nap. Lazy bird. You loved her.

Before you could go on even more about your chocobo, the others found you. Everyone squeezed onto the couch that you and Ignis were already sitting on. Everyone except for Noctis who seemed to understand what personal space meant. He sat one sofa over and made a show of lounging by resting his feet on the coffee table in front of it.

Prompto looked at you closely, and you stared back in mild confusion. “What?”

“I’m sorry, dude,” he said, rubbing at his neck. “I never mentioned that you know who works in the media department now. I didn’t want you to run into him, but you did, didn’t you?”

Oh. You’d forgotten about that. “I didn’t see him, actually. Ignis and I came up here when you guys went inside.” That was mostly the truth. You’d seen the person and successfully avoided him. Luckily, Ignis had no idea what you were talking about and couldn’t correct you. He was giving you a curious side glance, though.
Prompto sighed in relief, an exaggerated sound that made you smile. “Good. I was totally unprepared for seeing him.” He looked out the window at the fireworks. “Nice view.”

It was a pleasant moment of quiet before Gladio spoke up. “So, did you guys kiss at midnight?” He elbowed Ignis and looked at you.

Quick as a whip, you pointed a thumb over your shoulder. “Actually, we both kissed Craigory.”

You looked back at the librarian behind the desk who nodded in confirmation of your lie. Again, what a true friend.

Ignis sighed, but didn’t say anything. You could see the ghost of a smile playing at the edges of his mouth.

It was going to be a good year.
You taste like a burger. I don't like you anymore.

Chapter Summary

Falling for Ignis is like falling down a staircase.
This is the beginning of you slowly walking to the top.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Brown hair and big brown eyes, your newest Boy was the epitome of beauty. But so had been the last one with his blue eyes and blond hair and the one before that who had the softest ebony skin you’d ever been so lucky to caress.

It had been a fun week with him, this brown eyed Boy. Normally you’d have ghosted him by now or he’d have been completely cool about it and not contacted you again. You kept him around because he made you laugh sometimes, which was high on your list of requirements in a partner.

But things needed to end. Not only because you were beginning to have painful cramps as that time of the month approached, ending any sexy times for the foreseeable future, but because this Boy said one of the worst things he could say. At one of the worst times.

A favorite movie of yours was a particular type of love story about friendship. You didn't really get romantic movies, but friendship made your heart swell. You were in the middle of watching it when the Boy said, “I bet your friends are cool. Will I get to meet them sometime?”

You paused the movie to look at him. He was talking during one of the best parts. And he wanted to meet your friends after only being with you for a week? Shiva, this wasn’t going to work.

—

An email from the university tipped you off before you’d even had your morning coffee.

Due to inclement weather…

You tore back the curtain at the window of your living room. Everything was covered in snow so white you had to blink to adjust to the brightness. Gloves and scarf and one —no, two coats later—and you were tugging on your boots when Prompto called.

“Let’s meet at that dog park,” he said instead of greeting.

The dog park was located approximately between your apartment buildings. Neither of you had dogs, but it was where you always met if you weren’t going anywhere in particular. “Of course.”

—

The park was empty when you arrived. Perfect. A short cobblestone wall bordered the property, reaching as high as your shoulders. You stuck by that wall and began to make snowballs in advance to get Prompto with. That sucker had no idea what was waiting for him.
Except he seemed to have the same idea, popping up from hiding on the other side of the wall and pelting you with snowballs, one after the other. You tried to dodge them to no avail. He was just too good.

All you could see was his face over the wall and his hands that came up to grip the stone. He laughed loudly as you dusted and shook the snow off. His shit-eating grin only grew when you swiped snow from the wall into his face.

“Come face me on this side of the wall, you coward,” you laughed.

With a hand held up, he uncovered the camera he’d been hiding underneath his scarf. “Just one sec. Hold still.”

You didn’t move, long used to his sudden pictures. Sometimes you didn’t actually look terrible in them. You knew he was just trying to catch the drops of melted snow in your hair or something. Which made it easier to be in them. Photos weren’t your favorite thing.

Once he was done, he climbed the wall rather than go all the way to the gate, landing next to you easily and giving you the dorkiest finger guns as if you were supposed to be impressed.

That Boy had been right, your friends were pretty cool.

—

Four hours deep into editing, you dropped your head onto your desk. It wasn’t even halfway finished. Before you could properly edit, you had to arrange the data of each file and wade through all the scenes and outtakes. You couldn’t stand to do this part of the job.

One day, when you were a successful director, you were going to pay a team of other people to do this crap for you. Until then, you could only dream and keep slamming coffee so hard that the porcelain of your mug clanked against your front teeth each time. It was the only thing keeping you awake through this boring process. Even though it was only three in the afternoon.

Your phone had been lighting up for the past few hours, beeping with notifications until you silenced it. Now, with your head on the desk, you looked at it as another little message popped up on the screen.

186 notifications on a photo you’ve...

The message cut off since it was only a preview, but you had some idea of what it was about. Prompto must’ve posted that photo of you in the snow on binstagram and tagged you in it. He always raked in the likes for his pictures. The idea that 186 strangers saw your face and decided they liked what they saw was a little weird, but who cared when Prompto was so proud of his work?

You opened the app to check it out. He hadn’t sent the photo to you —you never asked to see them anyway— so you didn’t know what to expect. It was a close up of you peeking over the stone wall, just your eyes and snow covered hair and hat. The caption read Winter Dweeb.

Bahamut’s sweet buns, you should’ve known to expect this. He’d posted two other photos like this before. One last July of you holding a sunflower that obscured most of your face, titled Summer Dweeb. And of course, Autumn Dweeb had been taken in October, just weeks before meeting Noctis and the others. That one had been taken in a costume shop, a scary mask obscuring your face. You didn’t mind them so much; a dweeb was probably the least insulting thing you’d ever been called.

You scrolled down the comments, knowing damn well that you shouldn’t. The usual compliments
on his photography. A few constructively critical comments. Among everything, you noticed a comment left by Gladio that simply said Juicy.

Poetic.

He’d been a mutual follower of yours for months now. You loved the ridiculous pictures he posted of different ways to eat cup ramen, and had commented on a particularly hilarious one with the word Juicy. Ever since then, he’d commented on every photo you posted with that word. It had been annoying at first, and you’d slid into his DMs with a cease and desist message. Then it had become one of the few constants in your busy life.

If a friendship could be defined by the comment of juicy on a photo of the litany of plants that were arranged on your balcony, that was what you had with Gladio.

On this particular iteration of the running joke, someone had replied to his comment with Is that any way to remark on such a nice photo? You didn’t recognize this person coming to defend you. Not the username nor the vague image of a bookshelf they used as a profile photo. You couldn’t even creep on them because their account was private. Not that you blamed them. Everything you did online was super private ever since— anyway, it didn’t matter because you seemed to be catching the conversation en media res.

Gladio replied with an eggplant emoji.

The other person said Absolutely not.

Oh. You knew who it was. Duh.

He accepted your request to follow him just a minute later. Though he wasn’t in a single photo, you knew it was Ignis because the most recent thing he’d posted was of the fireworks you’d watched from the library. He never used captions. Boring. Even so, you wasted too much time looking at all of his photos when you should’ve been editing.

He’d been to Altissia in the last year. Each photo was more beautiful than the last. You wondered if he knew Altissian, and decided to test it out.

—

You: (I see you’ve been to Altissia. Can you read what I’m saying?)

You typed it out in perfect Altissian and sent it with an alternative goal in mind. When he responded in kind, you were elated.

Ignis: (Yes, I’m fluent.)

You: (I’m not surprised.)

Ignis: (Knowing other languages is important for someone in my position. It’s a bit strange that you know Altissian.)

You: (I had a lot of free time and no friends in high school.)

Ignis: (I see.)

Why did you say that?! Even in Altissian, there was no way the awkwardness of that statement would’ve gotten lost in translation. Switching to Lucian, you decided to just get to the point.
You: Are you free anytime this week?

Ignis: I’m afraid not. May I ask why?

You: I might’ve forgotten to have you sign the creative talent release forms before we filmed so I legally can’t show my film until you give me permission.

Ignis: Mail them to my office. I’ll send you my postbox number and the address.

You: You’re a lifesaver, Iggy.

Ignis: When do you need them returned to you?

You: The application deadline is next month. No rush.

Ignis: The sooner the better. Prompto will be at the Citadel on Monday. I’ll give them to him, if you trust that he won’t lose them.

You: That’s cool, thanks.

He never responded after that, but you were too busy wondering why Prompto was going to the Citadel to care.

—

At work on Monday night, Prompto handed the forms to you in a carefully organized folder that had Ignis written all over it. One glance inside at the elegant handwriting had you feeling like you were holding something terribly precious.

“Are you nervous?” he asked, watching you stuff it into your bag underneath the counter. He began to make more popcorn even though you had plenty. A roar of laughter from one of the theaters echoed down the hall toward you.

“Yeah, dude.” You were so nervous about submitting the film with your internship application, you didn’t want to think about it. Like, at all.

The past few days had been spent distracting yourself by wondering about Prompto’s activity in the Citadel. If he was reconsidering the Crownsguard, you had no doubt that he’d make it in even without Noct’s help. You just wished he would give you fair warning before ditching you to live that life.

—

“Why don’t you start a blog to showcase your stuff?” Prompto leaned on the counter, his expression bored. Neither of you had anything to do. Mondays were always the slowest at the theater.

You rolled your eyes. “Prom, no one does that anymore.”

He scoffed, flicking a popcorn kernel at you. “I just made one and it gets a lot of traffic, y’know. Easier than hauling around a portfolio.”

Pretending to think about it, you put a hand to your chin. “Maybe.” Everything you’d done so far, the few short films, the pile of unfinished screenplays and scripts, none of it was good enough to see the light of day. It was terrifying enough that actual Altissian filmmaking professionals were going to be judging your film.
Why did you have to make it about erections again? You were beginning to regret everything.

—

You: I should’ve made you go shirtless. Why did you have to be so fussy?

Ignis: What are you talking about?

You: I can’t submit the film.

Ignis: Oh, I see. Why is that?

You: Because of a lot of things. One of them being your refusal to not wear a shirt.

Ignis: I’m afraid I don’t understand what brought this on. You didn’t mind before.

You: I know!! I’m just freaking out a little!

Ignis: A little? If it’ll ease your mind, why don’t you have a viewing to get feedback?

You: Your advice is somehow even worse than Prompto’s.

Ignis: Excuse me?

Ignis: I remain confused about how this is my problem.

You sighed and shoved your phone into a pocket. Business in the theater was picking up since a movie was starting soon. Better to not bother Ignis with your nerves anyway. It wasn’t really his fault.

—

Prompto was sweeping and you were restocking the cups when he asked, “Just by looking at him, how would you rate a kiss from Gladio?”

You stared at him across the room. “I’d have to kiss him first. That’s the rule. You can’t rate it before you’ve tried it.”

“Just guess.”

“B+.”

He paused, leaning on the broom and grinning. “That’s pretty high.”

“Why are you even asking?” You frowned at him. “I told you I don’t like Gladio that way. He’d crush me during sex.”

Prompto shook his head and went back to sweeping. “I only asked because he mentioned something today.”

That piqued your attention. So whatever Prompto was doing at the Citadel had something to do with both Ignis and Gladio. It was definitely Crownguard related stuff. Just great. You didn’t mind, you really, truly didn’t.

“Well, that’s cool, Prom.” You refilled the supply of straws a little roughly and tried to distract
yourself. “If I had to rate the others, Noctis is probably a solid C and Ignis is definitely an F.”

He surprised you with a light laugh. “Why so low for Iggy?”

You let a small smile slip onto your face as you looked at him. “Doesn’t he seem like the type to either be a virgin or have a sex dungeon? No in between with guys like that.” It wasn’t fair to say that when he wasn’t around to defend himself, but who’s to say you were wrong?

—

It was your first time in such a classy speakeasy. The person you were meeting with was different than the usual type who took interest in you. He drew the chair out for you when you sat, complemented your dress even though it didn’t quite suit the rococo style of the bar, and expressed how far his interest went by continually finding reasons to touch your hand that rested on the table.

He wasn’t bad looking and clearly had expensive taste, but whatever cologne he was wearing had you holding a hand subtly over your nose every so often. Aside from that unfortunate factor, he was an okay date so far.

Only a quarter of an hour into your date, you were surprised to see a familiar face take seat at the table just behind the man you were hoping would take you home later in the evening. In what must’ve been the closest thing he had to casual wear, Ignis settled into his seat, opening a briefcase and pulling out papers and things while saying something to the server.

You couldn’t believe your luck. Leaning your head just slightly to the side, you looked at him, and for a moment he didn’t notice. When his eyes met yours, he paused, hand holding a pen as if he were about to write. He seemed to take in your situation, looking at the back of your date before returning his gaze to you. A small nod, then he was back to minding his own business.

You didn’t return any sort of gesture, not wanting your date to know that your friend was sitting right behind him. It didn’t appear as if the man noticed much, though, as he continued to talk about himself and his career. One cocktail in, and you’d already forgotten half of what he said because he came at you so densely packed with such dull information.

“I go outside the Wall and hunt in my spare time,” he said, finally piquing your interest. “You could say I’m one of the best in Lucis, actually.”

“Amazing.” You pretended to be very impressed. “You must be an incredible fighter.”

A small laugh seemed to come from Ignis, brief in nature. When you tilted your head a little to narrow your eyes at him, you only caught a small smile. He kept his eyes trained down at the files and papers he had spread across the table. The server came by, carefully placing his drink down on the only open surface. You found it a little weird that he came to a bar to do his work. It was his kind of place, you reasoned, eyeing the fanciful nature of the speakeasy. But still.

“I hate to brag, but yeah,” the man said, recapturing your attention, though he didn’t seem to have realized how often he lost it in the first place. “I’m good at three things, and I think it’s because they’re closely tied together. Fighting, dancing, and fucking.”

Oh, so your date was a go right for it type. You could work with that. Bringing up the topic of sex was a pretty big move so early on in the date. Hopefully he pulled through on whatever promises he was about to make.

As he continued on, you found yourself looking at Ignis again. This time, he smiled directly at you. Nodding at your date, he rose a brow. What was that meant to mean? Did he think you were
bombing it because you hadn’t been able to get a single word in for some time? Because you kind of felt that way.

Shrugging slightly, you looked at your date again, humming as if you agreed with something he was saying. When he made a joke, you laughed overly hard at it, grinning widely to show Ignis how much fun you were having even if it was weird that he was right there during the date. You weren’t bothered or distracted by having a friend present. Except you were completely bothered. Not even Prompto had ever encountered one of your temporary partners so the circumstances you found yourself in were entirely foreign.

A vibration coming from your phone caught your attention. You’d hidden it in your lap under the table. Peeking at it, you caught a message that had you sending a subtle glare to the man behind your date.

**Ignis:** You have something in your teeth.

Pursing your lips, you excused yourself and went to the restroom to check if he was being truthful. You did have something right between your two front teeth. How embarrassing! And the man hadn’t said anything about it.

**You:** Thanks, but can you go away and do your work somewhere else?

**Ignis:** I don’t recall you owning this bar.

**You:** Come on, Iggy, I’m trying to have a nice time here. Seeing your face is ruining the sexy vibe.

**Ignis:** I’m so sorry that my presence isn’t as intoxicating as that of the man who’s cologne is an affront to society

**You:** It's not that bad.

**Ignis:** It is so. Aside from that, he's spent nearly an hour lying directly to your face.

**You:** What? Everyone lies on first dates.

**Ignis:** Do you?

**You:** Always.

**You:** You better be gone when I come out in a minute. I’ve been in the bathroom for way too long already.

**Ignis:** He hasn’t even noticed you left. He’s still talking and looking up as if in deep thought.

You didn’t reply, returning to your table to find that Ignis hadn’t been lying about this either. You sighed quietly, annoyed at how he was picking apart your date so skillfully. Normally, you’d be indifferent to people’s quirks; Ignis pointing each thing out made them hard to overlook.

Your date was boring and had clearly invited you to this bar you couldn’t normally afford to eat at because he was compensating for how boring he was. He didn’t even notice when you sent off another message.

**You:** My date’s ruined now. Thanks.
You watched Ignis read the message. A small frown formed on his face. He didn’t reply, picking up the papers and things from his table and putting them back into the briefcase. He downed his small drink in one go, left a payment on the table, and stood up with a small stretch.

Unsure of what he was going to do, you tensed when he walked past. He didn’t do anything. He left the bar. You turned in your seat, mouth slightly gaping as your eyes trailed after him. Straightening yourself, you looked at your still rambling date. Why had you expected Ignis to do anything anyway?

Several minutes passed, five becoming ten. The situation didn’t get better with Ignis’ absence despite what you’d told him. Probably because the date being bad hadn’t actually been his fault. Another small vibration came from your phone, and this time you didn’t try hiding it when you checked. Your date was as oblivious as he was boring.

**Ignis:** Have things improved?

**You:** Not really. :(

**Ignis:** Apologies.

You stared at the message, stomach grumbling because the food there was served in such small, expensive doses, and head aching from the boredom. Suddenly, you’d had enough.

Looking from the message, up to your date’s face, you interrupted, “Hey, sorry, I actually have to go.”

He looked disappointed. “Why?”

“Uh, emergency,” you said. “My dog just… died… in a fire.”

“Just now? I’m so sorry. Should I go with you?”


You were outside before you even had your coat on. Sighing in relief, you took in your surroundings. You had the day free so you didn’t necessarily have to rush home. Stomach growling again, you decided you’d backtrack to that dive you passed on your way to the speakeasy. They advertised having the best burgers in the Crown City.

—

The place was warm and crowded when you walked in. There wasn’t an open table in sight, but you froze in the doorway when you saw Ignis sitting at a table with his things spread everywhere again. Feeling yourself drawn forward, as it always seemed to be with this particular person, you walked past crowded tables and took the only other chair sitting at his table.

He looked up, surprised to see you. “Hello. What are you doing here?”

You waved a hand to get the attention of a server. “I’m starving, and this is the only open seat in the restaurant.”

Ignis looked around as if he hadn’t noticed the busyness of the place until you’d pointed it out. “So it seems.”
After putting in your order, surprised to see Ignis ordering a burger, too, you met his eyes in an unwavering look of indifference.

“How was your date?”

You shrugged. “Considering I’m here with you and not on my way to his place, you could probably guess.”

Organizing his things, shuffling papers and putting files back into the briefcase, Ignis seemed to need a moment to gather himself. With the table cleared, he looked at you. “It’s not so bad to miss out on an evening spent with such a bold liar as that person.”

“Iggy, I already told you,” you sighed. “Everyone lies on first dates.”

He rose a brow. “I don’t.”

Looking at him, at his unbuttoned collar that showed off the necklace he always seemed to have on, at the piercing eyes behind his glasses.

“Because you don’t have to lie to impress people.” You lifted a finger and began to count things as you spoke. “You’re a Crownguard, which is a big deal on its own. You’re a royal advisor, nobility, wealthy, handsome, well mannered.” Pausing there, you scrutinized him. “You weren’t made in a lab, were you? By a team of scientists looking to create the perfect bachelor?”

He blinked, mild confusion giving way to a chuckle. “I don’t believe so.”

Your food came, and as you tucked in, you said, “I bet you do lie. I bet you have to lie to play yourself down instead of playing up like everyone else does.”

He swallowed a bite of food before answering quietly, “I wouldn’t know. I don’t have time for such things.”

That did seem to be something Ignis had in common with your date. He was boring. It didn’t matter how rich and handsome someone was. If they were married to their job, they didn’t have much to offer when it came to dating. And Ignis seemed more than married to his profession. From what you could tell based on Noct’s comments about him, his role as advisor was his bread and butter, his entire life force.

Which was why you suspected you were catching him working off hours at bars and restaurants on the weekend like this.

“Let’s pretend,” you said, coming up with a small idea. If Ignis was going to be your friend for long, you didn’t mind helping him. And, gods, did he need help. “This is a first date. I’m going to play myself up, and you have to play yourself down. We can meet somewhere in the middle. It’ll be good practice for you.”

A frown tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I don’t think—”

“Great, I’ll start,” you interrupted, biting into a fry. “I’m a television director. What do you do for a living?”

He didn’t look like he was going to humor you. Frown still on his face, he seemed to think it over, then said, “I’m a tutor.”

You shook your head. “That’s too low. Think bigger.”
“A professor.”

Smiling, you said, “Perfect. It’s obviously a lie because you’re way too young to be teaching at a university.”

He looked away from you. “This is ridiculous.”

That made you snort, a hand coming up to stifle it. “I’m directing that really popular show about dragons, you know the one?”

He nodded, eyes meeting yours again.

When he didn’t say anything, you sighed a little. He needed a small nudge. “What do you teach, professor?”

Pursing his lips, he relented. “Literature.” He continued before you could go on to your next lie. “Working in the entertainment industry, you must know plenty of famous people.”

“Uh, yeah. I know lots of famous people.” You were losing the plot, confused by his sudden directive. “My best friend is… Beyoncé.”

He stared at you, and you stared at him. A small smile grew on his face. “Wouldn’t that be too big a lie?”

Gaping a little, you tossed up your hands. “You threw me off! I didn’t expect you to ask me anything.” You grumbled and mumbled, ending the silly game to focus on eating your food. It was dumb anyway.

“Forgive me if I’m overstepping,” Ignis spoke up after a short stretch of silence. “Are you so knowledgeable on the subject because you’ve been on many first dates?”

You didn’t care if he knew about your dating habits. It wasn’t something to be embarrassed over. With a shrug, you said, “Yeah. Every date I’ve been on has been a first date.”

“So you lie in this way every time?”

When he put it that way, you felt like you should’ve been embarrassed. Which annoyed you. “Pretty much.”

The look he gave you then was sympathetic, and you didn’t get that at all because he was the pitiful one here, not going on dates and not knowing how to not be boring. He was working on a weekend, for Astral’s sake.

—

He walked you to the nearest train station, telling you it was on his way home anyway. It wasn’t. After waving goodbye and walking toward the turnstiles, you looked back to see him walking back in the direction you’d come.

After your failed attempt at teaching him the trick to first dates, the meal you’d shared had become quiet. He’d spent half of it writing things into that small black notebook he always seemed to carry. It hadn’t been awkward so much as different. He wasn’t exactly the same alone as he was with the other guys.

You wanted a friendship with him to work. Noctis had grown on you a lot recently, and Gladio was
hard to hate. All that left was Ignis, who’d seemed pretty unapproachable until you’d realized how nice he actually was. Boring and stiff, but nice.

You crossed through the turnstile, thinking about the short walk from the burger dive to the station. He’d gone out of his way to walk you there. It wasn’t like the area was dangerous. He was just that kind of friend who did small things to be nice, apparently.

Too bad you were the kind of friend who pestered others until they grew to like it. You really wanted the friendship to work, but you weren’t sure someone like him could handle it.

—

Sick with a cold, you spent two days straight at home. Aranea dropped off some medicine and soup once you’d mentioned it to her in passing that you didn’t feel well. She was a mystery, and you’d long given up trying to figure her out. You welcomed all the care you could get.

Marathoning a show Prompto had suggested, you lay on your couch in a bundle and intermittently used the fancy handkerchief you’d borrowed from Ignis to stifle your coughs. He wasn’t getting it back anytime soon.

There was an insignia in one of the corners that you hadn’t originally noticed. You examined it closely after a small sniffle. Yep, there it was. That same design that was on Ignis’ pocket watch. The regal bird, the book in its talons, and the spiraling vines and leaves that circled it, it was a wonder how someone could embroider something so intricate.

Ignis had to expect this back. You rubbed the soft fabric between your fingers. Maybe you could just conveniently forget that you’d ever borrowed it. The damn thing was softer than a chocobo’s ass. Your deliberation was interrupted by a loud growl from your stomach. When you reached the kitchen to make soup, you paused in front of the fridge.

Wait.

In all of its pretentious glory, the invitation to the New Year’s Eve celebration sat wedged between a picture of Bokeh and a takeout menu. You took it off to look it over for a similar symbol.

But, no, the design on the invitation was completely different and much more recognizable as the symbol for the Lucian Kings. The one on the handkerchief was obviously Ignis’ family crest or something similar. You’d ask him if you thought he’d actually tell you. Better to Moogle it to find answers.

You set it down on the counter and continued your task of warming up soup. The thing needed to be put away. New Year’s Eve was weeks ago and you hadn’t even went to the celebration. Awkward to have something like that on display for so long afterward.

While you waited for the soup to heat up, you looked at the invitation again and folded it closed. From your junk drawer, you found the envelope it had come in and put it back inside. Throwing it out completely was the best thing to do, but it was so fancy, it felt like a waste. It even had a wax seal on the back to keep it—

You blinked, holding the envelope closer to your face. The small, intricate design pressed into the wax seal was the same one on the handkerchief in your hand.

Interesting.

Either Ignis had lied when he said he didn’t work in the Royal Mail department at the Citadel. Or
something strange was afoot.

A succession of sneezes halted your detective work, but once you defeated the cold, you’d reopen this investigation and sleuth out just what the hell was going on.

―

Walking through a filthy showing room, you picked up trash. Prompto was on the other side, going down the parallel aisle and doing the same. You always had about ten minutes to clean the entire place between movies. And sometimes that wasn’t enough.

You reached a hand into a cup holder for what looked like a wadded up napkin. It wasn’t. Whatever it was, the goopy mess was sticky with clumps of things in it that you couldn’t quiet discern. You gagged as it stuck to your hand, which you lifted to show Prompto.

“Dude! What is this?!”

Instead of helping in the slightest, he laughed and shrugged. “I dunno. Looks pretty nasty.”

You sighed. “Is spring break in Galdin Quay worth this? I could be spending this time studying instead of working to pay for that stupid trip.”

“Yes!” He was quick to answer. “Don’t let the mystery goo hold you back!”

That was easy for him to say. He didn’t have it all over his hand. You stomped to the exit, leaving the rest of the room for him to clean. If a beach trip was worth it to him, he could do it all himself.

You hated this job.

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Free of goop, you helped Prompto make popcorn. It was like clockwork, working with him. Once the newest wave of people had filed into the cleaned theater, he turned to you with a grin.

“I almost forgot. Iggy’s birthday is next week. We’re throwing a party at Noct’s.”

You rearranged some condiments, only half listening. “He doesn’t seem like the party type.”

“He’s not. It’s more of a hangout, and it’s a surprise.”

“How old is he turning? Forty?” You paused in your task to feign a worried look. “Because he acts like it.”

A wadded up napkin hit you as Prompto snickered. “I thought you got along with my friends. What gives?”

“I totally get along with them.” You knew you could just look up Ignis’ age online, but Prompto was right there. “Just tell me how old so I can get him a card or something.”

“Twenty three.” Prompto shrugged. “But it doesn’t matter. Don’t bring a present. Gladio is stealing one of Iggy’s cookbooks, and we’re gonna try to make his favorite foods.”

A smile crept onto your face. That birthday hangout was going to be a disaster.

―
You were, by all accounts, simply an amateur gumshoe. But after a bit of a search, you found the Scientia crest on some historical database and felt really proud at confirming your guess about what was embroidered on the handkerchief. You looked at it intermittently as you tried to find some connection between Ignis’s family and the Royal Mail department, but there wasn’t one.

Then you began to dig around in classical noble practice in general. It was entirely possible, and likely, that the wax stamp on the invitation meant nothing. But you were going to cover all of the bases first before tossing the suspicion away.

It was fascinating once you began to really delve into the information. Apparently Insomnian nobility had different rites of passage that they met as they grew up, and they had a lot of tricky etiquette practices that made you wonder how Gladio got by. Made complete sense why Ignis was such a stick in the mud, though.

The thing that struck you was the mention of how important a family crest supposedly was. It was used in most things, notably courtship, which was a process expected from men once they reached twenty three. Women were pressured even sooner when they became twenty. You rolled your eyes at how antiquated all of it seemed, grateful to be a commoner for once in your life.

Wasn’t Ignis turning twenty three in a few days? This was the perfect ammunition to pester him with once you saw him. Just trying to imagine him courting someone was comical.

According to the information online, which you weren’t sure you trusted, the sign of courtship beginning was when a person accepted a gift from another with their family crest on it. That made your eyes bulge. You looked down at the handkerchief uncomfortably. As much as you wanted to keep it, you needed to give that back to him as soon as possible.

Even if all of it was bullshit, you weren’t going to take any chances.

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You: Love that article about you in the Eos Daily today. Tabloids love making nobility look like fools, huh?

Ignis: I don’t even recognize that magazine title. You should stop reading such things.

You: I only look at them when I am stuck in a long checkout line at the store.

Ignis: That’s how they get you. Next you’ll be believing in aliens and swamp creatures.

You: Too late.

Ignis: I’m not surprised. May I ask what the article was about?

You: Look it up yourself. I’m not your assistant.

Ignis: Perhaps, but you seem to have a knack for finding information about me, however untrue it may be.

You: So it’s not true that you are going to be of courting age soon and plan to seduce the entire city with your cunning wit? Too bad they don’t know how bad you are at first dates.

Ignis: Tell me you’re joking.
**Ignis:** I can’t believe this.

The little dots kept going as he typed, and you quickly replied to stop his sudden distress.

**You:** Wow I just made that part up. Are you okay?

**Ignis:** That joke wasn’t funny nor was it good.

**You:** I didn’t know you were so touchy about your love life. Gods, calm down. The article was funny though.

**You:** Apparently you are raising an army of Sahagin in the sewers to overthrow King Regis.

**You:** I’ll send you the link.

**Ignis:** Please don’t.

You sent it to him anyway.

**You:** The picture they used is hilarious. You look so pissed.

**Ignis:** I had dropped my car keys down a grate.

**You:** So that’s why you’re squatting over one?

**Ignis:** I don’t squat.

**Ignis:** Riveting as this has been, I must go. You’ve interrupted my workday for long enough.

**You:** Fine. Be boring.

**You:** But you’ve totally been squatting. I can tell. ;)

You put your phone down on your desk only to pick it up again when a succession of beeps rang through the room. Gladio had opened a group chat with you, Noctis and Prompto. That was new.

**Gladio:** Nice

**Prompto:** what did u say 2 iggy??

**You:** What? Don’t bother me when I’m studying.

**Prompto:** we saw ur profile pic on his phone like 2 secs ago

**Gladio:** The only other person we know who uses obscure memes as their profile picture is Noct and hes sitting here with us in the meeting

Why was Prompto even in a meeting with them? You hated not knowing what was going on.

**You:** What’s the meeting about?

**Gladio:** Don’t change the subject and just tell us why Iggy is so flustered

**You:** Wow, Juicy. Is he really?
Prompto: uh juicy??

Gladio: yeah, juicy, he couldn't focus on the meeting for a full minute thats when we caught him reading a text from you

Prompto: he looks mad at us :( 

You: Ask him if he’s been squatting recently.

Noctis: He’s definitely mad now 

You: Of course he’s mad. He’s totally not receptive to my flirting.

Prompto: don’t flirt pls D:

You: I’m joking!

You were only kind of joking. To be fair, you weren’t really flirting, but if that’s all it took to make Ignis squirm, you liked your chances. He was such a dork that he only needed one mention of his ass to make him flustered? That was so cute you could barely understand it.

Noctis: Keep it coming and Iggy might forget to ask me about the reports I haven’t read yet 

Prompto: lol

Gladio: Hate to break this up but we’re still in a meeting guys

You: Still curious about that.

Prompto: ill tell u l8r I promise

You left them alone then because you really did need to study, not to mention the loads of editing you still had to finish. An hour passed before your phone beeped again, and you tore your eyes from your opened books and the computer screen to see if Prompto was finally going to explain things. But no.

Ignis: You’re insufferable.

There was an old Altissian saying that went something like “I protect myself from my enemies, may the gods protect me from my friends” and you were tempted to send that to him as a fair warning for the type of friend you were.

While you would’ve loved to get into another Altissian conversation with him, you were elbow deep into researching for a paper with no apparent end in sight. So you kept it short and silenced your phone after sending.

You: I think you mean charming.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and the feedback, everyone! :)
I took so many liberties with this chapter. All the courtship stuff is completely made up for the purpose of this fic.

I liked the idea of Ignis knowing more about you than you do of him thanks to Prompto. And then Ignis having no idea how to approach being friends with someone so different than he is as a person.

He just kind of sees you and doesn’t know... what to do... and you’re not much better!
This is the perfect time to panic!

Chapter Summary

Ignis “I never lie” Scientia is actually a huge liar.

Chapter Notes

I really appreciate all the kudos and comments! It keeps me going so thank you! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Noctis' apartment was chaos. It threw you off in a major way because the apartment itself was really nice. Much nicer than Prompto’s or your own place. You stepped over a half filled bag of garbage spilling onto the hardwood floor as you followed him into the kitchen. Prompto gave you a smile when you came in, stirring something in a large bowl.

“You’re here just in time.” Sloppy bits of rice and spices fell from the spoon as he lifted it. “We need help.”

“I can tell.” You looked around the room. Each burner on the stovetop was covered by a pan, various foods cooking in each one. Trash littered the floor here, too. The mix of smells was overpowering and horrifying. You ran a hand over your face and looked at Noctis. “Do you have an apron?”

It was a dumb question and you knew it, but you’d put your best top on for this birthday thing. You didn’t want it to get ruined by whatever the hell was boiling on the stovetop.

Noctis surprised you by scratching his head a little, then walking past you to look in a closet. “I think Iggy has one somewhere.” He pulled out a black, unassuming apron. It tied around the waist, though, totally useless for protecting your shirt.

You put it on anyway, smacking your hands together dramatically. “What are we making?”

Prompto dumped the contents of the bowl he’d been stirring into one of the pans on the stove. “Paella, dumplings, and a cake.”

These weren’t easy things to make. You had them explain exactly where they were in the cooking process and which pan was cooking what. They were following a cookbook that looked painstakingly crafted together by hand. Certain recipes had small stars drawn next to the titles.

The paella recipe was twenty seven pages separated from the dumpling recipe and they had to keep flipping back and forth while catching you up on the situation. You were beginning to think they might have conflated the recipes at some point because the more you looked at the directions, the less everything looked like it should.

They really needed your help, but this was probably beyond you. It was impressive how badly they
were doing at cooking and, to add to your bafflement and annoyance, every few moments, you tripped over an empty water bottle or food wrapper.

“Sweet Shiva.” You leveled a flat look at Noctis. “Do you own a garbage bin, your highness?”

He rolled his eyes.

Prompto snickered as he picked at the dumplings with a pair of cooking chopsticks. He tried to turn one over but squished it instead, poking holes into the skin. “Shit.”

You took the chopsticks away and pushed him out of the kitchen area. “Prom, you clean up. Noct and I can do this.”

One glance at Noctis and you knew he disagreed. He sat at the bar, watching you monitor things rather than actually helping. You wouldn’t complain; he was a prince and clearly didn’t know a damn thing about cooking. It was a wonder they hadn’t set the place on fire before you got there. You’d expected Gladio to be there, too, but these knuckleheads were the only ones around.

“So, where’s the big guy?” you asked as you began to gather the ingredients for a chiffon cake. It was the only thing they hadn’t begun to make so there was a chance to salvage at least one thing.

“He’s throwing Iggy off by giving him a gift while he’s working.”

“Throwing him off?”

Noctis stood and walked to a nearby bookshelf, you were envious of his massive collection of comics. “Yeah, Iggy is next to impossible to surprise. If we ignored him all day he’d know something was up.”

Prompto made a sound in agreement, sweeping up the junk on the kitchen floor. You kicked an empty bottle his way as you asked, “How are we getting him here, then?”

“I’ll text him and complain about not having food or something.” Noctis grabbed a comic and returned to the bar. “He’ll come with stuff I need so it’s like killing two birds with one stone.”

That was a bit weird, but you weren’t going to question the level of dedication Ignis seemed to have for his role as a retainer. It was just a little sad that he would go so far to overwork himself on his own birthday.

You concentrated on getting all of the right measurements for the ingredients. As Prompto had suggested, you hadn’t gotten Ignis a gift. So the least you felt you could do was make the cake as great as possible. If only Noctis and Prompto were just a little more helpful. They kept trying to distract you with comic books and video games. The place was looking much better without all the trash, at least.

Once Gladio arrived, it was like a weight was lifted from your shoulders. He brought wine, which you were just itching to try. Absurd how Noctis didn’t have any alcohol to be found in his apartment. Gladio stopped you from opening it with a chuckle, and you made him take over while you went outside to smoke because the other two were driving you a little crazy.

The air was cold but the sun was out so it tricked you into thinking it was warmer than it actually was. Noctis’s place had a great view overlooking part of the city and a nearby park. You shivered a little as you went through a joint in record time.

When you returned inside, Noctis was on the phone, huffing a string of complaints. The food was
almost done so he must be tricking Ignis into visiting. You checked on the cake—fifteen minutes left on that sucker—and elbowed Gladio.

“I’m so glad you could finally join us.” You rose the lid to the pan of dumplings, steam swirling upward. Gods, you didn’t know if they were supposed to look like this. “I’ve been holding this place down for a while.”

“Thanks,” he said, elbowing you back in the side, harder than he realized. “I can’t believe you got them to clean.”

You rubbed your side a little. “Prompto did. Noctis just kind of watched everything.”

Said prince shot you a flat look, phone at his ear. But you weren’t lying and didn’t feel a bit guilty at calling him out.

“Okay, fine,” he sighed, turning away from everyone to speak lower into the phone. “I have a present for you. Just stop by on your way home to get it.”

Prompto paused the game he was playing, and all of you waited as Noctis listened to whatever Ignis was saying on the other line. Then, Noctis said, “Cool. See you in twenty.”

You reached for the wine again, and again, Gladio took it from you. This time, he dug through a drawer for a corkscrew and popped the bottle open.

“No one else drinks it,” he said as he poured a glass for both you and himself. “Prince Charmless over there hates the stuff.”

You couldn’t say you were the biggest fan, but you appreciated the fancy label on the bottle and the dark red of the liquid as it swirled in your glass. You spent the next twenty minutes drinking, finishing the cake, and flipping through Ignis’ cookbook. It was well cared for and full to the brim with personal recipes. You noticed a starred recipe for a pie that sounded amazing, wondering why no one had wanted to make that.

You were two glasses in and thinking about the pie that could’ve happened when Ignis finally showed up.

There was no shout of “surprise!” but the way his brows arched over his glasses as he realized what he’d walked into was catching. His eyes trailed from one face to another, lingering on yours for long enough that you grinned at him.

He eyed the finished dishes on the bar, the cake cooling on the counter where you’d placed it next to the cookbook. “So that’s where it disappeared to.”

“Don’t worry about it, Iggy,” Gladio held out a plate toward him. It had both paella and dumplings on it. Gods, you did not like that combination, but they were some of his favorites, apparently.

Everyone ate around the table, talking animatedly. Ignis didn’t seem especially impressed by the food. The dumplings had been weirdly both undercooked and over cooked, depending on where you bit in, and the paella was a veritable disaster. He had yet to say a word directly to you, but falling to the background while everyone else talked was more comfortable for you, anyway.

It wasn’t until Gladio began a story about a Kingsglaive that he spent an evening with that made you speak up. It had Noctis blushing, Prompto snickering, and Ignis sighing. It was a beautiful array of responses, and you were ecstatic to put in your two cents.
Once he brought up how the morning after went, Prompto laughed loudly. “Hey, she’s always leaving stuff behind.” He nodded toward you. “What did you leave at that one guy’s place? The guy with the fancy mustache.”

Oh yeah, you’d forgotten about that! “My favorite underwear. It sucked because he was so uncool the morning after.” You forked a bit of paella into your mouth. “The situation was too uncomfortable to go back for them.”

Noctis seemed awkward at the story and Ignis looked disapproving, but Gladio chuckled gruffly along with Prompto. “Right? You never know how they’ll act once they’ve gotten off.”

“Exactly!” You felt validated to have someone who understood how hard it was on the casual dating scene. Maybe being friends with the big guy was more than just the occasional annoying comment on your online photos.

Gladio had poured you another glass of wine when you sat down after very proudly giving everyone cake. If no one liked it, fine, but you followed the recipe perfectly so it would just be Ignis’ fault for having such bad taste.

Ignis’ face lit up on the first bite, and he looked at Noctis. “I see you were able to follow at least one of the recipes.”

Prompto pointed at you with his fork, crumbs falling from it as he spoke. “It was all her. She made me clean the apartment.”

Your eyes met Ignis’, and for the first time that night, he acknowledged you. Interesting to find that he could be so petty. Guess that’s what you got for talking about his butt the other day. You took a long sip of wine, anticipating some sort of dry remark from him.

“It’s perfect.” He gave you a small smile. “I love it.”

You choked on the wine, spilling it on your shirt and coughing. A slight overreaction, maybe, but you were extremely uncomfortable with the “L” word no matter how it was used. You wiped at the wine on your chin with a hand and set the glass down. “Uh,” you looked at Noctis. “Where’s your bathroom?”

His chewing slowed, and he looked at the others as if for help. You’d gathered that he could be anti-social at times but couldn’t believe that the condition was so bad that he couldn’t easily communicate where a room in his home was to a new friend.

“I’ll show you, c’mon.” Gladio pushed his chair back with a roll of his eyes.

You followed him down the hallway back toward the entrance, turning into a messy bedroom. It wasn’t until you were turning on the light in an en suite bathroom that you realized you were in a prince’s private quarters.

Gladio turned to leave, but you grabbed his massive bicep with a hand. “Hey, wait. I have a question or five.”

He leaned on the bathroom door after closing it, crossing his arms and looking down at you. “Throw ‘em at me, juicy.”

You didn’t exactly approve of the nickname, but you’d never exactly confirmed if you could call him juicy so it seemed fair. You rummaged in a cabinet for a moment, grabbing a cloth that you ran under some water before dabbing on your shirt.
“Um, it’s about noble stuff — like, uh, courtship?” You looked at him in the mirror above the sink, watching as he scratched at the scruff on his chin. “So, is twenty three really the age where you’re expected to begin that kind of thing? Like, are you courting someone and now Ignis has to, as well?”

Gladio didn’t say anything at first, and you turned around, rubbing at the red stain on your top. A chuckle made you look up. The son of a bitch was laughing at you. With a frown, you sighed.

“Look, I’m not courting anyone.” He grinned at you, shaking his head a little. “I’m the Shield of the crown prince, I have a greater duty that overrules that kind of thing. I don’t know about Iggy, but it’s probably the same for him.”

You nodded slowly, content to know that the stuff you’d found out online was true, at least. The stain wasn’t coming out, and you were growing frustrated. It was a beautiful top, and now it was ruined. Gladio pushed off from the door, taking the cloth from your hand. He began to grab various things from around the bathroom. You stood idly, pulling at the hem of your shirt.

Okay, so is it true that if you give somebody a thing with your family crest on it, that means you’re courting them?

He put a bottle of something next to the sink, looking at you over a shoulder. “What? I guess that’s how it works. It’s kind of different for every family, though. Why are you asking about this stuff?”

You shifted your weight from foot to foot before digging a hand into a pocket and pulling out the handkerchief. “Ignis gave this to me, and I want to give it back without it being awkward, okay?”

His laugh resounded off the tiled walls as he covered the cloth in a mixture of liquids. “He’s not trying to court you. Gods, that’s the best thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I didn’t think—” You twisted the handkerchief between your hands. “Obviously he isn’t, but now that he’s expected to, isn’t it kind of weird for me to give him something like this?”

You stayed still as he pulled on the hem of your shirt to dab at the stain with the cloth. “Look, I know Ignis, and if he ever tried to court someone, he’d do it all proper. Not by giving someone a rag he blows his nose into.”

Heaving a sigh, you stayed still, amazed at how the stain was slowly diminishing. “Yeah, no shit. Could you just give this to him for me? So I don’t have to think about it anymore?”

He snatched the handkerchief from your hand and stuffed it into a back pocket. “Fine. You think too much. Maybe he should court you. He’s the only other person I know who can overthink the simplest things like this.” The stain was almost gone, like magic, and he shook his head again. “Your wedding would be a disaster I’d pay to see.”

You slapped him on the shoulder. “Shut up and keep working your magic.”

The slap probably felt like a bug bite to him. “I’ve had to do this a lot so I know a thing or two. Just give me a sec.”

Once it was gone, though your shirt was now wet and wrinkly, you gave a small cheer and headed out the door. Gladio could clean up the bathroom. You wanted to finish that cake you had waiting for you. At the doorway to the bedroom you stopped, hearing voices from the other room. Eavesdropping took precedence when something potentially juicy was afoot.

“And you’re certain? There are many things to consider, Prompto.” It was distinctly Ignis’ voice. It sounded clipped and firm. “She’s a complete mess.”
“So what?” Prompto sounded like he had food in his mouth.

A sigh. “She has a questionable practice with both illegal substances and sexual partners. A person like that isn’t suited for such an atmosphere.”

It felt as if your stomach dropped to the soles of your feet. They were talking about you.

“I know.” Prompto said. You almost wished you could see his face, but you couldn’t make yourself move. “It can be really annoying, but she doesn’t like to be bossed around. She—”

Noctis’ voice broke through. “Who likes to be bossed around? Iggy, what’s your deal?”

“You’d be okay with someone who smells of marijuana mingling with everyone?” Ignis sounded frustrated. “What if she sleeps with the wrong person and causes a scene?”

Noctis sighed. “I don’t really care. She’s cool.”

A hand gripped your shoulder gently, and you were pushed forward into the hallway. Gladio squeezed before letting go and walking past you. He raised his voice when walking into the room, ending the conversation between the others. “I’m stuffed.”

You trailed after him, wiping a hand over the rumpled wet spot on your shirt. You were feeling incredibly self conscious. The men sitting around the table looked at you, and you wanted to shrink back. Prompto gave you a grin that you didn’t return. All you could think of was his voice in your head, over and over again, I know, it can be really annoying. About you. It made you angry. There was no reality in which it was any of their business who you slept with and when.

“I have to go,” you said, backing away a few steps.

Prompto groaned. “Already? C’mon, we haven’t even gotten to the fun part yet.”

You glared at him. “I don’t think I’m suited for this atmosphere.” On your way out, you grabbed your coat and put on your shoes at warp speed. You needed to get the hell away from them.

Noctis had defended you, kind of, but Prompto agreeing that you were a mess. That was hard to swallow. You knew he wasn’t fond of your frequent change in partners, but he’d never actually said anything to you about it.

He was supposed to be your friend.

—

Waking in your room with two other bodies in your bed, you climbed out and stretched. It had been your first time with two lovers at once and even that wasn’t distracting enough.

You hadn’t spoken to anyone aside from your professors and Aranea in a week. Prompto kept sending messages that you blew off because you were still mad.

Unsuited to be their friend? Sure. It wasn’t like you’d sought them out; they’d come into your life. You were going to save them the trouble by cutting ties now since Ignis apparently had such a distaste for you as a person. It was his own fault for being the most boring person in the universe.

“It’s been fun,” you told the Boys, leading them out of the apartment. Hopefully Aranea wasn’t out there. She could be so intimidating for your guests, and you wanted this to go smoothly. The stoop was mercifully empty when you walked them to the main door downstairs.
One Boy still looked tired while the other gave you a grin. All you knew about them was that they were both from Galahd. The smiling one wound a scarf around his neck. “Should we lose your number?”

You scratched at your arm, then leaned on the doorway to feign being casual. This was always the hardest part. “You can call me, but I wouldn’t expect… this to happen again. I’m not really looking for—”

He cut you off with a laugh. “I totally get it.”

Stepping down the stoop, the tired one shot you a smile and a small wave. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

Shiva, they were much cooler than most about this. Maybe you could contact them again when you weren’t just trying to find bodies to distract you from your hurt feelings and self imposed isolation.

The rest of that morning was spent between bouts of editing your film and pursuing your options on a dating app. When the editing was getting nowhere, you selected yes to all the creeps and freaks that had asked you on dates.

Because why the hell not?

—

The reason why not became clear as you raced from a cafe to a restaurant several blocks away. Then from there to a bookstore even further. Having dates in succession was taxing, and none of them seemed particularly into you. Which was fine. The only people willing to go on sudden dates like this were just lonely people, like yourself, with nothing better to do than feel sorry for themselves, like yourself, especially on a day that places high value on romantic relationships.

“Valentine’s Day sucks,” you said, sipping on water at your third restaurant that day.

The guy across from you nodded. “It’s a racket that profits from lonely losers like us.”

“Speak for yourself.” You rested an elbow on the table, leaning forward just enough to show him a bit of cleavage. You had one more date waiting after this one. In a cafe across town. You were growing impatient and didn’t feel like going that far. If this guy didn’t work out, you were going home to eat junk food. “I’m not lonely now that you’re here.”

He was a disappointment, not picking up on anything you were throwing down. You picked up ice cream on your way home and ate it while bitching to Aranea about everything that was happening.

“I think your weed smell is lovely.”

You stared at her. Unbelievable. You could never tell if she was joking or not. “I try super hard to keep from having a weed smell! I shouldn’t have one, Aranea.” You were pouting at this point.

“You don’t,” Aranea sighed. “I think this guy would find fault with you no matter what. But you can’t stay mad at Prompto because of what the other one said.”

“Oh, but I can,” you assured her. “He agreed with him and didn’t even defend me. Noct—” you stopped yourself from using names other than Prompto’s because Aranea didn’t need to know. “Whatever. It’s all stupid.”

“There’s something we agree on.”
Once you really delved into editing that night, you noticed just how often you and Prompto had ruined the audio of a shot by laughing together about something behind the camera. Noctis had made it into one of the shots, too, quickly covering his face and hedging away. There was so much unusable crap in there, and you had to wade through it all as you finished the film.

When it came to the credits—a point in the process that you never imagined you’d reach—you thought hard about listing Ignis as something rude. In the end, pride in your work overwon pettiness, and you labeled him Lover like you’d told him. Prompto was the Director of Photography, which was well deserved even if he did snicker a lot at the dumbest things during scenes. You gave Gladio and Noctis credits, too, for helping out. It also made your credits look less pitiful with the extra names.

The grocery store was empty the next morning and you filled your arms with candy. You were going to swallow your pride and go to Prompto’s apartment to split it with him. When you rounded the corner of an aisle, you bumped headlong into someone. The bags of half price Valentine’s day candy slipped from your arms and smacked the floor with mismatched plops.

“Oops, sorry.”

You looked at Prompto with mild surprise, his face wearing a matching expression. He didn’t usually get up this early unless he was working. You both bent down to pick up the candy at the same time, bumping heads. Rubbing at your head, you accepted the candy he’d picked up.

He looked like he wanted to say something, shifting from foot to foot as he often did. You saved him the trouble by speaking first. “Are you busy today?”

The uncertain look on his face made you uncertain. “Not really. I was going to study mostly.”

Your brows arched. “You studying? That’s a first.”

The corners of his mouth curled into a smile, blue eyes rolling. “Hey, I study. Sometimes.”

You hefted at the bags in your arms. “Wanna come over and watch bad movies?”

“Hell yeah,” he replied instantly. “I was gonna drop by and annoy you into talking to me again, anyway.”

You walked to the checkout line, eyes looking over the tabloids just out of bad habit. “Aranea would’ve killed you.”

He snorted, then it became a soft sigh. “Is she still single?”

“I don’t know. She’s even more private than I am.” You paid for the candy, but he grabbed the bag before you could. The walk back to your place was amicable, and when Aranea waved from her patio on the floor below your apartment, Prompto made the goofiest face that had you forgiving him wholly.

You sent out a mass message to everyone involved with the film that there would be a viewing at Prompto’s apartment at the end of the month. Okay, not everyone. You didn’t tell the Costume
Person or Actor One because you weren’t friends with them. But you felt no guilt leaving them out. Of all the responses you received, you didn’t expect the one you got as you walked into your last class.

_Ignis:_ I can’t wait to see it. Are you free this afternoon?

_You:_ No. I’m in class.

_Ignis:_ That’s unfortunate. I have something very important to discuss with you.

If this was his idea of trying to apologize, you were not impressed.

_You:_ I’m super duper busy. I’m sure you understand.

_Ignis:_ I’ll buy you a coffee.

_You:_ Stop bothering me during class. My studies are important.

_You:_ But I’ll meet you at the cafe on South Quartus in thirty minutes.

_Ignis:_ That’s too far from the Citadel for me to make it in time.

_You:_ Then I guess you better book it, turbo.

He was standing outside the cafe when you arrived, not looking rushed at all despite his protest. You were slightly astonished that he’d shown up at all. His formal appearance and overall aura clashed with your casual attitude; he didn’t return the small wave you gave him.

“Hello,” he greeted, nodding once. “How are you?”

The formalities grated on you. “I’m just peachy.” Stepping past him, you went inside and took a seat at one of the smaller tables near the windows. You made a show of taking off your coat and ordering the largest mug of coffee they offered. He sat across from you, following your lead and looking slightly frustrated. Good.

“So.” Your fingertips rapped against the tabletop. “What’s this very important thing we have to discuss?”

He used a finger to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose, meeting your eyes. “I want to apologize.”

You let out a slow breath. This was ridiculous; Prompto had hurt your feelings, but you couldn’t care less about what Ignis thought of you. “I’m over it.” The coffee arrived, and you sipped it with an exaggeratedly delicate hand as Ignis seemed to consider his next words.

He looked down into his mug. “I need a favor.”

With a blink, you lowered the mug. There was next to nothing that you could give him that he couldn’t easily get on his own. He drank from his coffee, remaining collected despite the slight frown at the edges of his mouth. This was just a little bizarre, but you’d bite. “Which is?”

Green eyes pinned you, and his brow furrowed almost anxiously. He pursed his lips, saying nothing for several moments. Then, he took another drink of coffee, using that as an opportunity to look away. When he met your eyes again, he sighed. “Forgive me. I’m finding it difficult to gather my thoughts on this particular subject.”
Okay? You began to chew on the inside of your cheek, not liking the way he seemed to grow increasingly distressed by the second.

“There are certain expectations of someone my age and position—”

“Oh, gods,” you interrupted. “Is this about the courtship stuff?” You’d asked Gladio about that in confidence! It hadn’t been explicitly said, but you thought that it was implied by the privacy of the conversation. Rather than bypassing any awkward moments, it seemed you were meant to have an uncomfortable exchange about the stupid handkerchief after all.

Ignis’ mouth parted in quiet surprise, then he nodded slightly. “How much do you know?”

You shrugged. “I did some research when I saw your family crest on the handkerchief.”

“What handkerchief?”

“The one Gladio gave you, I’m guessing?”

His expression must have mirrored yours because he looked as confused as you felt. “Gladio hasn’t given me a handkerchief.”

“Wait.” You pushed your coffee away to lean forward on the table a little. “What are you talking about?”

He looked away, eyes flickering from one place to another as if he were thinking. It only lasted for a moment before he seemed to squash the worry, replacing it with calm. “I’ll try to be succinct. Has my uncle contacted you?”

You frowned, more confused than ever. “No?”

He sighed, relief washing over his face. “Then, I believe I may be troubling you for nothing. Apologies.”

Wait, what? This entire discourse had been nothing but annoying and unhelpful.

“Uh, no way do you get to just brush this under the rug, dude.” You reached across the table to stop him from picking up his mug to take a drink. He was going to explain what was happening now.

“Why would your uncle ever contact me?”

He looked at your hand on his, then up to your face. A quiet sigh escaped him. “I made a somewhat careless and sudden decision several months ago.”

You narrowed your eyes. “Just tell me.”

He removed his hand from under your grip and used it to adjust his glasses. “Do you remember the day we ran into each other in the Royal Mail department?”

The day he’d forgotten your name, how could you forget? “Yeah, I do. Is this relevant?”

“It is, but I’d be more comfortable if you’d let me preface this with an explanation.” He sipped from his mug, and you gave him a sharp frown. You didn’t care if he was comfortable.

“Seriously, Ignis, tell me.” This was becoming maddening. “I formally invite you to enlighten me on this careless decision that you keep trying to be vague about.”

“After leaving the Royal Mail department,” he said, pausing as if it pained him to even finish the
sentence. “I told my uncle that I was courting you.”

That answer didn’t help. With every new bit of nonsense that came out of his mouth, you grew further from understanding anything. “Why would you tell him that?”

Ignis sighed, pushing his glasses up and rubbing at his eyes. “Due to a recent event involving the royal family, my uncle has gotten this unfortunate interest in my social well-being. Before I lied about you, he’d been constantly suggesting and setting up meetings with potential partners. It was a nightmare.”

You absorbed that information. They had been having a strange conversation in the middle of the Mail department that day, but you hardly remembered the details. Suddenly, it dawned on you. The invitation to the New Year’s Eve celebration must’ve been sent by Ignis’ uncle if he believed Ignis was courting you. It was all beginning to make sense; how grateful Ignis had been that you’d given him an out on the day of filming, and his confusion at you even receiving an invitation.

You gasped as the pieces fell into place and pointed at him. “You’ve been using me to get out of actually courting someone.”

His expression was all you needed to know you’d hit the nail on the head. He frowned, looking down into his mug. “Yes. I sincerely apologize.”

As you lowered your hand, you felt a laugh bubble up from your chest. You tried to hide it by taking a drink of your, now lukewarm, coffee. But he was looking at you curiously, and another laugh came up, escaping quietly. You put down your mug, a wry smile on your face. “You aren’t as boring as I thought you were. Rigid, maybe, but not boring.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m honored, truly.”

You leaned back in your chair, crossing your arms. Your eyes looked him over, at the dignified way he sat even in this casual setting and the pressed lines of the suit he wore. So he didn’t lie on first dates, but he lied about entire relationships. He was on a whole different level. “What’s the favor, to keep up the lie?”

He nodded once. “Ideally, yes.”

“Well, in that case,” you said, uncrossing your arms and dropping your elbows on the table to smile sweetly at him. “No, thanks.”

The man could really sigh because this had to be the nth time he’d done it since meeting with you. “I understand how strange a request it is, but I promise the expectations would be solely put on me. You wouldn’t have to do anything but continue living your life.”

You shook your head. “It doesn’t matter. First of all, that’s not true. I looked everything up, and there are a lot of rituals involved with courtship. Second, wouldn’t your uncle just get suspicious when he notices that we don’t spend much time together?”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” He raised a hand for a server and ordered more coffee. So he planned for you to be here for a bit longer, then. He had better make his explanation a damn good one. “Courtship would normally involve a lot of small rituals between the people involved, but since you’re a commoner, the rules are much more relaxed. No public declarations or formal obligations.”

“Okay, well,” you began, thinking over everything he’d said so far. “Just ask literally any other commoner. Prompto would probably do it.”
The server came with fresh coffee, and you both took a moment to enjoy it before getting back into this, frankly uncomfortable, conversation.

“The issue is that I’ve already told the lie.” Ignis held his mug with both hands, his knuckles were white. “You’re the perfect person for the job because you’re a commoner, and you’re incredibly private. My uncle would be unable to snoop and no one else would have to know.”

You ran a hand down your face. “Ignis, listen to yourself. This is crazy. Just tell your uncle that you don’t want to court someone yet.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

He had the audacity to look affronted. “It’s my social responsibility.”

“Then actually court someone,” you said, leaning forward again and lowering your voice. “If it’s so important, you should do it right with someone you don’t think is a slut.” You took a drink of your coffee to stop from speaking further. Maybe you were kinda bothered by Ignis’ low opinion of you still. The coffee spilled slightly in your rush, running down your chin. Apparently, you were a child who could never seem to drink anything right.

“This is the busiest time of my life thus far; I don’t have time for such trivial things.” He watched you wipe at your chin with a napkin. “All I’m proposing is that, should you ever come across my uncle, however unlikely that may be, you simply imply that we are getting on well. We could have a fabricated separation in a month or so. Then, I’d convince my uncle that I’m too devastated by it to begin another courtship for at least… two years.”

Titan, he’d really thought this through. This must’ve been what he was like during meetings. All negotiating with little room for argument. You sipped at the coffee, more careful this time. “Two whole years? I’m pretty hard to get over.”

He knew what he was asking was absurd, the mix of hope and discomfort clear on his face. “Is that a yes?”

You rolled a shrug across your shoulders. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t find this kind of… exciting. But your uncle’s not gonna buy the lie if I don’t have something with your family crest on it.”

Relief colored his expression, and he reached into an inner pocket of his jacket. At first you thought it was his pocket watch, but when he placed it into your hand, you realized, while similar to the watch, it was a little bigger and flatter. Solid gold, it felt light in your palm. Etched onto the face of it was the crest you were well familiar with by now. It popped open with slight pressure, and you realized it was just a compact mirror.

“I noticed you seem to get things on your face fairly often,” he explained. “I’d wanted it to be a practical gift, even if it is a lie.”

“Very funny.” You closed it, feeling a blush come to your cheeks. It certainly didn’t help that you’d just spilled coffee on your face. “Why gold?”

He seemed more relaxed than ever, an easier smile on his face. “Scientia always use gold to initiate courtship.”

“Big surprise,” you said, rolling your eyes. “It’s kind of obnoxious. Couldn’t go for white gold?”
A corner of his mouth quirked up with a smirk. “A tad late for requests.”

“Do I get to keep it once we fake break up?”

He shook his head, smile growing slightly despite the firmness of his words. “It’s imperative that you return it, otherwise the end of the courtship is still up in the air.”

“Well, that sucks.” You opened and closed the compact again, gaze going from it to Ignis. Maybe it could be fun. All you’d have to do was pretend to be dating Ignis if you ever happened to see his uncle, which was as improbable as winning the lottery. Otherwise it would just be business as usual. “Do I get a favor in return?”

With a nod, he subdued his smile. “If you wish.”

You pocketed the compact, unsure if you were making the right choice. “Okay, my favor isn’t nearly as insane. I just wanna know, has Prompto been preparing to become a Crownguard?”

He tilted his head, brows furrowed. “Not that I’m aware.”

That wasn’t good enough; Prompto was spending more and more time at the Citadel lately. “Then, what’s going on?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“C’mon, Ignis, I’m dying to know.” You reached across the table again, but he dodged your hand. “I’m your friend and now your fake girlfriend and accomplice. You can tell me anything.”

Adjusting his glasses again, he sighed. “Courtship would not make you my girlfriend.”

You gave him an incredulous look. “Isn’t it basically long-term dating?”

“It’s markedly different,” he said, returning the look.

You closed your eyes, shaking your head a little. “No, nice try. You’re not changing the subject.” With a big gulp of your coffee, you stared him down. “You said this was the busiest time of your life so far. Why? Does it have something to do with Prompto?”

He stared back, only looking away when he withdrew his pocket watch to check the time. Why he couldn’t just use his phone like everyone else was beyond you.

Suddenly, he was standing and putting on his coat. “You have an incredible tenacity that I admire.” He placed a large bill on the counter and met your eyes again. “I’ll answer your questions when I’m given clearance to do so, that’s a promise. Please, take care of yourself.”

Then he was gone, leaving you caught somewhere between flattered and infuriated.

Chapter End Notes

Ignis: so you just gonna make me a birthday cake on my birthday at my birthday party on my birthday with a birthday cake?

You: happy birthd—
Ignis: *smashes a mug of coffee against your head*

If it ever feels like I’m holding your hand narratively, let me know. Because I am so unaware of how much to over-explain or under-explain. My single brain cell is working overtime to make heads and tails of this story.
They call it a royale with cheese.

Chapter Summary

You find that Ignis can be stubborn, and you really didn’t sign up for this.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Movie snacks became creative when you were working with what Prompto had in his kitchen. He made some kind of bean dip that looked questionable at best. You’d brought cup noodles as a small surprise for Gladio, who hadn’t arrived yet, so there was that. Noctis melted a bunch of cheese over popcorn. In fact, there was a variety of popcorn disasters that he’d created all over the place. Drenched in hot sauce or mixed with chocolate, each one was just a bit more frightening than the last.

You were sick of popcorn because of your job but tossed some into your mouth nervously anyway. You couldn’t really stop eating the stuff even if you hated it. You’d rolled a joint in the bathroom as soon as you got there, but you wanted a clear head while watching the film. So for now, as people kept arriving and Prompto connected your laptop to the tv, you stuffed your face.

Gladio came in with Ignis, amid a conversation using hushed voices. Of course your interest was piqued, and you leaned over the back of the sofa to watch them even though you couldn’t catch a single word being said. Gladio kicked off his shoes while Ignis took his off carefully, giving the other man a displeased look. As he removed his coat, he caught you watching. You lifted your hand in a small wave, liking the way he paused with one arm still in the sleeve to wave back.

It had been nearly two weeks since you’d made your strange arrangement, and you’d spoken to him all of zero times since. So far, the fake courtship was pretty chill like he’d promised.

You offered him the cheese covered popcorn when he sat next to you on the sofa. How forward of him, really. “It’s a Noct original.”

“Quite the delicacy, I’m sure,” he appraised, rejecting the offer with a shake of his head.

Prompto snapped his fingers to catch your attention. Now that everyone was there, you knew it was time to start the film. Your nerves were so frayed; what if no one liked it? Covering your eyes with a hand, you nodded. Best to get it over with.

Your hand slowly lowered from your face as the film went on and no one was laughing derisively or looking particularly uncomfortable. It was only just over fifteen minutes long, but it felt so much longer. At the end, Prompto cheered at his credit, knocking your shoulder softly with a fist. As if being the director of photography over such a small project was something to be proud of.

Awash in compliments from everyone that you couldn’t determine were genuine or not, you excused yourself to the fire escape to calm your nerves. It was over, and you were fine. People actually saw something you created; they even seemed to like it. For the first time in a while, you felt palpable pride. Maybe showing your work to others wouldn’t be so bad after all. Hopefully the Altissians liked it as much as everyone inside claimed to.
The window to the apartment creaked as it slid open. Without warning, Ignis climbed through and closed the window behind him to just a sliver like you’d had it before. He glanced at the steps leading up to the next floor before deciding he’d just lean back against the railing next to you. A wind blew past, chilling you and sending the smoke from your joint right into his face.

“Sorry,” you murmured and put it out against the railing and flicked what was left toward the nearby alley below. It was a waste, but you were only a casual user and didn’t want to give Ignis any more fuel for disliking you. Not that you cared. Quickly licking your lips, you looked up at him and smiled. “I can’t wait for spring.”

“The cherry blossoms that grow on this side of town are a magnificent sight, indeed,” he mused.

You let the silence linger between you for several beats. Your smile waned, and you looked away, walking your fingers across the railing thoughtfully, paint chipping off in places. “What brings you out here? Fair warning, I think I’ve hit my limit for strange favors.”

He chuckled, and you looked up in time to see him control it. “I’m out here to give you a bit of praise, actually. I was rather impressed. I’ll admit, I expected something less coherent.”

That was a pretty backhanded compliment. As easy as you found Ignis to read, you couldn’t distinguish if the sincerity was real or not. You tended to think it was genuine since he’d just insulted you in the same breath. You blushed either way. “Thanks. You helped make it work.”

He shifted, turning around to look out at the street below. “It’s cliche to use love as the answer, but I think the way you had it play out in the end was original.”

“I kind of phoned that part in,” you admitted. Your body felt light, and the wind was less biting; the kind kush was finally kicking in. “I’m not much of a romantic, like at all. But people really go for that nonsense so I did it.”

“I find that surprising.”

You looked up to meet his eyes. “Which part? That I phoned it in or…?”

“That you aren’t a romantic.” His expression was far too serious for this conversation. His lips were lovely, though, a perfect bow. You traced them with your eyes before looking down at your hands on the cold railing.

“Not all artists are inherently romantics.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

You wondered what his lips looked like when he said that, what they looked like when they said your name. You’d pay attention to that next time. “Do you think the Altissians will like it?”

“They’d be fools not to.”

That definitely sounded like bullshit, but you were too relaxed to argue. Thinking about Altissia and recalling a past conversation with him, you said in Altissian, “Good.”

“Hm.” He leaned both elbows on the railing, one of his arms pressed against yours. He took the bait and responded in kind. “How well do you speak Altissian?”

“I’m very fluent.”
“Your accent is terrible.”

You elbowed him, and he gave the barest of chuckles. “You’re impressed.”

He was looking at you, you could feel it. When you glanced up at him, he said, “Yes, a bit.”

Face growing warm, you wanted to tell him he impressed you, too, but he probably heard things like that often enough. You also wanted to tell him that his lips shouldn’t look so teasing when speaking Altissian.

Instead, you grinned at him. “How are things with your uncle?”

His smile wanted a little at the subject change. “He hasn’t requested to meet you so things are fine.”

“I keep expecting something to happen. Being your girlfriend is boring.”

He shook his head a little. “I told you it would be as if nothing changed.”

He’d been right. Nothing really had changed other than you carrying around the shiny golden compact everywhere you went.

With a small sigh, you made for the window. It was freezing outside, and this time neither of you had a runaway chocobo keeping you out there.

—

“I was sprinting from one place to another,” you said, looking from Prompto to Gladio. “It was the busiest Valentine’s Day of my life.”

Gladio chuckled gruffly. “Why would you say yes to so many dates in one day? Even I don’t have the stamina for that.”

You shrugged, knowing the answer but not willing to give it. “I was bored. They were all bad, too. I ended up eating ice cream with Aranea at home that night.”

Prompto perked up at the mention of your landlady. “That sounds way better than a one night stand.”

“I don’t just have one night stands,” you defended.

Gladio chuckled again, deeper than before. “C’mon. You’re holding out on us. I was hoping to hear what you’d left at someone’s house this time.”

With a grin, you relented. “I didn’t leave anything anywhere, but I did fulfil a wish of mine.” You held up two fingers. “Two guys at once.”

Prompto gasped like you hadn’t already told him about it while Noctis slumped into the sofa as if he wanted to physically leave the conversation.

Gladio had questions. “A wish, huh? How was it?”

Ignis came back from the kitchen when you were describing, as Gladio had so eloquently put it, “which part of the sandwich” you were during the threeway.

“Specs, take me home.” Noctis shot up, avoiding eye contact with you. It almost made you feel bad how uncomfortable you were making the prince. Gladio and Prompto only seemed to think it was funny so you didn’t feel guilty for long.
With a careful frown pointed in your direction, Ignis put on his coat. “Not that I care to take part in your distasteful conversation, I don’t believe some of those positions you mentioned are possible.”

You blinked, not thinking he’d been able to hear you from the other room. “They’re totally possible. I could show you sometime, if you’re interes—”

Ignis shook his head in disapproval while Noctis grunted unintelligibly, practically shoving his feet into his shoes as he made for the door. You covered your mouth with a hand to stifle a laugh. You’d not mention your sex life in front of the prince anymore, you decided. Even though his reactions were priceless.

—

Over all things you had in common with Prompto, one thing triumphed as the biggest reason you remained such good friends. You both absolutely, undeniably adored the same video games. If one of you liked it, it was a guarantee the other would, too. Because you were both not the richest people, you had a system of sharing a lot of games to save money, spending nights at each other’s places for extended game nights. Ever since everyone had gotten Prompto a big tv, it always ended up being at his place more often than not.

Once everyone had left, you stuck around to surprise Prompto with the newest video game in a series you both loved. Kind of your own private celebration.

“It’s not even game night,” he said, putting the game in excitedly. “Are you sure you don’t have studying to do or something?”

“Oh my gods, dude, you’re not getting stingy before even playing, are you?”

He grinned at you sheepishly. “Of course not.”

—

When a character spoke Altissian—with subtitles— during a cutscene before a boss battle, Prompto looked at you.

“Were you and Iggy speaking Altissian on the balcony?”

You hadn’t realized anyone noticed. “How’d you know?”

He laughed sheepishly. “We were all kinda listening.”

Attention being pulled from the cutscene, you frowned at him. “Seriously?”

He threw up his arms. “Iggy never goes out there. It was weird!” You gave him an unamused look that only made him more defensive. “How was I supposed to know you guys were getting along again?”

The gameplay began, and you weren’t doing well already, distracted by the conversation. “He got me a coffee a couple weeks ago and apologized. When I told him I’m minoring in Altissian, he offered to help me practice since he’s fluent. We’re cool.”

He heaved a sigh in relief. “I’m glad. I know he can be intimidating as hell.”

“Intimidating isn’t the right word.” Your character died, and you handed him the controller begrudgingly and threw your head back. “He makes me want to impress him.”
Prompto snorted. “Because he’s flawless?”

“Dude, no. Trust me, he has flaws.” Like coming up with bad lies that involved you. You watched Prompto get his ass kicked by the big evil boss. It was just the first boss battle, too. This game was going to be a challenge. “I’m sure I’ll find some flaws if I flirt hard enough to see what he hides underneath those fancy suits.”

He mashed the buttons, but it seemed nearly impossible to save himself before his character died gruesomely. Passing the controller back to you, he stood to get more snacks. “I think Iggy’s ace so, like I’ve tried warning you before, try not to flirt with him too much. You’ll just end up disappointed, and he’ll be totally uncomfortable around you.”

Your character died almost immediately; you were too distracted by your thoughts. A lot of things made sense, suddenly. Ignis’ apparent distaste for your casual love life and his need to avoid courtship; he was definitely an asexual hiding his identity. You felt less weird about helping him with his courtship problem.

You knew what it was like to fake it.

—

The compact mirror usually sat safely in an inner pocket of your bag. While you were in classes, you moved it to a coat pocket or pulled it out just to look at it between taking notes. It was polished and shiny, too ostentatious for your taste, personally, but beautiful nonetheless. You almost wanted to go to the Citadel and find Ignis’ uncle just to have someone to show it off to. It had proven to be very useful so far. You’d picked food out of your teeth several times already since receiving it, saving you a good deal of embarrassment.

Now you were using it to reflect sunlight into Prompto’s face. You were both studying separately in the library, and he had yet to notice you. He was too focused on his phone, typing furiously every few moments. All he did to avoid the sunlight was move slightly to the side, a back and forth motion you wondered if he even realized he was doing.

You snapped the compact shut, shoving it into a pocket and crossing the room to join him at the table. If he hadn’t noticed you already, he was likely never going to. “Surprised to see you here.”

He jumped, looking up at you blankly before saying, “Oh, hey. Maybe you can help with this.”

“I’m not doing your homework,” you told him as you took a seat at the table.

He shook his head. “No, we’re trying to convince Iggy to go to Galdin Quay with us.”

That was news to you. “Who’s we? I thought you and I were going to Galdin Quay together?”

“We are,” he said quickly, putting down his phone to give you an apologetic smile. “I invited Noct a while ago, but he didn’t get permission to go outside the Wall until today.”

“And if Noct is coming, Gladio is, too.” you guessed.

He snapped his fingers, pointing at you. “Exactly. So we’re trying to convince Iggy now. That way it’ll be all of us.”

You were annoyed that he’d made these decisions to invite others without you, but it really would be more fun with more people, right? He kept looking at his phone, rolling his eyes and sending more messages.
Opening a book and placing it on the table to make yourself feel like you were being productive, you joined in harassing Ignis.

**You:** I heard you don’t want to go to the beach with us.

You were surprised to receive a response so quickly, if at all.

**Ignis:** I have far too much to do, especially if the prince is to be gone for a week.

**You:** No fun, as always.

**You:** Ignis, just go with us.

Prompto dropped his phone loudly on the table, startling you and gaining a few stares from nearby students. He covered it with a hand, slightly embarrassed. “Iggy’s hopeless. Who doesn’t want to go to the beach?”

You nodded in agreement. Both you and Prompto had worked for months to save the money for this trip. Ignis could, ostensibly, go anytime he wanted, and he would rather work. He needed someone to save him from himself.

**Ignis:** And let the work build up in my absence? I’m incredibly busy. All of you know that.

**You:** Iggy Iggy Iggy

**You:** Can’t you see?

**You:** Sometimes your words just hypnotize me.

**Ignis:** Stop.

**You:** I can’t. I’m hypnotized.

Prompto offered to get you something from the cafe. You handed him your card for the Ebony machine and tried to think of a different approach.

**You:** Won’t your uncle think it’s weird that I’m going all the way to Galdin Quay with a bunch of guys but not you?

**You:** What if I fall in love with Gladio or Noctis while we’re there? Or both??

**You:** Maybe we’ll elope. Prompto could witness.

**You:** A three way marriage without you. What would your uncle think then?

**You:** HUH?

Prompto came back with the coffee, and, to your utter amazement, actually began to study. When Ignis finally replied, the muted ping made Prompto look at you.

“I’m doing my best on Ignis,” you said, picking up your phone.

**Ignis:** I’m sure you think you’re being very clever to leverage this against me, but the entire purpose of this arrangement is to get me out of forced social obligations, not my actual responsibilities.
Ignis: Should you all fall in love, I’d be the first to congratulate you.

“Is it working?” Prompto asked.

“No,” you sighed, locking the phone without replying. You’d have to try something else later.

—

The cherry blossom trees that lined your side of town were incredible to behold once spring decided to hit Insomnia with a force. Pink was everywhere as you walked to Prompto’s apartment with the triumphant news that you’d just submitted your application and film to the Altissian Academy of Motion Pictures.

As a breeze blew past, cherry blossom petals twirled around you in soft waves. That had to be a good sign from the gods. They loved you and wanted you to be happy. They wouldn’t have created you otherwise, right?

You paused on the sidewalk to keep from stepping in front of someone’s camera as they took photos of the trees. Prompto was probably somewhere outside doing the same thing, and you knew you had to keep an eye out for that dork on your walk.

In fact.

You took a shitty picture of the blossoms with your phone, uploading it without a caption. Since you allowed few people to follow you, there wasn’t much to expect aside from the obvious juicy comment from Gladio.

As you began your ascent up the stairs into Prompto’s building, you checked to see if the big guy had pulled through for you because you really needed something to latch onto for some sense of normalcy. You were still reeling a little from the excitement and trepidation of becoming one step closer to your dream.

No comment yet, but there was a single like. From Ignis. You smiled at the stylized heart and put your phone away. That would have to do. You anchored yourself to the feeling, calming down a little. All you could do about the application at this point was wait.

—

Because Ignis was, in a way, a political figure, you felt the only true way to sway his adamant decision was bribery. You’d remembered the pie recipe he’d starred in that cookbook of his, and spent a fair amount of your free time baking one from memory. And Gladio had gotten into Ignis’ apartment again to take a picture of the actual recipe for you.

Gladio said Ignis never changed his passcode, and that it was painfully obvious. He also said it was fun to just dig around in his stuff because the man apparently had a lot of books.

So it was with a fair amount of anxiety and a warm pie, you went to the Citadel. The place was heavily guarded, but most citizens were allowed on the first few levels that contained public departments like Transportation and Royal Mail. Gladio had given you the location of Ignis’ office, somewhere high up, beyond the guards. You looked at them with wide eyes as you walked toward the elevators, and though you were there for the most innocent of reasons, their hard eyes made you feel as if you were doing something suspicious.

You stopped in front of them, and with a slightly unsteady voice, gave them a phrase that Gladio had said would get you through. As you expected, one of them took your bag, holding it for the other to
check inside. You had nothing to hide. Just some lip balm, your wallet, and the pie. The only thing you hoped they didn’t see was the embarrassing photo on your driver’s license.

The one checking everything over took the pie box out, opening it roughly to look inside. She seemed almost disappointed by the contents, putting it back inside before the guy gave the bag back to you.

Stepping into one of the elevators, your gaze went over the large array of buttons. So many floors. You found the one for the thirty third and pressed it, waiting for the elevator to pull you upward. It was so smooth, you didn’t notice it was moving until you turned around and realized that the back of the elevator was glass, giving you a perfect view of how high you were climbing.

You felt dizzy as things and people became smaller. Oh, gods. Turning right around again, you distracted yourself by pulling out the compact and checking to be sure you had your game face on. Nothing between your teeth or leftover food on your face. Good. You peeked over your shoulder, inhaling a breath at the ever growing distance you were from the ground.

The elevator stopped suddenly on the twenty fifth floor. Your head jerked forward as a tall, beautiful woman joined you inside. She held the same type of intimidating air as everyone else in the building. You noticed her nails were well manicured as she held a hand over the buttons for a moment but didn’t press one.

“Going to the thirty third as well?” She smiled, not unkindly. Her accent was the same one Ignis spoke with, lilting with royal education. “Whatever you’re carrying smells delightful.”

You returned the smile, oddly at ease with her. “It’s a pie I baked.” What a dumb thing to say, you thought, regretting it as soon as it was out of your mouth. Not that it mattered. She wasn’t paying attention to what you were saying, her eyes going pointedly to the compact still open in your hand. Shit. You quickly closed it and shoved it deep into your coat pocket.

Her smile had waned slightly as her eyes flicked to your face. “And were are we going with said pie, may I ask?”

“I’m surprising my friend. Count Scientia.” You chewed on the inside of your cheek for a moment. Was Ignis’ uncle a count, too? You had no idea how any of this worked. “Uh, the younger one.”

Her perfectly arched brows rose, and she said, “Wonderful. I’m on my way there, too. Let’s go together.”

Well, seemed like that was just decided for you, though you wouldn’t complain about getting help finding the right place. The elevator came to another halt at the thirty third floor, and she took the lead, her heels clicking against the marbled floor at a graceful gait. “How rude of me not to introduce myself sooner. I’m Mirum Amicus. Since you are a friend of Ignis, you may call me Mirum.”

You introduced yourself in turn, increasing your pace to keep up with her. Mirum. Sounded familiar. She couldn’t be Ignis’ assistant, could she? Probably not; she seemed to radiate authority.

You introduced yourself in turn, increasing your pace to keep up with her. Mirum. Sounded familiar. She couldn’t be Ignis’ assistant, could she? Probably not; she seemed to radiate authority.

After a few winding turns and long halls, she brought you to a stop in front of a large doorway. “He should be just out of a meeting. It’s so hard to catch him at rest these days.” She led you through the doorway to a room with several desks, walking toward one occupied by a woman wearing the most colorful sweater you’d ever seen.

Mirum tapped a nail on the desk, and the seated woman — her name plate simply read Dulcis — looked up with an automatic smile.
With a smile of her own, Mirum said, “We need to see Ignis.”

“Of course. Give me one moment to see if he’s busy.” Dulcis picked up the phone on her desk, pressing a few buttons. “Lord Ignis, you have two guests. Lady Amicus and…” You whispered your name and she repeated it incorrectly into the phone. “Alright, sir. Should I send them in together?”

When she put the phone down, she looked at Mirum. “He wishes to see you first, my lady.”

You were fine waiting, not entirely comfortable trying to convince Ignis to take a sabbatical with one of his peers like Mirum in the room.

“I like your sweater,” you said, nodding at the assistant.

Her smile grew, touching a sleeve lightly. “Thank you so much. It’s—”

“I’d very much prefer going in with my new friend,” Mirum interrupted. She walked toward another door, waving for you to follow. You looked at Dulcis, brows shooting up your forehead in question, and she only shrugged.

Good enough, you thought, going after Mirum.

She opened the door unceremoniously, heading inside first. “Hello, Ignis. I finally gathered all of the correct paperwork from Tenebrae.”

“Brilliant. I’ll take over from there.” You heard him before you saw him, shutting the door behind you. When you did finally find yourself in front of him, you couldn’t believe how rough he looked.

His eyes widened behind his glasses. “I thought I’d heard Dulcis incorrectly. What are you doing here?”

You wanted to ogle the entire wall of bookshelves behind his desk or the large window he had that you were pretty sure overlooked the city. But he had tired lines around his eyes, and his large desk was covered in files and papers. Messier than you imagined it usually was. You reached into your bag and pulled out the pie box, placing it right on top of what were probably important forms or something.

“I made a pie for you.”

He blinked, as if you weren’t speaking a language he understood. “What?”

You sighed. “Dude, have you been getting any sleep? You can’t just drink coffee all day.”

“He can and he does,” Mirum said. “He’s a powerhouse, my dear.”

You looked between her and Ignis, more determined than ever to convince him he needed a vacation. Overworking yourself this much was just accepted here? You were guilty of grinding too hard sometimes, too, but at least you had others to remind you that it wasn’t healthy.

Before coming to the Citadel, you’d just thought it could be fun to see what his office looked like, and the other guys had decided you’d be the best choice to send in as a surprise attack. Now you were faced with a man who looked far too worn, face slightly gaunt with dark circles under his eyes. How could he have deteriorated so much since the last time you’d seen him?

“I’m afraid I don’t have time for pie, but I do appreciate the thought. I have another meeting in—”

He checked the time. “Less than ten minutes. I need to gather my notes in preparation.” He turned
his gaze to Mirum. “Thank you for the excellent help.”

It was a clear dismissial, but neither of you made a move to leave.

A hand placed delicately on top of the pie box, you said, “This is your favorite pie. It took me four hours to make because your stupid recipe calls for everything to be made from scratch.” You weren’t trying to pout, but you hated being turned away so quickly.

He looked at the box with mild interest; your off the cuff speech seemed to be working.

You leaned down, pressing another hand on his desk. Your palm slid on some papers, but you didn’t lose face, meeting his eyes. “I put a lot of care into it because it’s important to me. Please, Ignis. You need a break.”

He shook his head, sighing. “I can’t afford a break at the moment.”

“Yes, you can,” you pressed, hoping he could read between the lines. He was a pretty intelligent man, but damn if he didn’t look tired as all hell. “The ingredients weren’t cheap, y’know. I worked so hard to make this happen, and I wanna share it with you.”

He adjusted his glasses, shifting in his seat slightly. “Is it really so important to you?”

“No just me.”

With another, heavier sigh, he nodded. “Alright, enough. I’ll do it. Are you satisfied?”

Not really. He still looked rough, and he was going to keep working himself to the bone once you left. But he was going to Galdin with you so you could force some relaxation then.

A smile stretched across your face. In gentle Altissian, you said, “Get some sleep soon. You look like garbage.”

He blinked again and sighed. Then he used a hand to remove his glasses, rubbing at his eyes as he suddenly turned away from you. “My sincere apologies, Mirum. Was there anything else you needed?”

You’d forgotten she was still there, righting yourself at the sound of her voice.

“No, Ignis. I was simply captivated by your friend.” She smiled at him, then at you.

He stood from his chair, gathering various papers and things from his desk. “I have but two minutes to make it to the meeting on time. I’ll see you both out.”

The frown that had been on his face the entire time you’d been in his office remained. Even as he walked through the room of assistants, nodding at Dulcis in passing. Even as he waved goodbye to you and rushed away down a hall.

“I like your style,” Mirum said when you’d both gotten back to the elevators. “Be mean, keep him keen. I’m rather surprised it works on Ignis, but I suppose he is just a man underneath it all.”

You had no idea what she was talking about. “Huh?”

The elevator doors closed. You pressed the first floor button, and she went for the twenty fifth, reaching past you. She even smelled really nice. You couldn’t decide if you wanted to be her or be with her. Neither were possible, and you knew it.
“You said he looked like rubbish in Altissian, didn’t you? Right to his face.” She laughed lightly. “I never took him for the type to pursue a commoner, but you’re something else.”

Along with the elevator, you felt like your stomach was dropping. “What do you mean?”

She looked at you, almost impishly. “Don’t play dumb. I saw that golden token in your hand earlier. Do you have any idea how many people in this palace alone who are vying for such a token?” She crossed her arms. “Myself included.”

This was getting way out of hand. How could she have seen the family crest on the compact? You’d thought your hand had been covering it pretty well. She had to be operating on assumptions, and you weren’t going to fall into a trap and accidentally confirm anything. “I think you’re misunderstanding —”

“You appear rather scrappy,” she interrupted, giving you a once over. “But I’m not afraid to fight you, should it go that far.”

There was no regaining control of this conversation. The elevator stopped on her floor, and with a *woosh*, the doors opened.

“I’ll give you a fair warning,” she said. “I’m no Crownguard, but I do visit the training room often enough to hand you your own arse.” Then she ran a hand down every single button on the interface as she stepped out. “Until next time, dear.”

The doors closed, and you were descending again, stopping on every floor on the way down. Your mind raced at what had just happened, and you knew you had to tell Prompto immediately.

**You: Pretty sure I was just threatened by a woman who has the hots for Ignis.**

He was at work and wouldn’t reply for a while so you put away your phone and did your best waiting out the slow trip down twenty five stories. As long as you didn’t look out of the glass side of the elevator, it wasn’t so bad.

At least you thought so until the doors opened on floor seventeen and Ignis’ uncle stepped into the elevator. Of all the times and places. The Citadel was filled to the brim with people, and there were six different elevators that you knew of, probably more. It was so unlikely that he would cross paths with you, but here he was.

Maybe the gods actually hated you.

He definitely recognized you, bowing a little. You returned the gesture, feeling awkward. Should you say something? Stay quiet? Try to find a casual way to bring up the compact to keep your promise and really drive home Ignis’ lie? He ended up deciding for you, turning slightly to look at you as the doors closed.

“Had a visit with my nephew?”

You nodded.

He nodded.

Silence.

The doors opened on the sixteenth floor, and he looked at all of the buttons that were lit up, warning of many future stops. He must’ve thought you’d done something so childish. No point in even trying
to explain what actually occurred because you didn’t really understand it yourself.

“How is he?”

You were torn from your thoughts by his wizened face looking at yours. Thinking about it for a beat, you said, “I don’t think he’s taking very good care of himself right now.”

His uncle gave you a serious look, which only made you feel more awkward. You hadn’t meant to be so honest. “It is a busy time for everyone in the prince’s retinue.”

“Yeah, Ignis keeps saying that.” You pursed your lips at this bit of new information, watching as the elevator doors opened and closed again. So the secret thing was specifically related to Noctis. “But it was hard seeing him like that. Like an overworked zombie or something.”

He chuckled, or at least you thought he was about to before stopping himself. “I see you’re worried.”

“Totally.” You met his eyes. They weren’t like Ignis’ at all, but you saw other aspects of him there, like the straightened posture and the dignified dress. “Um, I baked a pie for him.”

This time, he definitely let out a small laugh, getting off on the eleventh floor. “I’m happy he’s found someone to care for him in such a way. Good evening, miss.”

His last words lingered in the air on the rest of the way down. You hoped you got the hell out of the Citadel before coming across more people you weren’t equipped to deal with. You’d done your job, and the others had better appreciate it.

—

You paused the movie you were watching to answer the phone. Normally, you’d ignore it, but Ignis’ picture appearing on your screen was such a rare one, you were curious to see what had him calling you so late.

“What’s up?”

He sounded just as tired as before. “Hello. How are you?”

Instead of answering, you sent the question back. “How are you?” It was a formality that you hated because it had no meaning. No one ever said how they were really feeling.

“I’m exhausted, truthfully.”

Okay, maybe people said how they really felt sometimes. But this was a rare case. If he’d had claimed to be fine, you would’ve called him out on it, and he knew that.

“Have you gotten any sleep yet?” You couldn’t believe you were the one to be mothering him.

“Considering it hasn’t even been a day since I saw you last, the answer remains no.”

You opened your mouth to speak, but he yawned which made you yawn, and then he was talking again.

“But I’ve retired to my quarters so the answer is soon to change.” His speech was slightly muffled and tinny through the phone.

“It’s about time,” you said, curling up on your couch. You stared at the paused movie on your tv as you spoke. “Why did you call?”
He mumbled quietly on the line, then said, “I can’t keep my eyes open long enough to send a message. I wanted to thank you for the pie. It was perfect.”

That made you smile, a pleasant surprise. You’d worked hard on the dumb thing. “I’m surprised. I don’t like cooking at all.”

“You want to know something?” His voice kept growing quieter. “I didn’t especially like it much either. In the beginning, at least.”

With a small laugh, you got up from the couch and turned off the movie. He was making you sleepy, and midterm exams began the next day, anyway. “I never would have guessed that since you have your own fancy handwritten cookbook.”

“Hmm.” He grunted softly. “It’s one of my responsibilities and a point of pride.”

“Well,” you yawned. “I’m glad you enjoyed the food. Because I’m never doing it again.”

“That’s too bad. I think you’ve a natural talent. I daresay we could teach each other a thing or two.”

You turned out every light in your apartment as you made your way to your bathroom. “I think you should go to sleep now, Ignis. You’re making even less sense than usual.”

A soft chuckle from his end made you pause. “Perhaps you’re right. Goodnight.”

“Yeah, goodnight.” You hung up, looking at your phone for several beats before brushing your teeth. He was kind of cute when he was sleepy.

You told Prompto everything about your exchange with Mirum the next time you saw him. Well, most things. You left out the bits about the compact mirror for obvious reasons.

“I wish I had been there,” he said, laying across your small couch in a way that took up all the space. You were sitting on his legs, trapping him, though he didn’t seem to care.

“I do, too. It all happened so fast.” You tilted your head back, looking up at the ceiling. You needed to dust this place. “I feel kind of bad for her. Since Ignis is ace, and she is definitely hoping he’ll court her.”

“Nah. It’s no one’s fault but her own if she doesn’t catch the hint that he’s not into her.”

“We don’t know that for sure.”

“I guess,” he snickered. “Dude, did you say she was a duchess or something?”

“She’s a marchioness,” you corrected. You’d looked her up out of curiosity when you’d gotten home. She was actually the marchioness of the territory you grew up in. So you’d almost bet your mom, as a landowner, had dealings with her before. Small world. It also made sense why her name had been a bit familiar.

You found it kind of strange that she was interested in Ignis because a marchioness was slightly higher in status than a count from what information you could gather. Then again, you’d established he was pretty much the perfect bachelor. On paper, at least.

Prompto hummed thoughtfully. “Nobles are super weird. We’re lucky Noct and Gladio are so…”
“Of the people?”

“Yeah, kinda.” He shrugged. “Iggy’s like the rest, though. With his royal accent and proper everything.”

You rested an arm over your face. Your voice was muffled into the skin of your bicep. “He looked pretty bad, Prom.”

“He’ll feel better when we head to Galdin in a few days.”

The reminder that the trip was so soon had you excited all over again. Thoughts of Ignis went to the back burner of your mind.

—Ignis: Dare I even ask what you’ve said to my uncle?

You’d gotten the message during an exam, but didn’t read it until you were walking across the university campus to your next one. It was the last day before spring break, midterms were finishing up and people were rushing everywhere to get things done early. You kept thinking about the message well into the exam. What the hell was he talking about? Once out of class and on the train home, you finally responded.

You: You’ll have to be more specific. I hang out with your uncle all the time. Mostly karaoke and taking shots all night. Uncle goes hard.

Ignis: Your wit is inspiring.

You: Just tell me what has your panties in a bunch.

Ignis: My uncle told me he spoke with you when you visited the Citadel the other day.

You: Yeah, so?

Ignis: He wants me to invite you to have dinner with him at my family’s estate. Or in his home in the Citadel.

Going back there was the last thing you wanted to do.

You: I thought you said we would be exempt from the usual formalities since I’m a commoner? What gives?

Ignis: Precisely why I’m asking you what you could’ve said to make him request your presence.

You: Well I’m not going.

Ignis: I’m not certain we have a choice.

You: He’s not the king or my dad so I don’t have to do a damn thing.

Ignis: I can’t argue with such sound logic. Problem solved.

You: Look, just hold it off until after spring break. Maybe he’ll forget by then.

Ignis: He won’t.
You: Then we have a whole week to prepare for it. Stop finding more things to stress about and relax for once.

He didn’t respond after that; you hoped he was taking your advice to heart.

—

Noctis had never been to your place, and you tried your best not to be self conscious when he followed Prompto inside. Especially since you knew for a fact that, despite never dusting, your place was most definitely cleaner than his. It wasn’t a hard thing to accomplish.

All of you were leaving the next morning for a day long drive to Galdin Quay in Noct’s car. Making that happen had been a solid fight, you against the others, because you’d already bought your bus ticket and it was nonrefundable. Idiots.

Your argument had been “I know Noct’s car is black on black, I’ve seen it on tv! Don’t you realize there’s an entire desert between us and Galdin? We’ll die of heatstroke before we get there.”

But they had won out with “It’s faster than the bus so more beach time, and we can stop whenever and wherever we want.”

Which were valid points. You felt like they owed you a bus fare, though.

With that behind you, Prompto had decided you’d start the vacation early with a night of movies. You had such a huge collection, it made the most sense for it to be at your place. Both Ignis and Gladio hadn’t been able to come because they had training, which Noctis was supposed to attend, too, apparently. Yet there he was, walking past your kitchen and looking around with slight interest.

“What kind of training?” you asked, pointing to where he could drop his bag.

“Crownsguard stuff,” Prompto answered for him, tossing himself onto your couch, as per usual. “Sucks for them.”

You walked over to your shelves of movies, a little embarrassed at having so many hard copies. No one bought those anymore, but you liked having something physical to look at.

“I heard the training room is intense,” you lied, not sure what you were looking for with this line of conversation. “Overheard it, I mean, when I was walking through the Citadel.”

“It is,” Prompto said, and Noctis snorted.

“All you took was self defense training.” He rolled his eyes, making you grin.

“Was that when you were thinking of joining the Crownsguard?”

“Yeah,” Prompto groaned, pouting at both of you. “Whatever. I did pretty well.”

—

Noctis chose some of your movies on the scarier end of genres, and you didn’t know what else you could’ve expected. When you debated over which one to watch first —Prompto wasn’t a fan of any option— you couldn’t let the earlier conversation go.

“Can just anybody take self defense training or do they have to pass a test or something?”

Noctis looked at the back of a movie case. “If there was a test, Prompto wouldn’t have stood a
chance.”

“Hey!” Prompto kicked at him, but Noctis dodged it and held up the movie, looking at you in question.

“This one good?”

You nodded. “It’s a little gory.”

“Perfect.”

—

Before starting the movie, Noctis helped you recreate the absurd cheese covered popcorn he’d made at the film viewing —sometimes trash food was good. While the microwave hummed and you both waited, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, looking at the picture of Bokeh on your fridge.

“If you want to take self defense training, I’ll mention it to Gladio,” he said, sounding more thoughtful than you would’ve given him credit for.

The microwave beeped loudly, and he joined you in front of it to check if the cheesy mess was melted enough.

“I’m interested,” you said, pulling out the bowl and hissing at the heat of it burning the tips of your fingers. “Have you seen the side of town I live on?”

He shrugged, taking the bowl with hands of steel, apparently. “This neighborhood doesn’t seem so bad, but I get it.”

He really didn’t, you thought. But you hummed in agreement anyway. Self defense training would be good just in case Mirum decided to come after you like she’d promised. Among the scarier things that lurked in the background of your life.

—

Noctis fell asleep sometime during the third movie, slumped over the couch like some kind of sloth; Prompto on the other hand, didn’t seem ready to rest. He threw popcorn at you when you announced you were going to bed once the credits began to roll.

“I just watched a guy get his butt sawed off and forced to eat it.”

You looked down at the popcorn littering the floor, then up at him in tired annoyance. It had been a long day of midterms and packing. Now you’d have to clean this up in the morning before you left. “So?”

“So you can’t just leave me here alone.”

You laughed and picked your phone up from the coffee table. “No one’s going to cut off your butt and make you eat it, Prompto. It’s too small.”

Dodging more flying kernels, you took a picture of him and Noct to send to the others. They looked weirdly comfy all tangled up. You wondered if Prompto was trapped under the sleeping prince, but didn’t ask just in case he wanted help escaping.

The picture was a masterpiece. Noct had popcorn in his hair. Prompto was wide eyed and pleading.
You sent it to Gladio and Ignis with the caption *Movie idea: The prince and the Prompto. He can sleep anywhere, but can he save the world and win the big ballgame?*

Gladio replied almost immediately, telling you that you had no idea how true that was, that Noct slept in a ton of weird places with no problem.

You didn’t get a response from Ignis until you were already in bed. He sent two within moments of each other. The first one went to the group message with Gladio, stating that he expected to see Noct up bright and early.

The other was sent to only you, and read *Thank you for looking after him.*

What a big softie.

Chapter End Notes

Forgive me for introducing an oc as an apparent rival. D: I promise she’s not going to be around much, but she does serve a purpose.

Originally, Gladio was going to be your romantic rival… but the more I thought about it, the less I could handle the idea because I love Gladio. I’m weak for all of these boys.

The updates will slow down now to just one chapter a week instead of two. I don’t think anyone will mind, but I wanted to say something anyway.

Thanks for reading! I appreciate all the kudos and comments, seriously!! :)

You're tearing me apart, Ignis!

Chapter Summary

Sun, sand, and sexual frustration.

Chapter Notes

Guess who finished this super long chapter much sooner than they thought they would...

Warning: awkward conversations, mentions of a past abusive relationship, a mild panic attack, the worst kiss scene ever, some nsfw stuff (if you squint), and just bad decisions all around.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Wouldn’t it be funny if we broke down right outside the Wall?”

You were wedged between a prince and a hard place in the back seat of Noct’s car. Gladio had put an arm around your shoulders to make it slightly less uncomfortable. He was lucky you weren’t bothered by extreme physical contact because it was the only way to avoid his broad shoulder bumping into you at every turn. You both could only do so much. The car was luxurious, sure, but you got the feeling it wasn’t meant for long road trips.

“If that happens, you’re pushing,” Gladio said, looking up from his book to smirk at you. How he could read without getting motion sickness was a mystery.

You scoffed. “Like hell I will.”

On your other side, Noctis snoozed quietly, an arm tucked under his head. Prompto had called shotgun, and you hated it. You really, really hated it.

“Hey.” You jostled the back of his seat. When he turned around, you lifted your phone. “Play a round with me. I’m bored back here.”

You weren’t that good at King’s Knight, but it was a lot of fun. Noctis and Prompto were the only ones you knew who played. Aranea didn’t care for video games, and you weren’t close enough to anyone else to ever ask. So when Gladio closed his book and joined you, it was a small surprise.

“You’re certain you’ll fare just fine without me,” Ignis interjected, looking back at you guys through the rear view mirror. You could tell he was smiling despite not being able to see it without leaning uncomfortably forward. He looked much better than he had in his office.

Too bad Iggy’s driving,” he said.

“I’m certain you’ll fare just fine without me,” Ignis interjected, looking back at you guys through the rear view mirror. You could tell he was smiling despite not being able to see it without leaning uncomfortably forward. He looked much better than he had in his office.

—

Prompto fell over himself at the sight of the mechanic at the first pit stop. She had the sweetest accent
and a darling smile. You didn’t blame him for stuttering when introducing himself to her. She filled up the gas tank while you ate lunch at the diner nearby.

When all of you filed out, prepping to get back on the road, Prompto passed you his milkshake to check his reflection in a window.

You sipped from the straw and shared a look with Gladio. Noctis was reading a sign nearby, paying no attention. Ignis had taken off his suit jacket and was rolling up his sleeves, one at a time. You didn’t know what he was doing wearing a suit with suspenders on vacation, but you greatly approved. Meeting his eyes —caught staring at his bare forearms— you choked a little on the milkshake, coughing as you looked away.

“You okay?” Prompto asked, though he didn’t sound too concerned. He took the milkshake from your hand and squared his shoulders. “I’m gonna go talk to her. Wish me luck.”

Your eyes followed his gaze and stopped on the mechanic standing near the fuel station. “Go get her, hot lips.” He walked away, and you mourned the loss of the milkshake for a moment before looking at Ignis. “I give him two minutes.”

He smiled a little as he looked at his gloved hands, flexing them. “You have such little faith?”

You shrugged, though he didn’t see it. He also didn’t see you giving him the slowest once over that you’d ever done in your life. His clothes were meant for men in their forties, but he was making it work.

Gladio chuckled and elbowed you, never realizing his own strength. You rubbed at your side and glared his way. When you looked at Ignis again, he met your eyes.

What had you been talking about? Nearby, Prompto laughed nervously.

Oh. Right.

You cleared your throat. “Prompto gives up too soon. Every time.”

Prompto came back toward you within even less time than you’d estimated. If only his game was as strong as the blush on his face.

—

Stormy weather dashed your visions of a starry sky set against a beautiful beach upon your arrival to Galdin Quay that night. Rain pelted the roof in heavy drops, and the five of you spent several minutes in the car arguing over whether you were staying in a caravan or the hotel. It was the car vs bus argument all over again. At least this time you hadn’t already paid for something in advance.

The hotel won out because it had bigger beds, according to the sources online. The pier leading you there felt far too long. Ignis held an umbrella, sharing it with Noct while the rest of you got really wet, really fast.

You were able to take the bathroom first, drying off and changing into something comfier. Being in a car all day was surprisingly tiring. The beds were big, but there were only two of them. Prompto was already asleep on one of them, laying over the blankets. You crawled in next to him, mumbling a goodnight that he just grunted to in return.

The storm outside continued, and rain was always calming for you. Soon enough, you were squished between Gladio and Prompto in peaceful sleep, the world forgotten.
Waking at dawn, you thought you had to be the first one up, but a gaze around the room told you that it was just you and Noctis. You climbed up and opened the blinds to let the early rays of sunlight in. A quick peer outside at the much calmer weather had you excited for the day.

Someone was in the shower so you gathered what you needed and knocked on the door. Prompto called from the other side that he was in there, but that didn’t deter you. Going in, you ignored the little yelp he gave at your disregard for his warning; it wasn’t like you could see anything other than how pale he was through the opaque glass doors of the shower.

After changing and brushing your teeth, you were shooed out of the bathroom by Prompto so he could get dressed. So with toothpaste at the edges of your mouth, you found yourself back in the room with Noctis snoring quietly and Ignis trying to wake him.

“What are you wearing?” you couldn’t help asking because Ignis was fully dressed as if for a day of work. Even if you weren’t on vacation, it was still the weekend.

He looked at you as if you were the weird one.

You wiped at the toothpaste off your mouth with the back of your hand. There. Now he was definitely the weird one here. “I hope you’re wearing a swimsuit under that thing.”

“I have no intentions of swimming,” he said, bringing a hand down to shake Noct’s shoulder.

“What are you gonna do, work remotely all day?” You went to the mirror to fix your hair. He didn’t answer, and a peek at his reflection said you’d read him correctly. You turned around to look at him. “You can’t be serious.”

He was.

—

After Gladio returned from a run and Noctis finally woke up, you all shuffled to a table at the Mother of Pearl. Each moment of breakfast, Ignis was either on his phone or the laptop he’d brought. It was bullshit, but if that was his definition of fun, you weren’t going to stop him.

“Where did all these people come from?”

Prompto’s question was one you’d been thinking since stepping out of the room. The place had been dead the night before, with few cars in the parking lot. Now the lot was overflowing, the beach full of bodies already lounging even though the sun had only been up for about an hour.

“Galdin Quay is a popular location for spring break,” Ignis said, not looking up from the laptop. “It’s likely there are more to come.”

Everyone knew that, but seeing it for yourself was different. Surfboards were being pitched in the sand and most people were wearing nothing but their swimsuits as they roamed around. It made you want to take off your outer garments, too, even though it was a bit early for swimming.

You looked between the others. “So what are we doing first?”

—

Noctis wanted to fish. His interest in this was news to you; what a bizarre and humble hobby for a
prince. You walked past the crowds to a small dock with him and Gladio. Ignis stayed at the hotel to work, and Prompto was off trying to find good photo ops so the decision to follow the prince wasn't a difficult one to make.

Noctis had put on sunglasses and a hat to disguise himself, which only made him look more conspicuous, in your opinion. The person at the window of the fishing hut thought so, too, by the look on their face.

“Just a heads up,” you said as you affixed a lure to your line. “I’m pretty experienced at this so don’t be too embarrassed when I catch more.”

Noctis grinned, not saying anything. He ended up being very competitive about it, and you wasted away two full hours that morning saying and doing the dumbest things to sabotage each other while Gladio read his book nearby.

Once you did catch something, they were surprised to see you let it go after waving it around in Noct’s face proudly. Maybe it was your own ignorance of fishing practices since this was your first time ever near an ocean, but you never kept a fish unless you planned to eat it when you fished back home.

“I grew up on a farm,” you said, recasting your line. “We didn’t have a lot of fish in our pond so I’m used to tossing them back in.”

Noct hummed. “Makes sense.”

On the other hand, Gladio chuckled. “I didn’t know you were a farm girl.”

You weren’t. Not really, at least. But you wanted to catch one more fish to make you even with Noctis before quitting so you just shrugged without a response.

—

You recorded b-roll of people surfing and playing volleyball and took shot after shot of liquor that was offered to you by one of the players even though it was barely past ten in the morning.

“It makes playing more fun,” she told you, matching you drink for drink. Her hair was long and windswept, and she tugged at it while telling you where she was camping with her friends for the week.

By lunch, you were drunkenly running down the pier and coming to a stop in front of Ignis, who hadn’t so much as moved from the table.

You slammed your hands on the tabletop dramatically and giggled when he jumped slightly. “Come play with us.”

He shot you an annoyed look before returning to whatever he was doing. “I’m perfectly content here, thank you.”

“Tell me, Ignis,” you said, dropping into a seat across from him. “Are we friends?”

He looked up again, eyebrows arched slightly over his glasses and his gloved hands paused. “Yes.”

The answer you’d been hoping for. You rested an elbow on the table, your chin in hand. “Then why are you not hanging out with me? I put up with a lot to get you here. I made a pie for you. I’m super hurt, man.”
He returned to work, shaking his head. “I have a feeling you’ll be alright. I noticed you making other friends on the beach.”

That was pretty weird. You gazed out over the beach and realized that he had a perfect view of everything from there. On the farthest end of the shore, you could make out Noctis still fishing. Gladio sat on the dock behind him. Somewhere in the masses, Prompto was probably doing something silly. “You saw that, huh?”

“I did.” He pushed his glass of icy water toward you. “You should stay hydrated. Especially if you intend to become even more drunk before dinner.”

That reminded you of why you’d made the long walk back over the pier in the first place. You sipped from his water and ordered lunch, people-watching from a distance. “That girl was cute, but I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

“Hm.” He couldn’t be less interested.

“Yeah, I don’t know. Maybe I’m losing my mojo.” The food came, and you began to dig in, your mind working itself into a fluster. “Maybe I never even had it. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve gotten laid? Thirty two days.”

His response was a flat, “How terrible for you.”

You rolled your eyes. “Of course you don’t get it.” How could he? He’d probably never even slept with someone before; you’d bet he gagged at the thought.

“There are more important things than sex.” He lowered his voice toward the end, clearly uncomfortable with the topic.

“I know,” you said, pushing your food around on the plate. “But it’s the best way to get rid of stress. I’m like a walking ball of anxiety right now, Iggy.”

He looked up from his computer to stare at you for a beat, then sighed. “I hear the spa is exceptional. Perhaps you should get a massage instead.”

Chewing on a bite slowly, you considered it. “I’ll go if you go with me. I think you could use the help, too.”

He didn’t answer until you were done eating and ready to get back out there. Adjusting his glasses, he said, “I’ll make an appointment for us tomorrow.”

You grinned at him. “Sweet. It’s a date.”

He didn’t appear bothered by your wording, but you let it replay over and over in your mind for the rest of the day.

—

A loud sound jolted you awake. Your mind was groggy, and your phone’s screen was too bright as you checked the time. It was far too early for whatever noise the guys were making. You heard Ignis and Gladio talking somewhere on the room.

“I don’t see the harm in waking him,” Ignis said. “I’ve heard mention he likes to run. Simply invite him along.”
Gladio’s voice was harder to make out. “I can’t... only likes... he doesn’t... ya know?”

Ignis hummed as if he did know, then another loud sound jarred through the room as the door closed.

You groaned, sitting up and looking for the culprits. Near the door stood someone you didn’t recognize. They were tall and had on quaint pajamas, facing away from you while looking at a phone in their hand, the only light that illuminated the room. Where were Ignis and Gladio?

“Who the fuck?” You didn’t take your eyes off the invader as you tried to shake Noctis awake. He’d been tired enough to sleep in the bed with you and Prompto the night before without being weird about sleeping next to you. At some point the blond had moved to the other bed so it was just you and the unwakeable prince.

The stranger turned to you and said, “Apologies for the noise.”

Well, that voice was familiar.

“Ignis?” You rubbed at your eyes, willing your sleepiness to stop messing with your vision. How could you not recognize him?

He walked closer, and you could see clearly that it was him. What the hell were those old fashioned pajamas, though? With no glasses and his hair all flat, he looked unreasonably adorable. Your sleep-addled mind thought so, at least.

His voice was quiet, and he looked down at you with mild concern. “Yes?”

“You look weird,” you mumbled, dropping back on the bed and closing your eyes.

He let out a quiet sigh, then went into the bathroom. You heard the shower turn on, and in an effort to ignore the fact that he was naked in the next room, you rolled over and let Noct’s snores lull you back to sleep.

—

You were glad to see that Ignis was back to normal at breakfast. Who the hell knew what you would’ve done if he wore his hair down. It was too much. Made him too approachable.

“You’re okay?”

Tearing your eyes from your food, you gave Prompto a smile. “I’m fine.”

He didn’t look convinced, but you were too distracted by your continued train of thoughts to care. Ignis didn’t have his face buried in a laptop or phone this morning, but he was still overdressed in slacks and a collared shirt.

“Is that what you’re wearing?”

He didn’t realize you were speaking to him specifically until he looked at you. “Yes. Why do you keep showing so much concern for my wardrobe?”

“Aren’t you hot?” You dropped your fork, brows furrowing. Frustration was welling within you, and you couldn’t figure out exactly why. “Is that all you own? Beach Ignis is the same as Business Ignis?”

Noctis snorted. “Iggy’s always dressed like that.”
It was sickening, almost, how much you liked the contrast he made in your group. It wasn’t just that he was the only one of you wearing a shirt with long sleeves; it was every detail, down to the gloves, that made you squirm.

The others just found it funny.

You didn’t share the feeling until later that day when Noctis caught the biggest fish you’d ever seen in person, and Ignis didn’t hesitate to jump off the dock into the water with the rest of you to help haul it in.

The fish’s tail smacked him in the face as you all wrestled it toward the shore, knocking his glasses off. With a *plop* they fell into the water, and you laughed, dropping under the surface to grab them before they washed away.

You lifted them above your head as you climbed out of the water, ready to give Ignis shit for wearing something so ill-fitting for swimming. “I bet you feel so dumb…” but you trailed off.

On the shore, Prompto was excitedly taking pictures of Gladio holding up the fish and Noctis posing next to it. Ignis ran a hand through his wet hair to get it out of his eyes and held out a hand toward you. The fabric of his shirt clung to every bit of his torso.

Uh.

You put the glasses into his palm, and he said a quiet thanks before turning to Noctis and praising him for the huge catch. That only made things worse because now you had a great view of how his trousers were sticking tightly to his butt.

Oh, no.

You backed away a step. “I, uh, need to go back to the room. I forgot something.”

None of them were paying attention, but Ignis looked at you with a nod. “I’ll go as well. A change of clothes are in order.” His hair was tousled, and he’d yet to put his glasses back on. Had you really thought he looked more approachable with his hair down? Because that wasn’t the word you’d use now.

*Unbearable* suddenly seemed better fitting.

“Actually,” you said, voice higher than you intended. “I think that, uh, Volleyball Girl might have what I need so I’m gonna go over there.”

Then you took off, past groups of rowdy beachgoers and away from them. You needed a smoke very badly in order to get your thoughts organized. Or a drink to forget them.

Finding Volleyball Girl, you received neither. But she did split a handful of something called Oracle’s Kiss with you.

—

Everything was in sharp technicolor as Volleyball Girl introduced you to Surfer Boy. He wasn’t as pretty as she was, but was far more interesting to talk to. He was a film major, too, at the Academy of Arts in Lestallum. All of his favorite movies were overrated trash heaps, but he had nice arms and laughed at your bad jokes. Maybe you still had your mojo, after all.

With that bit of confidence and the extreme high you were feeling from the Oracle’s Kiss, you joined
Volleyball Girl in throwing off the tops of your swimsuits for a game of topless volleyball. Sports in general weren’t really your thing usually, but you were bursting with energy.

As if his Shirtless Fun Radar had gone off, Gladio showed up near the makeshift court, cheering your team on as you played.

A small nigging feeling kept poking at your mind, telling you that Gladio shouldn’t be seeing you topless, but he didn’t seem to be paying attention to you specifically. You played an entire game, gathering a small crowd of onlookers, before a lifeguard shut it down and made everyone put their tops back on.

You left Gladio there when you noticed he’d struck up a conversation with another of the players. As he flexed, you made your way back to the resort for lunch. You felt like you could eat the world.

Prompto showed you different photos he’d taken all morning, a few of them looking overexposed with how bright the sun was that day. Or maybe it was the Oracle’s Kiss making everything look brighter.

“I love that one,” you said, pointing at a picture of Gladio holding Noctis in a headlock. “They seem like they could be brothers.”

He chuckled. “Yeah.”

“May I see?”

Prompto leaned across the table to show Ignis. He was wearing something not quite but almost similar to what he’d been wearing earlier. Noctis and Gladio hadn’t arrived for lunch, not that any of you had made an agreement. You kind of liked it this way; less people to divide your attention.

But, oh hey, Surfer Boy was walking past the table with a few other people. You smiled and waved, winking at him. He waved, scratching his neck shyly before winking back. His friends seemed to be giving him a hard time about it, shoving him lightly and laughing as they approached the chef at the bar.

“I’m gonna be waxing his surfboard by the end of the week,” you said, looking at Prompto with a sly grin.

He let out a heavy breath. “How do you just do that?”

You shrugged. “Confidence. I don’t actually have much, but I fake it until I make it.” You felt very wise. Words came so easily. You could feel a bit of sweat at your brow, wiping at it absentmindedly. “It’s all about action, Prom. Action speaks louder than word. I could’ve just said hi, but then he wouldn’t get that I’m into him.”

Ignis’s voice sounded so strange, coming across the table in waves that you thought you could see. “Words are powerful if used carefully. Action can be muddled and murky.”

You chewed on your lip, looking around for a moment. Then, you pointed at a grapefruit a woman was eating with a spoon nearby. “Okay, how about this? Sexily eating a piece of fruit, using your tongue, is basically like saying ‘hey girl, put that pussy in my face’, but which one do you think actually works?”

Ignis’ expression was priceless. You wanted Prompto to take a picture of the shock on his face, but
he seemed equally as surprised by your statement.

“What?” You looked between them. “Is it because I said pussy?”

Ignis spoke first. “No one in their right mind would say such a thing.”

You snorted, enjoying the way Ignis’ green eyes seemed to shine in the sunlight. “Then what would you say?”

“I beg your pardon?” He pushed his glasses up the arch of his nose, looking at you uncomfortably.

“What would you say, Ignis?” you asked slowly, bringing your hands together and steepling them in front of your face. “What would you say instead of ‘put your pussy in my face’? I gotta know.”

He glared at you, and you matched his irritation. Who was he to say you were wrong? Action spoke volumes over word; it was a fact. You felt more sure of this than anything in your entire life.

“Would you say... ‘sit on my face’ and just leave out the pussy part? Or use a cute euphemism like ‘let me eat from your honey pot’?” You kept on, playing at that brim of his inhibition. “I bet you'd be technical and call it cunnilingus, right?”

Ignis stared at you for a solid few seconds before pushing his chair back and standing up. Irritated lines formed between his eyes, and he frowned sharply. You watched him walk away and disappear, probably going to the room you shared. What a coward.

Dropping your head against the table, you sighed. Everything felt so good, but you knew you’d crossed some unseen line. “Fuck.”

“Iggy’s pissed,” Prompto said, leg knocking against yours. “What’s your deal, dude?”

“He’ll get over it.” You stared into the space here Ignis used to be, afraid to tell Prompto just how infinite it seemed. Eos was laid before you in bright colors you could practically taste, but all you could take credit for was the overly wordy conversation you had with the server when she took your order.

Ignis would be fine.

Prompto didn’t seem to agree. He crossed his arms and leaned on the table once the server left. His freckles were countless and stood out like stars on his skin. Suddenly, you wanted to count every single one of them.

“You should go say sorry or something.”

Shaking your head, you pouted. It was Ignis’ problem, not yours, that he was a coward who ran from things he couldn’t control. Like his uncle and the word pussy.

But he was your friend. He said so himself the day before. And the warm, happy feeling flowing through your body made you want to listen to Prompto’s advice. For friendship. Which was the best kind of caring about someone that you could ever want.

Losing the pout, you got up from the table and gave Prompto a light smack on the cheek. “Don’t eat my food if it comes while I’m gone.”

—

The room was quiet when you entered save for the sound of waves drifting through the open doors
that led to your room’s private dock. You followed the soothing sound to find Ignis standing outside. He looked at you over his shoulder, slight surprise that quickly returned to annoyance on his face. “May I help you?”

You crossed your arms. Not due to any sort of ire you felt, but because you really wanted to touch his bare, gloveless hands. “I’m sorry.”

“For trying to embarrass me or—”

“Yes,” you interrupted, taking a step toward him. “I’m sorry for trying to goad you into saying something that clearly made you uncomfortable.”

The sun reflected off of his hair, his glasses, and each button that lined his shirt. It was a constellation of Ignis, and your eyes went from one point to another in open interest. He didn’t say anything for long enough that you dropped your arms and walked closer, growing impatient.

A salty breeze blew by, and you drew in a deep breath, looking out at the sea in the distance. Everything was so clear and beautiful. You grabbed one of his hands in yours, unable to help it anymore. It was slightly calloused and warm. He looked down at you, but didn’t pull away.

“I get it. We’re different,” you said, squeezing his hand gently. “I’m a hugger and a hand holder, and I have no scruples with sexual stuff. But you have all these personal boundaries— which I totally get even though I’m on the complete opposite end of the sexual spectrum. So I’m sorry for crossing them. Your boundaries, I mean.”

A frown pulled at the corners of his mouth. Quickly, you let go of his hand. “Shit. Sorry.” You crossed your arms again, the words flowing out of you freely. “If I ever make things awkward for you like that again, let me know, and I’ll stop. I’m really happy you’re my friend. I wanna keep you around. Even though you make me nervous sometimes. Like really nervous. Especially today—”

You stopped when he brought a hand up to your arm, the touch feeling far too nice for something so simple. His eyes searched yours. “Are you alright?”

Goosebumps rose across the skin of your arm and up your shoulder at his touch. It was incredible. You laughed. “Are you kidding? I think this is the best day of my life.”

He didn’t believe you, removing his hand to cross his own arms. “You’re behaving stranger than usual. Have you been drinking?”

The loss of his touch was a brief disappointment, but the feeling was fleeting, replaced by excitement at the sight of his concern. He’d forgiven you! Not explicitly, but he was no longer glaring at you, which was something. You chewed on your lower lip, grinning widely and shaking your head.

“I was kissed by the Oracle,” you said, wishing you could explain to him exactly what you were feeling. No words seemed sufficient. “Can I hold your hand again?”

Nonplussed, he blinked and dropped his arms to his sides before slowly holding out a hand. You took it immediately, the sensation just as amazing as it had been before. Electric. This time, when you gently squeezed his hand, he didn't seem so resistant. You looked up at him eagerly, but he still looked puzzled.

“Care to explain?”

You snickered, shaking your head again. With your free hand, you pointed toward the pier where
Noctis fished in the distance. “Do you think I could swim all the way over there from here? Oh my
gods, let’s race. A swimming race. Right now.”

He didn’t budge when you tried pulling him toward the water’s edge.

“C’mon, Ignis, don’t be a beach.” You tugged at his hand. “Water you wading for?”

The faintest glimmer of a smile came to his face. You laughed again, elated.

—

Prompto was probably eating your risotto because you’d been gone for a long while, but you
couldn’t find it in yourself to care. Ignis stayed with you on the private dock, probably to keep you
from trying to swim across the bay. He wrote things in his small, black notebook and didn’t say
much. Which was fine because you couldn’t seem to shut up.

“I like that we have a secret,” you said, fingers tracing the lines in the polished wooden floor. “It
makes me feel like, like we’re super good friends even though I know you can barely stand me
sometimes.”

He let out a quiet breath, looking up from the notebook. “It isn’t that you’re intolerable. I simply find
you hard to understand.”

Your eyes met his, and you leaned toward him with a serious look. “Well, we don’t have to be best
friends because I already have one. But I do need a good friend like you around. A mom friend who
cares.”

Ignis’ eyes searched yours, and he placed his notebook and pen down to lean your way. Your breath
caught when he cupped your face. “I see now. You’ve taken something, haven’t you? Your eyes are
immensely dilated.”

You blinked heavily, a slow smile overtaking your face. “Your eyes are immensely beautiful.”

Withdrawning his hands, he looked away. You hoped it wasn’t the drug making you imagine the
sweet blush on his face.

—

The comedown was a son of a bitch. It hit you hard and fast before you had the chance to go back to
the beach. You spent the rest of the day laid out on one of the beds in the hotel room, feeling more
like the Oracle had body slammed you into a pit of spikes.

Worst of all, Ignis rescheduled the spa date because he didn’t think you were in any state to enjoy it.
Like some kind of third mom you never asked for, he balked and lectured when you eventually told
him why you couldn’t stop talking or keep your hands to yourself. Or why the supposed best day of
your life had suddenly become the worst.

“Didn’t you learn in primary school not to take drugs from people you hardly know? What am I
going to do with you?”

“You’re not my boss,” you groaned, face in a pillow.

He sighed. Gods, that’s all he ever did, you thought. You wanted the world to end just so you
wouldn’t have to hear him do it anymore. You were thankful when he left you alone.
Good riddance.

Even if his touch had been pretty electrifying. You looked at your hand as if it held answers for why you could still feel it so clearly.

—

**You:** Hey have you ever lusted after someone that you shouldn't?

**Aranea:** what's happening at the beach for you to ask me this?

**You:** Have you or not?

**Aranea:** I need specs or I can't help ya

Looking at the message, you lingered on the specs for a moment before responding.

**You:** One of my friends is hot and not into sex so much.

**Aranea:** LOL

**You:** :( 

**Aranea:** you're just so dumb sometimes, kid

**You:** Not helping.

**Aranea:** I've never been into a gay guy so I don't know what to tell ya

**Aranea:** try focusing your energy on someone else, any other hot friends?

You gazed up from your phone to Noctis pushing what was left of his breakfast around on his plate in distaste. Next to you, Gladio guffawed at something stupid Prompto had said.

**You:** Nope. But I get what you're saying so thanks.

**Aranea:** anytime

—

You took Aranea's advice and sought out Surfer Boy whenever you could, discovering that he and his friends were staying in the room just next door. Convenient. His bashfulness was endearing, but the apparent tendency he had of randomly quoting movies you didn’t like was a real turn off.

You were determined to end your dry spell, though, and would put up with the odd quote if it meant you got to see what he had under his swim trunks.

—

The masseuse manhandled you like he was tenderizing the most stubborn piece of meat in Eos. Next to you, Ignis was comfortably relaxing on another table, his masseuse using smoother movements. Must’ve been nice.

“Can we switch?” you asked for the third time.
The man grinding his knuckles painfully into your spine tisked. “As I said, it’s too late for that.”

You sat up, climbing off of the table and holding your towel close to cover your bare chest. “I have to take a trip to the wiz palace.” Without waiting for a response, you went into the dressing room where your stuff sat next to Ignis’. Peeking through the little window of the doorway, you watched the masseuse flex his fingers and hands, stretching idly. He was definitely trying to kill you.

A muted chime rang through the room, coming from Ignis’ neatly folded clothes. Tying the towel around you for cover, you lifted his shirt and found his things, among which was the source of the sound, his phone. The screen displayed a staid picture of his uncle, who was calling. With little thought, because you were forever curious, you picked it up and answered.

“Hello?”

The line was silent for a second. Then, “Good afternoon, miss. I would like to speak with Ignis.”

You looked through the little window again. Ignis was deep into relaxation city, and you weren’t going to take that away from him. “Sorry, sir. He’s currently unavailable. I can relay a message, if you want.” What were you, his assistant? You smacked your forehead right after the words left your mouth.

“I see.” More silence. “No, that’s alright. I was merely checking up on him.”

“Oh.” You nodded even though no one could see. Taking a seat, you played with a loose string on the edge of the towel. “He’s doing really well. I’ll tell him you called. If that’s all, I guess I’ll go—”

“Wait, miss. I’m pleased to have this chance to speak with you.”

It wasn’t like you were just dying to go back into the massage slash torture room, but to say you were pleased to talk to Ignis’ uncle would be a lie. “Why is that?”

“Has my nephew mentioned my request to have you both at the Citadel for a meal?”

Shit. That’s what you got for answering someone else’s phone. You and Ignis hadn’t come up with a plan on how to deal with that yet. What were you supposed to say?

“He told me, yeah,” you said, mind searching for some viable excuse to get out of this conversation before it even began.

Ignis’ uncle wasn’t giving you that chance. “I’m happy to hear that. I look forward to it.”

You bit the inside of your cheek. He was just verbally walking over you, not even considering that you wouldn’t want to officially meet him. “Uh, can I be frank, sir?”

“Yes.”

“What made you want to meet?” You pulled at the string and the threading at the edge of the towel unraveled slightly. Oops. “You know I’m a commoner, right?”

“I’m fully aware,” he said. “Of course I’d wanted to meet you before, but Ignis expressed concern that you would be ill equipped to deal with such a meeting.”

Did he now?

Ignis’ uncle continued, “After our conversation in the elevator, the decision was self-evident. I think you’re a capable young woman.”
You snorted inelegantly. “So my being worried about him and making a pie equates to capability?”

“I find your honesty refreshing. That is something I’m afraid can be quite rare in my line of work.”

There wasn’t a doubt in your mind that he was being truthful. Politics seemed like a messy business. “Well, sir, I hope you appreciate the honesty I’m about to toss your way right now.” You inhaled a deep breath, hoping you didn’t bungle your words too much. “Ignis isn’t a prized chocobo or however it’s said. He’s doing this courtship thing his own way so if we accept your invitation for an official meeting, it’ll be on our terms. I don’t want this to just be another stress in his life. I’m sure—”

The door from the massage room opened and Ignis stepped in, towel over his shoulders. You jumped at his sudden appearance, but he didn’t seem to notice, walking over to his belongings.

On the phone, Ignis’ uncle said, “Is something the matter, miss?”

“No,” you quickly responded, watching as Ignis noticed his phone was missing. “Um, I have to go, sir. Please think about what I said.”

“Of course. Have a good holiday.”

You disconnected the call, slowly looking up at Ignis who stood in front of you with his hands on his hips. Expression sheepish, you handed him the phone and stood up. “Your uncle called.”

He pursed his lips. “I had a suspicion. I could hear you from the other room.”

Well, shit.

“Sorry for butting into your business.” You were becoming an expert at avoiding looking at his body. He wore a towel tied low at his hip, the waistband of his underwear just barely a sliver peeking from underneath. The other towel over his shoulders blocked his chest, which was a small blessing, but his arms and abs were just out in full glory. It was really hard. Especially now with all the oil on him.

He surprised you with a small smile. “In this instance, I’m glad you had to contend with him. I’m no prized chocobo, after all.”

You scoffed, pulling the towel tighter around you. “Whatever.” It was hard to keep your eyes off him. What would he do if you grasped each end of the towel draped over his shoulders and pulled him down for a kiss? Could you play it off as platonic as long as you didn’t use your tongue?

You tossed away those thoughts, knowing they came from a place of complete sexual frustration rather than anything to do with Ignis himself. He wouldn’t appreciate that kind of attention at all, you reminded yourself. “Are we done with the spa?”

“Yes.” He slid the towel from his shoulders and put his shirt on. “You skipped out on an excellent massage.”

It is so fucking hot in here, you thought, forcing your eyes away from him. Looking out of the little window at the masseuse, you fought a blush. “That guy has it out for me. He was pretty much using me as a punching bag for his professional wrestling routine.”

Ignis chuckled, and you could already tell he was in a much better mood than he had been all vacation. It was a nice sound. You wanted to make it happen more.
You were still wrapped in the towel when he’d gotten himself fully dressed, and you wished they had more than one dressing room because you were feeling unusually self conscious.

“Why the sudden modesty?” Ignis asked, tying his shoes. “I watched you play topless volleyball on the beach just yesterday.”

Staring at him, you saw him slow in his movements until he stopped before finishing the second shoe. Sharp eyes coming up to meet yours, he amended, “I meant to say that I happened to see it in passing. Don’t misunderstand.”

Heat rushed to your cheeks, and you began to dig through your clothes, looking for the top of your swimsuit. Ignis had seen you topless. Oh, gods. Ignis and his perfect body had seen you and your imperfect body in action. Gladio had been one thing. He was the one friend you thought related to you the most. So you’d known him seeing you topless was not really such a big deal.

But Ignis was very different. He didn’t have sexual desires clouding his judgement when it came to looking at nudity. So when he looked at your body, he had to see every ugly flaw. That fact had your anxiety spiking.

Since he’d seen everything already, you took off the towel and held the top against your breasts as you turned around to point your back at him. “Will you tie me up, please?” Your voice came out small, and you hated it.

He stood, fingertips lightly brushing your sides as he lifted the strings. He tied the first knot at your back, then his hands went to your shoulders, straightening the straps before tying them behind your neck.

“There you are,” he said, sounding as if he were backing away.

You finished getting dressed, evening out your breaths and keeping your eyes pointed downward. Why was this so uncomfortable? You’d made the choice to play that stupid game while high. You’d made the choice to take off your top. Pretty much everyone in Galdin had seen you topless so why was it bothering you so much that Ignis was one of those people, too?

You sighed, following him as you made your way out of the spa. Now you wanted to avoid looking at Ignis completely.

Flirting and pestering him to see his reactions was something you could handle because you had nothing to lose. He was never going to be into you, anyway.

But the thought of him finding new ground to judge you on, like your body, unsettled you.

—

Volleyball Girl invited you back to her campsite that night, and you brought Prompto because safety in numbers and all that. You were disappointed to find that Surfer Boy wasn’t there, but the music was loud, the beer and weed were free, and Prompto got a picture of you doing an impressive handstand and nearly falling into the fire.

When you got back to the hotel room long past midnight, Prompto stumbled directly into bed and fell asleep. You were just crossfaded enough to go out to the private deck and pretend you had the guts to take the nearby ship all the way to Accordo.

When Ignis joined you, sitting in a lounge chair and looking up at the stars, you told him about all the places in Altissia you were going to visit when you went there for the internship. He listened, quietly
humming and humoring your drunken rambles.

“And you have to visit me,” you told him. “Even if we’re fake broken up by then.”

He smiled slightly. “Something tells me I have little choice in the matter.”

You snapped your fingers. “Now you’re getting it. You’re gonna owe me big for this stupid courtship stuff.”

“It’s not all bad, is it?” He seemed amused by you, raising a brow. “What has been so terrible about it thus far?”

You spread your arms out in an arcing motion. “Everything.” Blearily, your thoughts went to the woman in the Citadel who’d kind of threatened you, then to Ignis’ uncle who seemed oddly supportive. Last, you thought about the other guys just inside, oblivious to the situation. You were lying to everyone.

He seemed to take in your statement with slight consideration, a small frown tugging at his lips. “Is that so?”

“But.” You dropped your arms and held up a finger. “I already promised I’d do it, and I’m a woman of my word. We’re in this together…” You mulled over your words, forgetting your train of thought in your drunken state. “Wanna take a picture to send to your uncle to prove we are so good at this courtship stuff?”

Ignis straightened in his seat, bringing a hand up to adjust his glasses. “It would be strange to send him a photograph when I’ve never done so before.”

“Oh.” You didn’t see how Ignis’ uncle knew anything about the courtship at all if Ignis never shared anything with him. Why exactly was Ignis faking a courtship just for his uncle yet keeping him in the dark about it? Maybe it was your drunken mind muddling everything, but none of this made sense to you. Standing up, you grinned at him. “Let’s take a group picture then. Oh my gods, it’ll be amazing.”

He caught your hand on the way to the room, stopping your in your tracks. “The others are asleep.”

It wasn’t that late was it? You scrutinized him with a frown. “If it’s so late, why are you out here?”

“To keep you company,” he replied as if it were the most obvious answer and let go of your hand. “So that you don’t fall from the dock and perish while we rest.”

“Perish?”

“That’s what I said.”

You scrunched up your face. “I won’t perish, Iggy.”

“No while I’m near, no.”

You continued your stare, wobbling a little. He thought you’d accidentally kill yourself if left alone? His opinion of you was still pretty low, apparently. At least, instead of judging you, he was now actively combatting your behavior with his own. You could support that; he was technically just keeping you safe.

Throwing yourself down on the lounge chair next to his, you sent him a wide grin. “Since no one
else is up… wanna make out?"

The look of uncomfortable annoyance his expression morphed into was satisfying. You’d never get
tired of that even if he got tired of you.

—

The Mother of Pearl was crowded so intensely, you walked directly through without stopping for
breakfast once leaving the hotel room. Whatever was going on that attracted such a large amount of
people, you were sure wasn’t worth the hassle of dealing with said people. When it was still just as
crowded by lunch, you sent a silent prayer for the gods to clear out the place so you could eat
something.

You didn’t care how. A plague, a giant wave, anything.

The chances seemed high that they’d listen because they answered a separate prayer you’d been
wishing for all week. That morning, you’d been given a pleasant shock at the sight of Ignis in
swimwear. And it was glorious.

He didn’t swim with the rest of you, choosing to lounge on the beach and read instead. Occasionally
he called out reprimands for the rowdy things you did, like Prompto nearly getting washed away by
a current and Noctis lifting a small sea turtle over his head. You had half a mind to shake yourself off
like a dog next to Ignis when you left the water just to bother him for being so bossy.

He noticed, probably because your stomach growled persistently, that you were hungry and stood up
to stretch and look down at you. “Care to go for a bite?”

As you’d seen already, the restaurant was flooded with bodies. So you tensed, shaking your head.
“Nah. I’m good.”

Your stomach emitted a long cry, contesting your statement.

Ignis let out a quiet breath, an almost chuckle. “You skipped breakfast. Don’t be stubborn. I’ll fight
off the crowds if need be.”

“Oh, well in that case—” You shoved him, though it didn’t do much other than serve as a brief
moment to press your hand into his solid chest. The shirt he wore was terribly soft. “I don’t need you
to fight off the crowds.”

“Then why the trepidation?”

“What trepidation?” You rolled your shoulders, brushing back your damp hair. He began to walk
toward the restaurant, and you followed, the hunger winning out over your will to fight his
mothering tendencies. “Fine, I’m hungry. But if you engage in fisticuffs on my behalf, I’ll pretend I
don’t know you.”

“You wound me when my intentions are purely gallant.” He held a hand to his chest briefly, and you
were stricken by this slight playfulness. You so rarely got to see this from him. Like when he’d given
you puns last fall during the console release or the sleepy conversation you’d had on the phone
before the trip. You wondered what it was that drew that out of him, and how you could tap into that
once you figured it out.

—

You split a dish of steamed crab, ignoring the jostling crowds. Turned out there was some sort of
day-long competition going on. You weren’t sure what exactly it was for, and you didn’t really care to stick around to find out.

Your shoulders were hot, stinging slightly when you touched them. The oncoming of a sunburn. Lovely. “I’m going to the room really quick,” you told Ignis as you left the table. “I’m changing so don’t follow me.”

He adjusted his glasses. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

An easy smile crossed your face despite the remaining sting that lingered of your self conscious near-meltdown from your time in the spa dressing room. “Ouch. I guess that’s fair since no one’s really your type.” You took a step toward the room, looking back at him. “Wait for me?”

He suddenly looked a bit confused, but nodded. “I’ll be here.”

After putting on a new shirt to save yourself from further sunburn, you gave yourself a thorough once over in the mirror. You had to get a grip on yourself. It didn’t matter how sexually frustrated you were or that Ignis had the hottest body you’d ever seen.

You left the room with a strong resolve that disappeared the second you ran into someone familiar.

Not him. Not here.

“I thought that was you,” he said, smiling widely. The sight of it made you sick. “Crazy how we’re both spending spring break here, huh?”

You didn’t move or respond. This was the first time you’d faced him in months. You’d only seen him twice since you’d left him. That had been a year ago. He’d contacted you numerous times since, but you’d always evaded him. There were a lot of effective ways of dealing with toxic people.

You’d chosen to remove him from your life completely, even though he seemed to have other plans.

He pulled you into a hug, and you pushed him away.

“Don’t you dare touch me.”

His smile disappeared. “That’s how it is? You leave me for Prompto with no explanation, and I’m the bad guy?”

Not willing to take his bait, you tried to walk around him, but he kept stepping into your path. Propelled by fear, adrenaline filled you. Your hands shook, and you had to force yourself to not duck your head or avoid eye contact. He would latch onto any sign of weakness the moment it appeared. That’s what he always did.

“Get out of my way.”

He shrugged. “I’m just standing here.”

Again, he stepped in your way when you tried to pass him. You fished your phone out of your pocket, hands unsteady. Maybe you could scare him away by calling someone. He never acted like this in front of others. That was part of the illusion he liked to put on. Innocence so that everyone thought you were the unstable one when you would eventually try to confront him over his need to control you.

It had never worked out for you; your so-called friends had thought you were the lucky one that he kept staying with you after all the times you blew up on him. He’d seemed so forgiving to them. So
much so that the only friend you had left after leaving him for good had been Prompto.

He made a reach for your phone —the fucking arrogance of this guy was appalling— but stopped when someone nearby said your name. You looked over his shoulder to see Ignis walking toward you, his expression apprehensive.

“My apologies, I grew impatient,” he said, looking from you to the person you hated. “Hello. Are you lost?”

Smile back in place, your toxic ex shook his head. “Just catching up with an old friend. Right?” He looked at you, the smile hard. You’d seen this look more times than you could count. You’d given into it each time.

“Ignis,” you choked out, looking past the guy to your friend. “Let’s go build a sandcastle.”

He nodded, reaching past the guy and taking one of your trembling hands. “A capital idea.”

You walked across the pier, past the car lot, and halfway down the beach before stopping. Breathing became difficult, an old but familiar tightness constricting your chest. Hunching a little, you inhaled a shuddering breath, alarms pinging off in your mind that you were not okay. But you’d dealt with this before. You knew how to calm yourself. You knew—

“Breathe, it’ll be alright.”

You looked up, scowling at Ignis through the panic. How dare he boss you around. You knew you needed to breathe; he didn’t need to tell you.

He brought the hand he held up to press your palm against his chest. It took several moments of you sending him confused looks, then you felt his heartbeat thumping solidly and evenly against your hand.

“What are you—”

“What type of sandcastle did you have in mind?”

You stared at him, chest heaving painfully tight, the sensation of needles prickling across your skin. What was he doing?

“I think something with several turrets should be sufficient, don’t you?”

Latching onto his words, on the distraction you realized he was offering, you nodded slowly. “Yeah. We’ll need a good defense.”

He brought up a hand to brush hair out of your face, pulling away when you flinched. “There are a fair number of pesky crabs that may try to take residence as well so I suggest we dig a moat.”

You gave him a wavering smile, breaths beginning to even out. He was pulling you into focus, and it was so much different than facing it alone or having Prompto with hands on your face, reminding you that it was only temporary. Your hand fell from his chest, and the few beach goers who’d been watching looked away as Ignis turned his gaze around a bit sharply.

“Thanks,” you murmured.

He nodded slightly, turning away to continue your walk back toward the others. “Think nothing of it.”
You couldn’t think nothing of it, but you would try.

—

You were quiet for the remainder of the day. Prompto could tell something was wrong. Instead of probing you with questions, he let you bury him in sand. You dubbed him the guardian of the castle you were slowly building. Ignis was surprisingly diligent, helping you build a strong base. Gladio put seashells in random places and Noctis dug the moat.

By sunset, it was perfect. You saved Prompto from his sandy prison, and everyone posed for a picture around the stately sandcastle.

You stuck back when they began to head to the restaurant for dinner. Prompto was especially whiny from skipping lunch. Ignis didn’t go with them, sitting down in the gritty sand next to you.

“That man, he’s the one you avoided in the library.”

Drawing into yourself, you looked away from him. This wasn’t a conversation you wanted to have.

He seemed to read that in your silence. “Forgive me for overstepping, but should we be concerned that he knows where you’re staying?”

Toes digging into the sand, you breathed in and then out slowly. “I don’t think he’d do anything. He’s pathetic, but smart enough to not actually attack me or something.”

He nodded, quiet for a while. Four waves crept up the shore before he said, “I don’t wish to pry, but —”

“You don’t,” you interrupted, looking at him sharply. Guilt filled you immediately at the look on his face. His eyebrows arched above his glasses, mouth parted slightly as if caught off guard. Running a hand over your face, you sighed. “I thought I would do better. If I ever faced him again, I mean. But I could barely move or say anything. If you hadn’t come, I think he’d still have me trapped back there.”

Revealing that much was easier than you’d anticipated. Unlike Prompto, Ignis hadn’t been around when you’d dated that disgusting person. Ignis was an individual wholly on your side—not that Prompto had ever doubted your claims of being abused—so telling him this was like getting a heavy weight off your chest, in a way. You knew by now that even Ignis wouldn’t judge you over this.

“He was overbearing and manipulative,” you said, moving your feet back and forth in the sand. “And I was aimless so I let him do it until I ended it a year ago. No one’s controlled me ever since.”

The words felt genuine when you’d thought them. When they came out of your mouth, they morphed into false assurances. No one controlled you because you didn’t give them the chance to get close. Not because you’d gotten any stronger or better at handling relationships.

The silence that followed was comfortable, your conscience feeling light. Ignis stood up and dusted sand from himself. “Would you like to destroy the castle?”

You took his offered hand with a small smile. “Hell yeah, I do.”

As if you were Titan deciding to punish a city, you kicked and jumped on the castle. Ignis only knocked down one of the turrets with a less aggressive nudge of his foot. You yelped when the tide was high enough to wash the remains away, running farther up the beach to avoid the salty water.

Ignis walked with you back to the restaurant. He let you hold his hand, a comforting gesture. You
were glad he was the one to be around when you’d been cornered by your ex. Prompto would’ve leaned into the guy’s false assumption that you were dating him now, complicating things. Gladio would’ve threatened bodily harm. Noctis would’ve been too recognizable as the prince, and that would’ve opened up an entirely new and awful can of worms to deal with.

The toxic guy was already trying to contact you all the time. If he knew you were friends with the prince, he’d be even more desperate to be back in your life. You had to remain careful not to let anything slip. He was the reason your entire life was private and so little of you could be found online. It was tiring, but one day the guy would give up and leave you alone.

Once that happened, you could finally move on completely.

—

Everyone joined you at Volleyball Girl’s camp that night. Noctis was reserved, but Gladio began putting on moves you didn’t even know he had. Prompto and Ignis were having their own conversation that, when you eavesdropped, turned out to be kind of boring. It was about formal wear and the appropriateness of it in certain situations? Prompto seemed to be seeking Ignis’ advice, and you didn’t want to interrupt even if the topic was super weird to you.

Surfer Boy made an appearance, and you spent the evening seeing who could throw more movie quotes at the other until a slew of meteors shot across the sky. From across the camp, you heard Prompto talking animatedly to the others about his wish to become a genuine, people-actually-paying-for-your-hard-work photographer. Ignis said something to him, then looked your way.

You started when he caught you looking at him, but then he smiled, soft and genuine. You couldn’t help but return it. Surfer Boy only regained your attention when he asked if you made a wish on one of the shooting stars.

“Um,” you thought about it for a moment. “I wish I had a black chocobo. I always wanted one when I was a kid. They’re faster than regular chocobos, and they can fly.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding disappointed. “Chocobos are cool, but I try to stay away from them. I’m allergic.”

You didn’t think someone could be allergic to chocobos, but you empathized anyway because he had an expanse of muscles you appreciated. As he went on about something else, you wondered if you’d have to make the first move. He offered to walk you back to the hotel since your rooms were next door to each other, but he didn’t even try to kiss you or anything before disappearing into his room.

It was becoming increasingly frustrating.

—

The next day, you watched him surf, more impressed by this than anything else you’d seen him do all week. Wouldn’t it be amazing if he just came ashore all wet and gleaming and took you right there on the lounge chair you were lying on? Apparently all you could do was fantasize because Surfer Boy was turning out to be a difficult catch.

You went to the camp that night with only Ignis. Noctis and Prompto had plans to stay in the room for the night, playing a video game together while they let their sunburns heal. Gladio stuck behind with them. A small part of you wanted to stay and play with them, too, but a much bigger part of you was determined to get laid.
Ignis hadn’t needed too much coercion to come with you once you told him it was to keep each other safe. You’d never go to a party alone if you didn’t know anyone there. Volleyball Girl was cool but you were practically strangers. Who made bad decisions together sometimes… Like taking Oracle’s Kiss…

Someone was playing a guitar at the fire this time, and Volleyball Girl was making s’mores. It was cute, really. Surfer Boy had said he’d meet you there, but he’d yet to show. A girl coming onto Ignis made you laugh, and you felt the need to defend his honor.

“I’m sorry,” you spoke up when she put a hand on his shoulder. “I wouldn’t waste your time. He’s ace.”

“Oh, no.” She smiled, embarrassed. “I didn’t realize— sorry.” Removing her hand, she went to another part of camp, covering her face with a hand and saying something to her friend that made them laugh. You didn’t blame her at all. You’d accidentally hit on people who would never find you their cup of tea plenty of times.

You gave Ignis a grin, but he seemed perplexed. Smile waning, you said, “Did I cross a line again?”

His brows furrowed, and he looked at you for a long moment before shaking his head. “No. Thank you for speaking up for me, but it was unnecessary.”

Shit, he was such a liar. You had crossed a line. Defending him against unwanted sexual attention wasn’t your job. You’d thought you were doing him a favor, but of course you couldn’t even get that right.

You occupied yourself by making a s’more and sitting near the fire. Ignis sat next to you, sticking nearby because he knew even less people there than you did. The fire crackled, warm against the cool breeze blown in by the sea.

S’mores were messy, a fact that you’d forgotten until you were attempting to eat one. Melted marshmallow gooped all over one of your hands, and you knew that you had chocolate and graham cracker crumbs on your mouth.

Ignis mentioned it as soon as he noticed. Because he had to be that friend. “You have a bit of it on your—”

“I know.” You looked at him flatly and took another bite of the continually falling apart mess of food in your hand. It was impossible to eat s’mores in a dignified manner. “I don’t have the compact mirror, but I just know there’s stuff on my face, okay?”

He quirked an eyebrow. “You don’t have it?”

“I didn’t bring it.” You shrugged. “It’s not like your uncle is gonna show up on the beach like how do you do, fellow kids just to check on us.”

He was quiet so you kept going.

“I’m telling you right now,” you said around the s’mores. “If that happens, I’m out.”

He still didn’t say anything, and you sighed a little at him not even liking your small attempt at a joke.

“I was afraid I’d lose it,” you admitted. “Then we’d be stuck in a perpetual courtship for the rest of forever.”
Finally, he gave a slow nod, then he was looking away from you. His hands and fingers tapped idly against his knees, a habit you’d often seen in Prompto but never Ignis. It was odd.

“Is my messy face bothering you? I guess I can’t ask if you wanna make out with a face like this, huh?” You smiled at the thought that he was such a stickler that he couldn’t even stand to be near a friend with food on their face. He looked at you again, his expression strangely serious. Okay, maybe it really did bother him. You rose your free hand to wipe off your mouth, saying, “I’ll just stop embarrassing both of—”

His hand grabbed yours, gently drawing it down. With a deliberate slowness, he leaned down toward you. Your heart jumped in your chest when he tilted his head slightly and took your bottom lip into his mouth. You felt his tongue swipe over it before he released your lip, drawing back slightly to look at you. Then, he captured your mouth fully with his own, lips moving gently, kissing away the chocolate with each soft flick of his tongue.

The remains of the s’more fell from your hand, and you instinctively reached up to clutch at his shirt, returning the kiss. This was a bad idea, and you knew it, but you craved the intimacy.

His lips were pliable and soft against yours, working in time easily. He tasted like chocolate and the coffee he’d been drinking after dinner. You leaned further into him, and that’s when the spell broke. The hand he had holding yours let go, and he ended the kiss with one last brush of his lips just to the edge of your mouth.

Words weren’t coming to you. What the hell just happened? He rose a hand to your cheek, wiping at the remaining crumbs with his thumb. “There. I think that’s all of it.”

His touch was warm and his voice steady, but he looked as surprised as you felt. Glasses a little smudged, he drew away and put a small amount of distance between you. He took them off and cleaned them as you sat there, reeling.

Of all the things that happened during spring break so far, this made the least sense to you.

“Why did you do that?” You stared into the fire as you asked.

His voice was more teasing than you could’ve expected, making you look at him. “I recall you saying that action speaks louder than word. I believe no explanation is needed.”

You blinked. Unbelievable. “Seriously? I thought we were past that. You are the most petty—”

The appearance of Surfer Boy made you freeze. Gods, you hoped he hadn’t seen anything. You smacked Ignis on the arm and stood up. “I can’t believe you did that just to prove a point.” You stomped over to Surfer Boy, more frustrated than ever but doing your best not to let him see just how desperate you were becoming.

Especially after that kiss. Someone who was ace shouldn’t be able to do that.

You looked back to see Ignis still sitting by the fire, doing something on his phone. The chest of his shirt was wrinkled with chocolate and marshmallow smeared across it. Your hand was still sticky.

Your heart was still hammering in your chest.

—

“Juicy, I have a serious question that requires a serious answer.”
You’d cornered him in the bathroom the next morning after he’d returned from his run. The only other person awake that early was, as always, Ignis, who had shot you a confused glance when you followed Gladio into the bathroom.

With scruples as non-existent as your own, Gladio began to undress and turned on the shower. “What’s the problem? That ex of yours bothering you again?”

He’d been really interested in the possibility of scaring the guy off if he made another appearance. Other than the occasional feeling of being watched, you felt pretty safe with the others around.

“What? No.” You turned away from him, but still caught sight of his butt in the mirror. Shiva, you didn’t need this. Crossing your arms, you waited until he was in the shower to face him again. “Is Ignis asexual?”

There was a moment of quiet, then he laughed. Harder than was necessary, you thought. “No. He’s just hard to read.” He poked his head over the door of the shower, hair covered in suds. “Why, you gotta crush on him now?”

You rolled your eyes. “Prompto is the one who misinformed me! Last night, I think I messed up.”

“Oh yeah?”

You leaned on the counter next to the sink. “A girl was flirting with Ignis, and I told her he was ace.” The more you thought about it, the more sense it made that he would be annoyed. You ran a hand down your face. “I accidentally cockblocked him, juicy!”

Gladio laughed again, even harder this time. He wasn’t being helpful at all.

You left the bathroom, at least now knowing why Ignis had done that weird thing by the campfire. If he showed any interest or a person flirted with him again, you were going to back off. Or maybe you could make it up to him by setting him up with someone. It would be a great distraction from your failure to seduce Surfer Boy, who had originally been a distraction from your attraction to Ignis. It was an eternal loop.

The quiet snores that filled the hotel room were becoming a familiar comfort. Prompto and Noctis were taking up one bed each in open mouthed sleep. Ignis sat at the sofa across the room and sipped from a cup of coffee, looking up at you from a book he’d been reading all week.

“You’re becoming rather rowdy this morning already.”

You stretched your arms above your head, still wearing what you loosely called pajamas. “Yeah, you missed a real party in the bathroom.”

He returned his gaze to the book. “Do invite me next time.”

“For sure,” you said, bending over your suitcase to find something to wear. “You can laugh at my pain, too.”

“Is that what I heard?” Ignis sounded oddly strained. “What pain, may I ask?”

You sighed, not wanting to tell him the truth of the conversation. Even if it had been about him, it was still none of his business. “It’s about Surfer Boy.” Gathering the clothes you wanted to wear, you righted yourself and prepared to wait until the bathroom was free. “I don’t think he’s that into me.”
When you looked at Ignis again, he was gazing at you, green eyes sharp behind his glasses. “You may need to remind me of who that is.”

You sat on the empty bed, clothes in your arms. “The guy I’ve been talking to all week. I’m gonna meet him at the camp and make a move tonight since we leave in the morning. It’s my last chance.” A shrug rolled over your shoulders. “You should come, too. It’ll be fun. We can be each other’s wingmen.”

He let out a light breath, a small smile coming to his face. “Perhaps.”

—

“Prom, could you?” You held out the sunblock, motioning for him to put it on your back.

“Sorry, my hands are busy.”

He was playing a game on his phone, and you gave him a flat look.

Noct, absorbed into the game himself, said quietly, “Get Specs to do it.”

Tensing a little, you ignored the way Ignis looked up from his book. Yet he said nothing. You dropped the hand holding the lotion and sighed. “I can do it myself.”

Applying it to your shoulders first, you used the full length mirror set against one of the walls. While dipping your hand underneath the straps of your swimsuit, putting the sunblock everywhere just to be safe, you met Ignis’ eyes in the mirror.

Either he didn’t realize you’d caught him watching you, or he didn’t care. You paused in your ministrations, hand awkwardly reached over your shoulder to rub it on your back. He still didn’t offer to help, a slight frown on his face. You continued the process, hurrying up to get out from under his gaze.

You couldn’t help that the kiss had affected you. He had to know that, which explained why he hadn’t talked to you much all morning. It wasn’t that it was a particularly good kiss. It had just been so long since you’d kissed someone. You were starving for some sort of intimate touch.

“Here, let me get that spot for you,” Gladio offered, taking the bottle from your hand.

You turned toward him quickly. “No, it’s good.”

“But you missed a—”

“Nope.” You shook your head, walking past him to put on a shirt. “It’s fine. Thanks.”

Slipping the shirt over your head, you ignored both Ignis and Gladio as they looked at you. Was it such a crime to turn down his help? You frowned, sliding sunglasses over your eyes as you walked toward the door.

“Later, jerks.”

On your walk to find something fun to occupy your time, you told yourself you’d just keep your shirt on all day to be safe. You had missed a spot on your back because you couldn’t reach it, and it was just going to stay that way.

It was stupid, but you’d wanted Ignis to rub it on you to see if you felt the same thrill as you had when you’d held his hand that time and when he’d kissed you. But he hadn’t offered, and you didn’t
want to ask. And letting Gladio do it after turning down Noct’s suggestion for Iggy to do it seemed pointed. You didn’t want Ignis to realize you were a little uncertain around him at the moment.

Forcing away your complicated thoughts, you waved at Volleyball Girl. Better to just avoid the boys in general today. It was your last day of vacation anyway.

—

Stinging and hot, your skin pulled slightly when you took off your shirt. The cold air of your hotel room chilled you, and you sighed in minor relief. You’d not listened to yourself and taken off your shirt almost immediately, and now the space just between your shoulder blades was sunburnt.

You sighed, scowling at your reflection. What a case of bad luck. Now you didn’t have a choice. You needed one of the guys to come to the room to rub aloe on your back otherwise you’d be miserable all day.

**You:** My back burned in a place I can’t reach. I’ll owe you big time if you come to the room and rub aloe on me. ;(

You sat on a bed and waited for a response. Who knew how long it would take for Prompto to even realize you’d sent a message.

While you went through a few of the photos on your phone that you’d taken during the trip, the bathroom door suddenly opened. You paused, looking up to see Ignis emerging, pausing himself when he noticed you there. He was wearing only a towel. You felt your stomach drop at the sight, swallowing thickly when the one he was using to dry his hair fell to drape over his shoulders.

With a quick look around as if trying to find where the others were, he asked, “The day is rather sultry. Needed a respite as well?”

You shrugged because you weren’t sure you could say anything that made sense, and he wasn’t that far off the mark.

He looked at the bottle of aloe in your hands, then up to your eyes. “Need a hand?”

You shook your head, hands closing over the bottle tightly. Then you remembered that you did want his help with it. So you changed your mind and nodded.

“I’ll be a moment.” He retrieved clothes from his suitcase, bending to dig through the carefully organized bag. The towel at his waist rose enough to reveal lean thighs, and you covered your eyes with a hand, feeling like the worst kind of friend.

You didn’t lower your hand until you heard the bathroom door shut. Sighing, you stood and walked directly out of the room. You couldn’t do it. Ignis may have been oblivious to your plight, but he wouldn’t be for long if you stuck around. You’d just find the other guys and get them to put the aloe on you. Or any random stranger would suffice.

As long as you didn’t have to suffer around that gorgeous dork any longer than necessary.

Just down the breezeway, you stopped and turned on your heel. You weren’t a *coward*. You were going to let Ignis rub aloe on you, and you were going to *like it*.

Wait, no.

Okay, *stop*, you told yourself, standing just outside the door. This was stupid. All of this was so, so
dumb. Ignis was dumb. He played a small joke on you and probably felt kind of bad about it, knowing him and his tight reins on sexuality and everything related.

The kiss had just been a weird moment in time, an unfortunate event caught between the crosshairs of his apparent annoyance at your assumptions over his sexuality and your inherent need for intimate touch.

It was nothing else.

You steeled yourself and went back into the room, returning to your spot on the bed. Ignis was none the wiser to your hidden distress when he emerged from the bathroom minutes later. Blessedly, he was completely dressed and had even fixed his hair so you weren’t suffering from it’s tousled look from before.

He took the aloe from you wordlessly, motioning for you to turn around when you stood to hand it off. The cold of it made you hiss as he gently spread it over your aching skin. The air conditioner shut off, plunging the room into silence. Waves could be heard from outside, muted along with the sound of distant chatter and the calm music that seemed to always be playing in the resort.

“About last night…”

You tensed at his quiet words. No. You did not want to have a conversation about this. Not when his hand was gently spreading across your back, easing your pain and sending shivers over your body.

“It’s okay. You don’t need to apologize or anything.” There wasn’t a doubt in your mind that he regretted it. It hadn’t been like him, and you’d honestly expected some kind of awkward apology all morning.

“Oh, you misunderstand,” he murmured, and you could feel his breath at the nape of your neck. “I don’t apologize for things for which I’m not sorry.”

You tried to swallow, but something was caught in your throat. “Oh, y-yeah?”

He hummed a short affirmative, not going on to finish what he’d originally intended to say. The silence screeched at your ears, made you squirm under his touch.

“Why not?”

He let the words float there, stuck in the air for an uncomfortably long amount of time. His hand stopped at one of your shoulders, resting there as he spoke.

“You’ve made attempts at embarrassing and flustering me from the moment I met you.” His voice was soft, closer than you’d thought he was. “Had I known you would react to the taste of your own medicine so strongly, I’d have done it sooner.”

A thrill coursed its way down your body. He was playing a game you were an expert at, his free hand brushing hair behind your ear while the other began to gently knead at the muscle of your shoulder.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” you whispered. It was meant to tell him off, a statement to go with the light gesture of tilting your head away from him.

“On the contrary,” he murmured, and you felt it, his lips against your neck. “I know precisely what I’m doing.”
Discomfort made you elbow him and step away. Your face was flushed when you faced him with a scowl. You must’ve looked ridiculous, green goo on your back, hair messy and dried from the salty sea water. How dare he flirt with you like this.

How dare he flirt with you at all. He was Ignis, and you were you. It didn’t make sense.

He touched his stomach where your elbow had connected, a frown on his face. His expression was a touch between surprised and apologetic. Before he could open his mouth to speak, you held up a hand.

“You said we were friends.”

“We are friends.”

“But you kissed me.”

“And you have flirted at me without compunction countless times.”

“To get a rise out of you!” You threw up your hands. “I like your reactions. They’re hilarious.”

He crossed his arms, any sign of his previous apologetic look completely gone. “Flirtatious jokes at my expense are deserving of retribution.”

“So you kiss me?”

Ignis’ expression softened, seeming a bit reluctant. “I admit it was ill-considered, though I must say —”

You cut him off by grabbing a handful of his collar, pulling him down. Smashing your lips to his, you twisted the fabric of his shirt as you rose onto your toes to add a little force to the kiss. You kept it brief, not giving him time to return the gesture or push you away.

Breaking away, you fell to the flats of your feet and took a step back. His eyes were lidded, and you realized he’d closed them. Would he have kissed back if you’d only waited? You pushed that thought away. It didn’t matter. It was the principle of the thing!

“Now we’re even,” you breathed. “I won’t flirt with you anymore. Now we can just be normal, boring friends who never antagonize each other. Just like you want.”

He cleared his throat, straightening his collar with a minute frown. “I’ll hold you to that promise.”

Right. Good. You turned away to look for the shirt you’d stripped off earlier. It was going to be sticky and irritating from the aloe, but you felt the distinct urge to cover up in front of Ignis. You found it on the floor between a pair of Prompto’s shoes, picking it up and turning it right side in.

“Y’know,” you said, slipping it over your head. “It didn’t mean anything when I pestered you. I guess I kinda thought that was our thing. Like with Gladio calling me juicy.”

When you turned to him, he was looking at you softly, a touch regretful, maybe. “Our thing?”

You shrugged. “Yeah, I guess it was dumb.”

After a brief moment of hesitance, he shook his head, saying nothing as he strode across the room to pick up the book he’d nearly finished. You didn’t want to go out until the sun had lowered enough in the sky to not bite at your skin so you really hoped he would leave.
He didn’t.

You lounged on one of the beds while he sat in an armchair and read. The others found you like that an hour later, and you were more than grateful by the sudden disturbance to the long, uncomfortable silence that had permeated the room since you’d kissed him.

—

Prompto was the one to go with you to the campground that night. He was meant to keep you from becoming too trashed, but a cute girl challenged him to a drinking contest early on in the night. So you kept leaving Surfer Boy to help Prompto stand up or not drop his camera into the ocean. At some point, it all seemed hopeless. You made a conscious effort in your drunken state to get Prompto back to the hotel room.

Neither of you were in any shape to get back safely, so it really worked in Surfer Boy’s favor that he offered to walk you both back. He said he was tired and wanted to turn in early, leaving his friends behind at the campground.

A spark of hope returned when he brushed his hand over yours as you both helped Prompto stand up. He told you that you were amazing and different from other girls while you trudged down the pier. That was murky water to tread, you thought. You just wanted to get laid, not have some dude confessing sweet things to you, especially when you barely knew him.

You knocked on the door to your room, unsure if you could regain enough focus to slide the keycard in properly. The world was spinning, and you only had one thing on your mind. Gladio answered, taking Prompto from you and disappearing inside. The door closed behind him, and you looked at Surfer Boy with what was probably a sloppy smile. It was now or never.

He took one of your hands in his, walking farther down the hall toward his room. Hell yes. Finally.

You walked toward him as the world kept spinning and closed in on you in pure darkness.

—

Your mouth was dry and stale when you woke up and everything was too bright. Your eyes fluttered, but you kept them closed against the early sunlight filtering into the room. With a stretch you realized you weren’t alone in bed. Where were you again? Your hand followed the arm at your waist up to a shoulder that was too broad to belong to Noctis or Pompto. Then, the night before came back to you.

Surfer Boy. You’d gotten into his bed after all. Sliding a hand across his chest, you enjoyed the feel of his bare skin against your palm. Heading further south, you noticed he was still wearing his underwear, your fingers tracing the waistband. In fact, you realized you were wearing the same clothes you’d had on the night before. Your shirt was twisted slightly around you.

Resting your forehead against his chest, you let out a sigh. So nothing had happened. At least he had the common decency to not take advantage of you after you’d blacked out. He shifted in his sleep, and you felt something hard brush your hand.

My, my.

It was never too late, you thought. Smiling softly to yourself, you dipped your hand beneath the waistband and curled it around the length of him. It was only morning wood, but you could encourage it into something harder with a little effort. You were no stranger to morning sex, a gentle ache between your thighs already coming to life at the thought.
With slow movements, you stroked him from base to tip and back again. It was so silky and soft. You squeezed lightly, building up a slow momentum. Your other hand went to his stomach and traced gentle circles into his skin. A low moan rumbled from his chest, and you felt it against your forehead. It sounded off, but everyone sounded weird when sleepy. The arm at your waist tightened a little, pulling you closer.

Your thumb grazed over the tip, catching the precum and smearing it over the head. You kissed his chest, mumbling, “Good morning.”

Then, he flinched, his arm leaving your waist to pull your hand away from his eager erection. You drew away, opening your eyes to give him a questioning look. But it wasn’t Surfer Boy.

Green eyes wide, Ignis looked at you in shock. Jerking away from him, you stumbled out of the bed and onto the floor. He sat up with a look of concern. “Are you alright?”

“Y-yeah!” You stood up, blinking the sleep out of your eyes. Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods. You’d basically just assaulted him in his sleep. It was written all over his face, the discomfort and distrust. He was still hard; the blanket hid nothing.

You ran to the bathroom and turned on the shower to wash everything away. The feel of his skin against yours and all the frantic thoughts that came along with it remained, unfortunately.

—

You caught Gladio coming in from his morning run as you were going out to catch an early breakfast. You weren’t avoiding Ignis. You were just… super hungry.

“What’s with that look?”

You gazed at him, eyes wide and expression serious. “What look?”

He rose a brow. “Like you saw the face of an Astral or something.”

“Nothing happened,” you said quickly.

Looking at you blankly and wiping sweat from his forehead, he laughed. “Sounds like something did happen.”

You shook your head. “No.” Your voice was higher than you meant for it to be, and you cleared your throat to get rid of the telltale fluctuation. “What, uh, happened last night, though?”

He looked down the breezeway for a moment. “You passed out right over there. The poor guy you’ve been trying to hook up with carried you to our door.”

You covered your face with your hands. “Really? I didn’t even make it to his bed.”

He laughed again, smacking your shoulder. “It happens, juicy. You’ll get lucky again soon.” Walking past you, he put a hand on the knob and grinned at you over his shoulder. “Hey, you slept with me and Iggy last night. I won’t tell anybody that all we did was sleep if that makes you feel any better.”

A flash of what it felt like to have Ignis hard in your hand went through your mind. Face flushing, you stomped off without responding.

—
You successfully avoided Ignis—because that’s exactly what you were doing—for most of the morning, eating breakfast alone and packing while he showered. It was all well and good until Gladio was shoving suitcases into the trunk of the car, and Noctis volunteered to drive until stopping for lunch.

“I call shotgun,” you said quickly.

Prompto chuckled. “Sorry, dude! I already called it.”

“You always call it.” You pouted at him. “Please, Prom.”

“You know how it works around here.” He smirked at you, earning a shove to his shoulder. “You’ll get another chance after lunch.”

That was the opposite of helpful, but you weren’t going to tell him that.

To alleviate the anxiety or at least dispel the idea that you’d intended to come on to Ignis like that, you approached him. “Hey, I’m gonna stock up on snacks. Will you lend me a hand?”

Ignis seemed reluctant, but acquiesced at your distressed frown. “Not a problem.”

Prompto asked you to get some kind of chips, but you were only half listening as you walked away. Out of earshot, you stopped and looked up at Ignis with every bit of genuine regret you felt. “I’m so sorry, Ignis. I didn’t know it was you. I would’ve never—”

He cleared his throat, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose and looking away. A slight blush reddened his face, which would’ve been catching in literally any other situation. “Please. We’re leaving now. I think everything that has happened would be best left behind as well. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, yes, I totally agree. We never talk about this again.” Nodding, you scuffed your shoe against the asphalt at your feet and forced a light laugh. “Y’know what, I’ve already forgotten.”

He nodded in turn. Great. Now the air was clear between you, and there should’ve been no reason for you to feel weird around him. You were on the same page. Right?

You looked at the others finishing up all the car prep for travel, then at the snack bar on the opposite side of the car lot. “What did Prompto want again?”

—

The Crow’s Nest you stopped at for lunch had a Kenny Crow statue sitting on a bench outside. You all posed with it for Prompto to get a picture, and as Noctis refueled the car, you sat in the statue’s lap, browsing the emails you’d ignored all week. A lot from school reminding you of the work that awaited. You could already feel the stress returning.

Ignis sat down on the bench next to you, attention on his own phone. You hadn’t said so much as a word to each other since setting off. He did accidentally elbow you, but when you’d said something about it, all he’d given was a quiet apology.

“You’re ignoring me.” Stretching out, you nudged his leg with the toe of your shoe, knocking his knees together. You kept repeating in your mind that it would only be weird if you let it be weird. You were going to act normal and hope you eventually did forget everything that happened.

He didn’t respond to your statement or the pestering. He really was ignoring you, the ass.
Another nudge, and he grabbed your ankle with his free hand, tisking. “Temper, temper.”

“Oh, so it speaks.” You tugged your foot from his grip. With Gladio standing so close nearby, you decided to use Altissian. “We said we would forget what happened. Why are you ignoring me?”

He didn’t even give you his full attention, not sparing you a glance as he replied. “I’m not ignoring you.”

“Yes, you are.”

“We’re speaking right now.”

You stared at him, at the profile of his face, the serious lines that made up his stoic features.

“I’m sorry for everything that happened.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m sorry for kissing you.”

He flinched, and that egged you on.

“I’m sorry for touching your penis.” You didn’t know any slang words in Altissian for it.

That gained Ignis’ attention. He looked up with a frown and slid his phone into an inner pocket. “Enough. I’m sorry, too. For everything. Let’s never talk about it again.”

“Fine,” you said, crossing your arms. If he really wasn’t upset, then you were going to bring up something else you’d been worrying over since you’d left Galdin Quay. “I’ve been thinking… What will we do?”

“What?”

“About your uncle. We never made plans.”

“Ah.” He adjusted a glove, looking away thoughtfully for a second. “Don’t worry about it.”

You shook your head. “We’re still in this together.”

Giving you a side glance, he appeared confused. “I think there’s a mistranslation. Are you certain—”

“Yeah,” you interrupted, nudging his leg again with the toe of your shoe. “I mean it.”

Aside from the numerous uncomfortable moments, Ignis had been a good friend throughout the vacation. You were beginning to think, barring those unfortunate happenings, that a real friendship with Ignis had been happening for a while, only you’d been too absorbed into your attraction to him to really notice.

Ignis graced you with a smile for the first time all day, one that you returned wholeheartedly. The sound of Prompto’s camera snapping caught both of your attention, the dork stopping to stand in front of you.

“What are you guys talking about?”

You hopped up from Kenny Crow’s lap, coming up with a quick lie. “Ignis is bragging about how good he is at speaking Altissian. He’s such a show off.”
Noctis called for everyone to get back on the road. You were torn between wanting more time off and wanting to get back to the grind. At least then you really could forget everything.

When Ignis got into the driver’s seat, you were thankful for the slight bit more room you suddenly had in the back. Noct was smaller and tended to fall asleep leaning away from you. Ignis adjusted the mirrors, looking at you in the rearview.

As he pulled out onto the road, you leaned forward just a bit to say, “I’m happy you’re my friend.”

His eyes were on the road, but you could see the edges of a smile in his reflection.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone please enjoy this BEAUTIFUL fan art of post-kiss Ignis by the wondrous Elathepenn <3
It’s sucking my will to live!

Chapter Summary

New moves are learned, old moves are rejected, and ya boy Iggy does a bad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was game night. You were two hours and an entire pizza in when Prompto got a call. Because the chosen game had been a racing type, you had to pause it while he answered.

“Hey, Iggy,” he said, dropping his controller. “What’s up?”

You perked up at the mention of Ignis. You’d spoken to him a few times over the past couple of weeks, but hadn’t seen him since he’d dropped you off outside of your apartment at the tail end of spring break. Things had leveled out between you. For the most part. “Put him on speaker.”

Prompto shook his head, pushing a hand into your face and snickering. “Oh, okay—” He paused and you smacked his hand away. “Wait, really? I-I dunno if I can.”

Watching the way his face changed expressions from calm to excited to worried was entertaining. You were exceedingly curious about what was going on.

Putting your hands on either side of your mouth to amplify, you chanted, “Speaker phone, speaker phone, speaker—mmhhhphh.”

Prompto shoved a pillow in your face. “Okay, Iggy. I’ll try, but that’s a lot of pressure.”

Knocking the pillow away, you grinned and made kissing noises. “Is he finally asking you out?”

You were maybe just a little high.

Listening to something Ignis said, Prompto looked at you. “Yeah, she’s here.”

You held out a hand. “Can I talk to him?”

He handed it to you and stood up. “I’m making popcorn. Then, I’m gonna kick your ass at this game.”

“Hey, Ignis,” you said, sounding loud, even to yourself. You cleared your throat and lowered your voice. “I have an important question.”

He already sounded exasperated. “I have a feeling I know what it may be.”

You drew your knees up on Prompto’s sofa. It was nicer than yours. Probably because it was actually his roommate’s. “Who should I take to the homecoming dance?”

A sigh came through the line. But Ignis sounded like he was smiling when he spoke. “Who are the options? Surely, Jack and Andreas.”

“Andreas, yes,” you said, thinking back to a previous conversation you’d had with Ignis several days
prior. “But remember, you advised me to go to the concert with Scorpion? That meant I had to stand up Jack so he’s not available anymore.”

“Ah, yes. Scorpion. How could I have forgotten?”

You covered your mouth to hide your snickers as he continued.

“So, you can’t decide between Andreas and Scorpion.” He hummed for a moment. “I say Andreas. He’s a gentleman.”

“Yeah, okay, but.” You held up a finger even though he couldn’t see it. “Scorpion is a bad boy with a heart of gold. Plus, he’s the only one with a secret ending.”

Prompto walked back into the room, and you angled away from him when he took his seat next to you. This was an ultra private conversation. You didn’t want Prompto to find out you had a secret weapon.

On the phone, Ignis said, “I think the answer is quite obvious.”

You nodded. Again, Ignis couldn’t see it, but Prompto did. “Scorpion it is. I’ll let you know what happens during the secret—”

Prompto leaned toward you, grabbing his phone. He was grinning, disbelief on his face. “Is Ignis helping you with *Triple Heart Saga: True Love Wins*?”

“No,” you lied.

To Ignis, Prompto said, “Dude, that’s so unfair. I’ve tried to get the secret ending like seven times already.”

Ignis said something that you couldn’t hear. Whatever it was, Prompto laughed and hung up before pointing at you. “You’re such a cheater. How did you even get Iggy to help you?”

You shrugged. It hadn’t been something you’d planned. He had called to set up a time to meet and plan out the big breakup of the courtship, and you’d been too absorbed into the dating sim to pay attention. So you’d asked him for help, and he was such a good strategist that he figured out pretty quickly the right decisions to make for the best outcome based on the predetermined personalities of each love interest. It was becoming your quickest and most successful playthrough of the game yet.

Why he was wasting time doing something so stupid with you was a question you’d wondered more than once, but you never looked a gift chocobo in the beak.

Making a blog was easy, especially with Prompto’s help. Deciding which of your works was worth displaying was the hard part. You didn’t think any of it was worth looking at, but you didn’t want an empty website.

Prompto did all of the work while you groaned about it the entire time. If he hadn’t pressed, you wouldn’t ever get it done, though.

In the end, you put anything finished on there, hoping that the few people that would end up visiting at least enjoyed what they saw or read. It was nerve wracking, but you still stuck by the belief that not many people would see it anyway. Nobody had blogs anymore. Except Prompto.
And now you.

To say that you were anxious about the self defense training was an understatement. The Citadel loomed over you ominously as you climbed the seemingly endless stairs upward toward the main entrance. Noctis had come in clutch, having Gladio let you know that you were expected in the training room of the Citadel every afternoon that week to train for four hours each day.

So there you were, going into the building that stressed you out most. It was Monday, you were done with classes, and you really hoped you were wearing appropriate clothing. Going from one person to the next, being led down long halls and further into different rooms, you felt underdressed, passing by guards with elaborate and sometimes beautiful uniforms in royal black.

The training room was oddly ornate with mounted weapons, display cases and full suits of armor lining the walls. Gladio and someone you’d never met — but immediately recognized only because of all the pictures you’d seen of her — were the only people in the room, deep into a conversation. The usher left the room and closed the doors behind you. You came to the attention of Gladio and his sister at the sound.

“Don’t look so nervous, juicy,” he chuckled, stretching out his shoulder. He tilted his head toward his sister “This is Iris. She’s gonna be your trainer.”

You were barely bigger than Iris, but wasn’t she just sixteen? She was adorable, explaining the process with a smile. Gladio stood next to her, arms crossed, nodding his head along with everything she said. He was doing this as a favor for you and for Noctis. Was Iris among that list, too? You couldn’t think of why else someone so young and presumably inexperienced would be training you.

Your initial doubts were obliterated along with any sense of pride you might’ve felt when she swept a kick under your legs, knocking you right onto your ass as soon as training began. She giggled and helped you up, which would’ve been cute if you weren’t already thinking of all the places you were going to be hurting by the end of the first session.

When training ended, you gave Gladio the birthday present you’d hidden in your bag. You knew it was his birthday because Prompto had only mentioned it a dozen times. Unlike Ignis, Gladio welcomed gifts and attention. You were grateful he was doing something as stupid as helping train you on his birthday so you made sure it was an especially good gift.

“I haven’t read this one yet,” he said, eyeing the book appreciatively as he flipped through the first few pages. On the title page, you’d gotten the author to sign it. That had been a two hour wait in a bookstore full of horny bookworms. “To Gladio, may your fantasies be—” he cut himself off, closing the book and giving you a grin.

You knew why he’d had to stop himself. The author had written something really explicit, as you’d asked. He couldn’t read that in front of Iris. She looked between you with a smile, either unaware or uncaring.

A man came in right before you made your way out, clapping Gladio on the shoulder and saying something to Iris. You recognized him but couldn’t quite place who he was other than someone important. Stars filled your eyes as you slung your bag over your shoulder. While he spoke to Iris,
you walked over to Gladio to say goodbye.

“Juicy, who’s the silver fox?” you whispered, looking over at the older man.

Gladio looked down at you, unamused. “My dad.”

You froze, tearing your gaze away to look up at him. “Seriously? That’s your dad?”

He nodded, crossing his arms. “Yeah, so don’t be weird.”

“Me, weird?” You balked, then shot the older man another look. He was looking your way, Iris saying something while motioning toward you. Shit. With a blush and a giggle, you punched Gladio lightly on the arm and backed away toward the door. “Maybe I should be calling him juicy because damn.”

Gladio motioned for you to get out already, rolling his eyes. You couldn’t believe you’d found something that actually bothered him.

—

Spring hit hard, kicking you in the face like Iris had before you learned to properly evade. With a runny nose, you took allergy medicine as you boarded the train from the university to the Citadel.

Prompto kept you updated on everything you were missing at work while you did the training. The usual customer bullshit, the claw machine broke, and he had to fix it again, and most importantly, Tuesday had been so slow that Prompto had time to get the new highest score on Cruisin’ Lucis. Beating that score was the first thing you’d do when you returned to work the next week. That game was absurd. The winning cutscene at the end was a dip in a hot tub with a bunch of pixelated babes and King Regis himself.

You wondered if they would update it with Noct in the hot tub when he became king.

—

You: I forgot the compact so make sure your uncle doesn’t stop by while I’m training or something.

Ignis didn’t respond, which wasn’t that out of the ordinary. He was a busy man, and you were used to some time passing before hearing anything back. The reason he never sent anything became apparent when you arrived to the training room.

The usher stopped you at the closed doors before walking away. Iris stood there with an air of excitement about her. “Noctis is training right now so we can’t go in yet. They’re focusing on teamwork today.”

“They?”

She nodded. “Noctis, Gladdy, and Ignis.”

You could hear the fighting through the large doors, but seeing it would’ve been much more exciting.

“We can’t watch?” you asked. Maybe you could sit on one of the green upholstered benches that lined the edge of the room.

“Unfortunately, we can’t.” She seemed to share your disappointment. “It’s totally packed, I think. A lot of Crownguard are training, too.”
You leaned against the wall next to her, listening to the loud clashing coming from the other side. Imagining what kind of secret maneuvers they were doing that you weren’t privy to.

Once it was over, the doors slammed open and people left in droves. You stayed still, not wanting any of the Crownguard to take notice of you. You could barely withstand the basic self defense — though you were getting better — and didn’t want anyone assuming you were a Crownguard hopeful. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Following Iris inside, you spotted Gladio easily on the other side of the room. He yelled something you couldn’t distinguish because of the echoing effect the room carried.

You waved at him, then at Noctis and Ignis when they noticed you were there, too. The room smelled faintly of something you couldn’t place. It had you looking around curiously, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Ignis walked toward you, nodding once he stopped just a few feet away. He wore a simple shirt, the topmost buttons undone. Sweat gleamed across his chest and arms. Gross. You swallowed thickly as he rubbed his neck with a small towel, his hair loose and swept to the side. Definitely gross.

“How is your self defense training?”

It was different talking to him in person. You were suddenly reminded of who he was and how his presence made you feel. On the phone or through text, he played along with your silly requests, helped you land fake dates in a game and sent you puns when you complained about school getting you down. The man in front of you couldn’t be that same person with his serious expression and professional combat skills.

You fidgeted, shrugging to hide your discomfort. “Iris is kicking my ass, but I’m getting pretty good at running away.”

He chuckled softly. “That sounds promising. I’ve heard tell we have an open guard position in our faint-of-heart division. You should apply.”

“Ha ha.” You rolled your eyes. Maybe he was the same person, after all. When he didn’t say anything next, you shifted your weight from one foot to the other, eyes avoiding his sweaty, exposed collar. “What’s that smell?”

He rose his brows. “Smell?” With a quick glance around, the hand he had rubbing the towel at his neck paused. “It does become rather ripe after training. No worse than the locker rooms.”

“No. It’s like a burning smell? But not?” You hoped that made sense. You couldn’t be the only one who noticed it, though everyone else seemed unbothered.

“Oh.” He nodded, hand gripping the towel and dropping to his side. “You mean the magic.”

You met his eyes, inhaling the smell again. It was… not good. Not terrible, but you hoped it dissipated before your lesson began. “That’s magic?”

“An aftereffect, yes.”

“Who exactly does the magic?”

He was unsurprised by your curiosity, but looked at the others in the room while answering as if he
weren’t sure he should divulge. “Gladio and I both have the capability, drawn from Noctis.”

You followed his gaze to look a bit closer at the others. Both Gladio and Noctis had scorched bits and holes in their clothing. Returning your stare to Ignis, you allowed yourself one small once over. Totally clean.

“You did the magic.” It was never said that you were eloquent, and now that you couldn’t flirt with Ignis without upsetting him, you found yourself at an even greater disadvantage when it came to speaking with him. “You made the room smell weird.”

He rolled a shrug over his shoulders, more relaxed than anyone who’d just spent an indeterminate amount of time training should be. “I hadn’t known your nose was so sensitive.”

As if on cue, you sneezed, catching it in your elbow before you showered him in germs. “Allergies,” you explained, sniffling a little. Maybe if your nose stuffed up, you wouldn’t have to smell the remnants of magic. A blessing in disguise.

His expression held slight concern that you brushed off with a wave of your hand. “Don’t you have a shower to take or something?”

“Right. Good luck in your training.” He walked toward the locker rooms, looking back once when you sneezed again. You turned away from him to make it pointed that you did not welcome his concern.

—

That session, Iris showed you the coolest thing you’d yet to learn: how to disarm someone and steal their weapon. This made you feel like you were actually learning something worthwhile. Then, when it came to actually doing it, you realized that everything connected so every bit you’d learned so far was important for this maneuver to even work.

Gladio was going extra easy on you, but when you successfully pulled it off, holding the practice sword against him threateningly, you dropped the stance and jumped up in excitement with a victory cry anyway.

“Iris, you’re the best teacher.” You had to give her credit; you’d had a lot of doubts up to this point.

She looked surprised, then grinned at you. “Thank you! You’re the best student!”

You waved the sword around, accidentally hitting yourself in the leg with it somehow. Gladio took it away from you with a laugh, telling you training was over. Already?

After showering, you were so busy talking with Iris about when and where you could use your newly learned maneuvers in daily life —creep hitting on you at a bar, teenage bully making fun of you, landlady stealing your food— that you hadn’t noticed Ignis standing at the doors. By the casual lean it seemed like he’d been there for a while. You hoped he hadn’t seen you hit yourself with the sword.

He nodded at you and Iris as you approached the doors. “I’ll walk her out, Iris.”

Iris looked from him to you, questioning.

You shrugged.

“Okay, see you tomorrow,” she said, smiling. “You did great today.”
“Thanks.” You rubbed at your arm and hefted the bag you had draped over a shoulder. “Bye, Iris.”

Through the doors and down the hall, you gave him a side glance. “Working late tonight?”

He nodded. “Par for the course. Thought I’d offer you a ride home since I happen to be leaving around the same time your training ends.”

That sounded nice. You could save some gil and an hour of your time by not taking the train. But it also seemed a strange offer. He lived in a completely different part of the city from what you heard from Gladio. So he’d be going out of his way to give you a ride.

You glanced at him curiously. “Oh yeah? Are you sure you aren’t worried I’ll run into your uncle without the courtship token on me?”

Looking caught, he frowned and said, “Is it not a reasonable worry?”

You huffed a breathy laugh. It hurt a little, the sore muscles of your rarely used abs pulling with the motion. “I’m not gonna offer him a big, fat blunt or something. Unless he asked.” You feigned a thoughtful look, putting a finger to your chin. “I’m sure I could come up with something.”

He looked at you in mild distress. “You’re not foolish enough to be carrying.”

“No way, dude.” You scoffed at him. “I get patted down every time I come here. I don’t wanna be detained on my way to the training room.”

He gave you an unamused look, but you could only smile in return.

“I’m okay taking the train,” you said, flicking the strap of your bag with your thumb. “It’s not a bad trip, plus there won’t be many people on board this time of night. Thanks, though.”

He nodded again and walked with you quietly for a time, opening doors before you could and nodding at people you passed. At the main level near the entrance, he let you know that’s where you had to part. The car lot was through a guarded doorway.

“This Sunday,” you said. “I don’t have work, and I’m catching up on all my schoolwork on Saturday. So be there Sunday, okay? No excuses.”

A corner of his mouth pulled into a smirk. “Of course.”

You smiled back. “Sometimes I think you’re not taking this courtship thing as seriously as I am.”

Taking a step back to part ways, you were stopped by his hand on your upper arm. “Wait. I’ve something for you.”

He drew his hand away to grab something from a pocket. A small box. Allergy medicine. The same kind you already had in your bag.

“Oh, thanks.” You took it slowly, looking from the colorful packaging to his face.

“I’m assuming your condition is seasonal,” he said. “In the case that you’re somehow allergic to magic, I’m afraid you’re out of luck.”

You wanted to tell him it wasn’t necessary to do this. You weren’t Noctis and you weren’t his real girlfriend so this level of care was a waste of his time.

Some other third voice interrupted you first. “Hello, Ignis, miss.”
Both of you looked off to the side, where Ignis’ uncle stood, a pleasantly surprised look on his face. Fantastic. All three of you in the same room together, and you didn’t have the compact on you. That had been your only job.

“Hello, sir,” you said, bowing your head slightly.

Ignis had the gall to look at you strangely. As if he were surprised you knew how to show anyone respect.

“You’re going out for the evening?” his uncle asked, looking between you. Gods, it really wasn’t his business even if you were going out with Ignis. What was up with these nosy nobles?

“We were just saying goodbye to one another,” Ignis said before you could open your smart mouth. He looked down at you with a soft look you’d never seen before and lifted one of your hands in his; he was putting on a show, and he was good. “Have a safe trip home.” He brought your hand up to kiss it, but you pulled it away quickly, uncomfortable with the gesture.

Then you remembered that you were supposed to be pretending that Ignis was your boyfriend.

“Oh, right.” You smiled sheepishly at him and shot his uncle a brief, embarrassed look. You were blowing it. Hopefully your behavior would be mistaken as shyness. Swiftly, you touched Ignis’ lapel, raising on the tips of your toes, and kissed him chastely on the cheek. That should make up for the faux pas, right? You weren’t going to stick around to be sure, murmuring, “‘Kay, bye.” Then you got the hell out of there.

On the train later, your phone beeped, pulling you out of a half-asleep state.

_Ignis:_ Impressive exit. Seems you have learned to run away rather well.

_You:_ Shut up.

_Ignis:_ I’ll see you on Sunday.

_You:_ I can’t wait to dump you.

—

There was a strong sense of lacking that you felt when you thought about the fact that you’d spent spring break with four men and had no sex to speak of. Four young men and not one of them had been even remotely interested in…

_I don’t apologize for things for which I’m not sorry._

You ran a hand down your face, swiping left and right at people on another dating app. Eventually, someone who wanted to play with you would come along. You just had to have patience.

Only patience was not a virtue you had, really.

Closing the app, you groaned. You had your last session with Iris and Gladio later. If Iris wasn’t involved, you felt like you could let out your sexual frustration then. Just exhaust yourself physically and forget about sex for a while. But trying to do that with a sixteen year old around would be creepy.

No, if it was only Gladio… you knew he’d understand.
Your eyes lit up, mind reeling with new thoughts. Bad ones, but what was new?

—

You’d never say you had a type, but if you did, Gladio wasn’t it. Still, when he stood behind you to correct your stance before you faced off with Iris, you could feel his broad chest brush ever so slightly against your back. Suddenly hyper aware of every little touch, you let the thoughts mull around in your brain for the duration of the lesson before ever voicing the decision you’d already made before even stepping foot into the training room.

While Iris cleaned up and you caught your breath at the end of the lesson, you drank water and stood purposefully next to the large man.

“So what are you doing tonight, juicy?”

He shrugged. “Gonna stick around and practice a few things I’ve been working on since training you isn’t much of a workout. Why?”

There weren’t certain phrases, as far as you knew, that worked on certain people when it came to sexual advances. In your experience, it was a matter of figuring out what a person wanted. That had been your problem with Surfer Boy. He’d been so bland, you had no idea what he’d wanted.

Looking at Gladio in your peripheral, licking water from your lip before it could drip down your chin, you already knew him well enough. He liked to play, too, and if it was exercise he wanted, you could be that outlet.

“I could help you,” you suggested. “I’m free tonight, and I need a… workout.”

You felt him gaze down at you, but you kept yours on the bottle of water in your hand. You’d never done this. Flirting with Ignis, joking or not, had come so naturally, but this, what you were doing now, felt completely out of place.

“I don’t know if I wanna hang out after that joke you made about my dad being hot.” Despite his words, he sounded amused.

You took that as a good sign. Raking your gaze over him, you finally met his eyes. “It’s just interesting to see where you got it from.”

He huffed a quiet laugh through his nose and looked at you for several beats. “Alright. I’ll bite. Hit the showers, and I’ll meet you outside in twenty.”

You nodded, surprised at his acceptance. It hit you on your way to the locker rooms that you hadn’t actually thought you’d get that far. Your self esteem was taking a real beating lately.

—

He took you to a ramen bar. You both sipped smoked whiskey and slurped ramen with absolutely no manners, the conversation coming easily. Gladio had a million things to say. It wasn’t the same kind of talkative as Prompto who could talk himself both into and out of a hole. Gladio just seemed to know how to engage with people.

He deflected every flirty comment you made with one of his own. You made a game of it with yourself, taking a large drink of whiskey whenever he said something particularly salacious. Until you had to stop when the conversation had devolved into nothing but.
You stretched outside the bar, leaning into him a little. Pretending that you needed help walking gave you a reason to get closer. Now that he’d loosened up, you felt comfortable asking him point blank, “What’s the big secret between all you guys? The one about Noctis that involves Prompto and is keeping Ignis so busy?”

Gladio groaned as if he’d been waiting for this very question all night. “I wanna tell you, I really do. But I can’t, okay? So drop it before you get worked up.”

You grumbled, shoving him uselessly. “Whatever. Nobody will tell me. Prompto plays dumb and Ignis is all serious about it. You guys suck.”

He grunted as if he agreed, but said nothing more.

—

On the train back to the Citadel, he held you drunkenly, though you knew he could handle his alcohol better just on the sheer size difference between you.

“Is that why you got me drunk?” You could feel the rumble of his voice in his chest against your head. “To get me to spill the secret?”

Lifting your head to look at him, you shook it slightly. “No. I wanted to fuck you.”

Nice, you thought, when he chuckled at that. Then you realized a tad late that it wasn’t the reaction you’d been hoping for.

His dark eyes roamed your face. “You don’t want that.”

With a blink, you scowled at him. “You don’t know what I want.”

“Okay, I don’t want that.”

You sighed, resting your head on his chest again. “I feel so unsexy right now.”

“Because I don’t wanna sleep with you?”

“Because no one wants to sleep with me. It’s like I have a curse.”

He rubbed your head comfortingly, fingers brushing your hair. “Everybody has those periods. Focus on something else.”

“I can’t.”

“Look…” He sighed. “I know you don’t wanna sleep with me. You’re just frustrated. I get it.”

You knew he was right, but that didn’t mean you had to like it. “Then why’d you say yes to hanging out?”

“I could tell you needed a friend. You were tense during the entire lesson today.”

The train shuddered to a stop at the Citadel station, and you removed yourself from him to leave the car. “I was hoping you’d just take me to your place tonight. I even made an excuse to go back to the Citadel with you and everything.”

“Yeah, I figured. Iris sent me a message saying you left your bag in the locker room.”
So that’s why he’d been checking his phone in the ramen bar. He’d seemed really amused about something. “I still need to go back. It has my apartment keys in it.” And the compact. You hadn’t thought everything though very well in your hurry to get laid.

In your hurry to fail at getting laid, to be precise. Because, apparently, this was your life now.

“You’re saying?” he said good-naturedly as he tugged your arm once he realized you were walking the wrong way. “You can stay in a guest room. Everybody will just assume you’re a friend of Iris.”

—

Sitting next to a window, you stared down into a garden. You’d never seen it before, but you knew it was yours. In your lap rested a familiar golden pocket watch. Your fingertips traced the Scientia crest while you watched the wind blow petals past the window.

At the sound of your name, you turned away from the sight to find yourself at a dining table with Ignis, his uncle, and numerous faceless people that your mind had filled in as his family.

They were congratulating you on a happy marriage.

Looking fearfully at Ignis, you asked, “Did we get married?”

He arched a fine brow. “What are you saying? We’ve been married for years.”

“So?”

“Are we not ‘in it together’, as you said?”

That wasn’t what you’d meant, and he knew that. How could he not know that?

You threw your hands out, trashing everything in front of you on the table. It didn’t matter. Everything kept going back into place, everyone around you continuing the congratulatory chant.

You were at the window again, watching the gentle breezes that tickled your garden. The pocket watch in your lap let out a soft, metered tick tick tick.

Ignis’ voice sounded close, against your ear, against your neck. But you were alone.

“You’ll never go out there again.”

—

You woke abruptly to a tapping against the door of the guest room. Senses coming into focus, you threw off the blanket. The dream was fresh in your mind, scouring your nerves like sandpaper. You threw the door open, expecting Gladio. “Juicy, I need to sleep with somebody as soon…”

You saw no one at first, then looked down at a kid you most definitely didn’t know. You were at Gladio’s, right? Instead of taking the bottle of water the boy was offering, you replayed the night before in your mind.

Yep, unless you were mysteriously displaced in your sleep, you were in the Amicitia household. So who was this? Did Gladio have a little brother? You thought if he did, he would’ve talked about him just as much as he did Iris. The guy was a Proud Older Brother second only to his job as Shield.

When you took the bottle from his hand, it was as if the tap of his mouth had been suddenly loosened. “Good morning, miss. I heard you weren’t feeling well, and my grandfather is busy so I
wanted to help by—"

You held up a hand, and he blinked, words coming to a halt. Opening the door wider, you almost waved him in, but that seemed pretty creepy since you were barely covered. So you just stood in the doorway and uncapped the bottle. The landscape of your mouth was a desert wasteland. The boy’s expression was hesitant as he watched you chug the water.

“Thank you,” you said, clearing your throat. Water was the best. “Where’s Gladio?”

“Oh.” He nodded, as if he were glad this was something he knew he could tell you. “He’s with Prince Noctis right now. Are you having breakfast?”

Breakfast? You were barely awake. Then again, hangovers gave you such strong cravings. Sure. You could have breakfast with the Amicitias without Gladio. That wouldn’t be weird at all.

—

His name was Talcott, and you liked him because he was precocious and shared an interest in cactuars with you. You followed him into a dining room, the conversation going pretty smoothly considering you’d never so much as spoken to a kid since you’d been one yourself. At a long table sat Iris. She was the only one present, and she giggled when you looked around in confusion.

“It’s just me this morning,” she said as she waved you over. “And I’m glad because I want to talk about something personal.”

That didn’t sound good.

You took a seat next to her, looking back to see where Talcott had sat, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Had you… imagined him?

Iris took in your look of confusion with amused patience. When she had your full attention, she began, “I wanted to do something nice by cleaning your clothes for you while you were out with Gladdy, and I saw something interesting in your bag.”

Oh no, this wasn’t good at all.

Her face was alight with excitement and you knew exactly what she was going to say. “Congratulations! Why didn’t you tell me you were with Ignis? This is so exciting.”

This was straight up terrible. Small flashbacks of the nonsense dream plagued your mind. Could you leave now? Would that be rude?

She kept talking excitedly, unaware of your distress. “I can’t believe he found love, and I was trusted to train you!”

“N-no,” you said before she could keep going. “We’re not in love.”

“Oh.” Her smile waned into a look of confusion that matched your own. Only for a moment. Then she smiled again. “It’s a new thing, I can tell. The compact is beautiful, by the way. He has good taste.” She elbowed you, much like her brother in regard to not knowing how much strength she put into the action. “In tokens and ladies. I already know we’ll be good friends.”

“Iris.” You kept your voice firm. She needed to understand. What she needed to understand, you
weren’t quite sure, but she definitely needed to stop talking. “It’s… a secret, okay? Not even Gladio knows so don’t tell anyone.”

She nodded in understanding. “Got it! That sounds just like Ignis. He’s always keeping his personal life separate from everyone. We all kinda thought he didn’t have a personal life for a long time.”

That’s because he didn’t. Not really. But you couldn’t say that.

“When will you tell everyone? You have to announce it eventually.”

“Oh, y’know,” you said, waving a hand vaguely. “When we’re ready.”

Someone came into the room and served you each a plate of food. It was the right distraction you needed to change the conversation.

You were doing a bad job at this low key fake girlfriend thing, and you hoped none of your mistakes made their way back to Ignis before everything was over.

—

“It’s not you, it’s me.”

You looked at your reflection. Crossing your arms, uncrossing your arms.

“Ignis, it’s over.”

It wasn’t believable. You couldn’t act to save your life. Smacking your cheeks lightly, you stared yourself down. Then you paused, dropping your hands to grip the edge of the sink.

“You’re nothing to me.”

You chewed on your lower lip.

“I never loved you.”

A small sigh escaped you. It had to be more personal. Something believable.

“I was only using you to make my student film stand out.”

That was a start. You straightened your shoulders and imagined all of the most classic breakup lines you could think of.

“Love…” You cleared your throat. “Lover was just a part you played in my movie. Stop pretending it was ever anything more.”

Too wordy. You could work on it, though.

A loud, measured knock coming from your front door snapped you out of your thoughts. One look at the time had you groaning. Ignis arrived earlier than anticipated.

You ran from the bathroom and scrambled around your messy apartment, listening to his second knock and yelling, “Just a minute!” You grabbed an old box of takeout off the coffee table, ignoring the crumbs left behind, and tossed it into the trash on your way to the door. Of all your friends, Ignis was the last one you wanted to see how disgusting your living space could be.

Opening the door, you let him in with the smallest of smiles. This was a million times worse than
when you let Noctis in because you knew Noctis was a slob just like you. Ignis was a total weirdo who probably liked everything in place. You’d spent all of the day before catching up on schoolwork, so much so that you hadn’t even gotten the laundry done yet. He followed you inside, probably judging you the entire time.

With a quick explanation of where everything was, you pointed at the kitchen. “Make yourself at home. I have to go downstairs for a few minutes.”

You ran to your room, gathering your filthy clothes into a bundle atop a basket that you carried into the living room. “There’s coffee and cakes in the fridge. I promise we can get started as soon as I get back.”

With that, you ran downstairs to Aranea’s apartment, the only place you could wash your clothes for free. Usually she let you with no issue, but you hadn’t given her any warning this time, and she threw her door open with bared teeth and an annoyed look.

“Aranea, please let me use your laundry room. My clothes smell so bad.”

Her expression flattened into one of empathy, something you were used to, and she tucked her soft hair behind an ear. “Alright, fine. You’re lucky Biggs and Wedge aren’t here tonight.”

You couldn’t ever figure out if Biggs and Wedge were her lovers or coworkers or both, but you were glad they weren’t around because your clothes were beginning to make your bedroom smell unlivable.

“Thank the gods,” you said, skittering into her apartment and loading your clothes into her laundry room. It was the only one in the building. If she had been gone on one of her trips with Biggs and Wedge —her lovers slash coworkers slash who the hell knew what— you would’ve had an easier time washing your things because she always kept a key hidden nearby.

“Let me know when I need to put them in the dryer,” you told her as you made your way downstairs.

She grunted, waving you off as if she didn’t have time for your nonsense. But you knew her well enough to recognize that she was agreeing to keep an eye on it for you.

Stepping back into your apartment, you inhaled deeply and let out a slow breath. This was going to be your biggest challenge yet: coming up with a good break up plan with Ignis. It had to be equally dramatic and believable. You were no actress, and you hoped your practice runs in the mirror would pay off.

You found Ignis sitting on your couch with a can of Ebony in hand —you’d stocked the fridge, but not specifically for him or anything— and a container of desserts. You carefully eyed the bowl of brownies he’d taken from the fridge and placed on the coffee table. What a silly man Ignis was, grabbing them rather than the coffee cakes you’d made.

Attempting to save him the trouble, you grabbed the brownie he held in his hand before he could eat it. “You don’t wanna eat this. Trust me,” you said, tossing it back into the bowl. “They’re pot brownies I’m holding for Craigory. He lives in a dorm, and the RAs are doing inspections this week.”

Ignis’ careful brows arched perfectly over his green eyes. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

Picking up the bowl, you shook your head and walked to the kitchen, calling over your shoulder, “Nope. It’s April and the twentieth is coming up.” Trading them out for the coffee cakes, you joined
him in the living room where he held a hand over his face, glasses held in the other. “Prompto and I
tried some this time last year. It’s actually how we became— what’s wrong?”

He straightened himself, putting his glasses back into place and looking at you carefully. “I already
ate one.” He said it with such seriousness that you stared back at him for a long moment before a
small laugh tumbled out of you.


Bringing a hand to your mouth to stifle a giggle, you took the brunt of a glare from him. “I was gone
for five minutes, tops. You’re totally out of control.”

He crossed his arms and sighed. “I should’ve known something like this would happen. We
should’ve met at my flat instead.”

“That’s not fair,” you said, feeling defensive because it wasn’t at all your fault that he’d done
something so dumb. “We have thirty minutes to an hour to plan before you feel anything. So let’s get
to it.” You clapped your hands together.

—

Ignis tugged at the collar of his shirt as he proposed staging the breakup at dinner with his uncle in
the Citadel. You didn’t like the idea of being the bad guy breaking his heart in front of his uncle, but
he reminded you that it was all fake.

“You won’t actually be breaking my heart,” he said, finger hooking his collar again and pulling
slightly.

Leaning toward him, you reached up and unbuttoned the topmost button of his shirt. He let out at
light sigh in relief, nodding in thanks. But you didn’t remove your hands from his lapel, rubbing the
fabric of it between your fingers. Everything Ignis owned felt universally softer than anything else on
Eos.

“It’s the principle of the thing,” you said, making yourself let go. Sitting back, you drew your legs
up. “It’s going to be awkward no matter what. I can live with that. I just don’t want your uncle to
think I’m a huge bitch. I still wanna be friends with you after this.”

“Of course we’ll remain friends.” It was offhand as if you were silly to even consider the possibility
of that not being the outcome. He lifted his can of Ebony, finding it empty, then looked at you with
slight dismay. “I’m sorry, but does it feel sweltering in here to you? I feel as though the walls are
closing in around us.”

You smiled, knowing by the slightly dazed look in his eyes that he was beginning to feel the effects
of the brownie. “Take off your jacket. I can’t believe you overdressed even for this.”

He slid the suit jacket off, draping it over the arm of the couch. Then he began to unbutton the cuffs
of his shirt. “This is hardly overdressed.”

You watched him roll up his sleeves to the elbow. “I have a few of Prompto’s shirts laying around if
you want to borrow one.”

Flexing his gloved hands a little, he looked up at you. “None of his shirts have sleeves.”

Exactly. You tore your gaze from his arms and went to the balcony doors, sliding one open. The
evening air was cool, and the sweet smell of your marmalade plant wafted in. “Is that better?” You
looked at him, catching him undoing another button of his shirt. Was he going to undress right in
front of you? Not that you’d complain, but…

“Marginally,” he said, finally stopping the adjustments.

With a roll of your eyes, you went to the kitchen for more Ebony. When you came back, Ignis was up, looking at your shelves of movies. Like you had with Noct, you had a little trepidation at the idea of letting him poke around.

“What kind of movies do you like?” you asked, handing him a coffee.

He took a drink before answering, examining the shelves as if looking for something specific. “Older films. I enjoy the classics.”

“Like Casablanca,” you guessed, and he nodded. You didn’t have Casablanca, but somewhere in your room, you had a porn parody of it called Assablanca. You almost told him this, but he chose that moment to remove a movie from the shelf to look at it.

“This is considered one of the worst films ever made.”

You scoffed. “It’s a masterpiece.” Sure, it had been a flop that lost millions of gil and cost a director his career, but it was a wild ride from beginning to end. “Have you ever seen it?”

“I haven’t,” he said, frowning at the movie’s cover. “For good reason.”

Taking it from him, you went to the tv and switched it on. “We’re watching it. Right now.”

He returned to his seat, still frowning. “We’re meant to be planning.”

“We can do both,” you reasoned as you set everything up. “Can I have a dramatic one-liner? When I break up with you, I mean.”

He chuckled, a sound that delighted you when it went on for longer than usual. You looked over your shoulder to see that he’d tilted his head back, looking at your ceiling.

“How about… I can’t take the terrible sex anymore.”

“You should input a modicum of truth, please.”

“It’s not you, it’s your shitty taste in movies?”

“That won’t work.”

With the movie set up, you stood and turned to him. “I’m sorry, Ignis, but I’m in love with your uncle now?”

He lifted his head, brows furrowed. “Absolutely not.”

You laughed and jumped onto the couch, sitting as far from him as possible. “I’ll work on it.”

Barely a minute into the movie and he turned to you, asking, “What’s your favorite film?”
First of all, rude to just talk during a movie. Secondly, you wish you had a girl for every time you were asked that question. "Midnight Sunrise."

He gave you a long look. "That's a rather obscure one. And a romance, at that."

Staring across the couch back at him, you said matter of factly, "It's not a crime to like romantic movies, whether you're a romantic or not."

Ignis laughed softly. "I'm only saying I'm pleasantly surprised."

"I'm surprised you even know what I'm talking about," you countered. Midnight Sunrise wasn't just obscure, it was old and low budget so few people even knew to look for it.

"I've never seen the film myself, but I know the premise." He was talking through so much of the movie's opening, you had to pause it to keep from missing anything important. He smirked a little, and you suspected that's what he'd wanted. So you unpaused it, unwilling to let him win.

He didn’t have to like it, but he was going to watch this movie with you. It was like a rite of passage.

—

The first ten minutes of the film were insane—an assassination, car chases, a secret agent facing off with his nemesis—but you spent most of the time giving Ignis side glances to check his reactions. He caught you doing it and asked, "May I help you?"

It was a little weird seeing such a big smile on his face, but you wouldn’t complain. "Nope. Just enjoying this amazing movie."

He chuckled in response, returning his attention to the tv. When you came to a scene of a family eating breakfast together, Ignis sighed. And it was pretty dramatic, coming from him.

"What's wrong?" You hoped he wasn’t that bored.

No hesitation. "Gladio is angry with me."

Oh. That was some juicy info. You paused the movie and faced Ignis. "Why? What happened?" You didn’t want to sound too eager, but you lived for that hot gossip. It was disappointingly rare between these guys.

Ignis looked at you, a frown cutting his face. "I had to cancel our plans for his birthday. He hasn't spoken to me outside of our duties in almost a week."

"Why cancel?"

"It had to be done. Now he only relays things passive aggressively through Dulcis while simultaneously flirting with her."

You scooted into the middle of the couch, closer to him so you could poke him with a finger. "You need to talk to him."

He sighed, enveloping your jabbing hand in one of his. "I refuse to play into his immature game of snubbing me. He'll talk to me when he gets over it."

Wow, these boys were both petty.

"That's super not how it works," you said, trying to poke him more, but his grip held firm. "What
were your plans for his birthday?"

“I always took him out for breakfast. He tells me new goals he may have and shares complaints or worries. Usually about Noctis.”

That was a simple tradition. And kind of sweet. “You need to fix this, Ignis. He’s one of your best friends.” You pulled your hand from his grip. “Send him a message asking if he wants to have breakfast soon to make up for the one you cancelled. I’ll help you word it.”

He pursed his lips, looking at you. His hand was still up, blocking you from poking him again. As if that could stop you. Then, to your surprise, he dug into a pocket of his suit jacket for his phone.

Oh, gods, he was actually taking your advice! Together, you wrote out a not too eager, properly apologetic, and entirely friendly message inviting Gladio to breakfast the coming Friday. That was apparently the only morning Ignis had off anytime soon because he was expected to stay out late to entertain a few guests from abroad on Thursday evening. He was vague about it, not that you cared because all you wanted to do was reunite your two arguing friends.

Gladio responded to it within ten minutes, and it was an agreement to meet. You threw a fist up in victory. “Now, reply with It’s a date so he knows you got the message.”

“That’s far too flirty,” Ignis said, typing and sending a short affirmation instead.

Dropping your hand, you went to poke him again, and again he blocked you by taking your hand in one of his. “It’s not flirty. It’s casual.”

He put his phone away, the golden chain of his pocket watch slipping from a different pocket of his suit jacket. “Oh, it’s flirty, but I’m beginning to realize that you don’t know the difference between what is and isn’t a come on.”

Your eyes widened. “I’ve literally said it’s a date to lots of people. To you, even!” That didn’t help your argument. It couldn’t be helped that you were just a naturally flirty person.

He nodded, slow and deliberate. “Precisely my point. I fear half the things that come out of your mouth.”

High Ignis may have been a less stubborn man than sober Ignis, but you were learning that he was also too honest. More than that, he was being unfair. You hadn’t so much as winked at him ever since you’d promised not to flirt with him anymore. If the slightest thing you said or did could be taken as a sexual advance, you weren’t sure you could interact with him at all.

“This is what I get for helping you,” you griped, unpausing the movie to ignore him.

___

In the middle of a prison fight scene, Ignis tugged his pocket watch from its hiding place and popped it open. “How long is this film? More importantly, how long will this overbearingly hazy feeling last?”

Edibles left you feeling far more mellow than hazy, but everyone reacted differently. With a shrug, you said, “I don’t know how long it lasts. A few hours?”

A frown grew on his face. “That isn’t helpful.” He snapped the pocket watch shut, and you leaned over, stopping him from putting it away.
“Can I look at your obnoxious timepiece?” Your hand covered the watch, and he let you lift it from his palm.

“Obnoxious?”

You pulled your hand from his to hold the watch with both hands, turning it around and examining it. “Solid gold with your family crest; it’s pretty ostentatious. Was it a courting gift for yourself or something?”

Opening it, you could see bits of the intricate workings of the inner mechanisms behind the face of the clock. It was more beautiful than the compact, you thought, because it was more worn. The crest wasn’t as perfectly etched on the front, and the rounded edges had the slightest scuffs.

The soft ticking sounds it gave were much less ominous in real life than it had in your dream.

“It was my father’s,” Ignis said. When you looked up at him, his eyes were focused on the pocket watch. “A courting gift from my mother.”

You closed the clasp, running a finger over the ridges of the crest. “So your mom was the Scientia?”

He chuckled, and you loved the sound. He was opening up further than you’d ever gotten to see. “No. She was impatient. My father held off his intent to court in favor of his work. My mother had this commissioned and presented it to him.”

A slow smile came to you. “I bet that took gumption.” Something like that was so presumptuous; you couldn’t imagine having the gall to do it. Then again, you weren’t the biggest advocate of commitment in general. Maybe you would’ve done something so dramatic for really good food.

“He was quite taken with her assertive attitude,” Ignis said. He lifted a hand, and you reluctantly placed the watch on his palm. “Or so I’ve heard.”

You watched him put it away, noting the softer look in his eyes when he faced you again. He had opened up in a whole new way, and you hoped he didn’t regret it when his mind became clear again.

The movie kept playing in the background, onto a prison escape scene you’d seen countless times. There was no point in pausing it; getting Ignis to enjoy this movie was a lost cause.

“Don’t you think,” you began, drawing up your legs. You thought of Mirum, the marchioness that liked him and thought you were some kind of rival. “You’re a lot like your dad? What if there’s someone who might do exactly what your mom did?”

He looked at you with usually sharp eyes glazed over. “Even so. Things of that nature are the least of my worries at a time like this.”

Now, that had your attention. High Ignis was loose lipped. Already, you’d heard about his small fight with Gladio, and he’d told you the barest information about his parents. Maybe he would tell you the big secret thing that seemed to involve all of your friends but you.

In an attempt to appear nonchalant, you tugged at the bottom of your shirt. “What do you mean ‘a time like this’?”

He chuckled and grabbed your fidgeting hand. You didn’t understand why he kept doing that; it was unlike him to be so touchy. “That’s still a secret I can’t share.”

You pulled your hand from his grip to remove his glove. He didn’t fight you, watching as you took it
off and tossed it away. Astrals, you’d wanted to do that since you’d met him. His hand was bigger than yours, long fingers curling over your own. You wondered how hard the edible was hitting him to have his boundaries be broken down like this.

Instead of bringing it up, you dropped your intertwined hands between you and looked up at him. “Why? I feel like you’re not telling me just out of spite at this point.”

“Were that I could, I wouldn’t hesitate.” He used his free hand to adjust his glasses. “It’s good news, in any case. You’ll find out soon enough.”

You pouted, turning your attention back to the movie. A pretty gross scene of someone having their face cut off was coming up soon, and you did not want to miss that.

—

You came back from a visit to the bathroom to find Ignis eating a coffee cake. From the looks of things, it seemed as if he’d already eaten several. How he could possibly have done that in the short time you were gone was a total mystery.

“These are incredible. Did you make these? I’m almost certain you did,” he said, pulling it apart and shoving each small piece into his mouth one at a time. He chewed quickly and drained the rest of his Ebony. “I need more coffee. I’m afraid I’ll fall asleep, but I can’t sleep here.” He stood up with difficulty, his footing slightly off. “There are implications to staying at a lady’s house overnight. Nevermind that no one knows I’m here but you.”

He continued to ramble on with no filter, walking past you toward the kitchen. You followed him, wondering if it would be a bad idea to record him like this. For posterity. He sipped from a new can of Ebony and looked at the picture of your chocobo for long enough that you were kind of weirded out.

“Ignis?”

He turned to look at you as if surprised to see you there. With a tilt of his head toward the photo, he asked, “Is that the fine Bokeh you spoke of on New Year’s Eve?”

You nodded. What a strange person, you thought. He couldn’t remember your name that time in the Royal Mail department, but he remembered the name of your chocobo that you’d only vaguely mentioned to him once?

“Sometimes,” you said, hoping to make him laugh again. You wanted to hear it so badly. “She cocks her head when you ask her if she wants a mohawk. It’s really cute. She’s like kweh?” You tilted your head as an example.

Rather than laughing as you’d hoped, Ignis adopted a serious face. “Why would you ask a chocobo if she wanted a mohawk?”

“I dunno.” You shrugged. “For fun? I was a kid.”

He smiled, then. “I’d bet you still ask her that question as an adult, don’t you?”

You nodded reluctantly, returning the smile once he chuckled at your admittance. “You’re so talkative when you’re high. You should do it more often.”

“You think so?” He took another, larger drink of coffee, but his eyes remained heavy. “I feel dreadful. I may not look it, but I’m very cross with you.”
From the other room, a gunfight could be heard from the television. You ambled toward it, knowing you were missing a good scene. “Come watch this, Iggy, it’s amazing.”

He didn’t leave the kitchen until you promised him that no one else got their face cut off. When he did join you, he sat in the middle of the couch and laid down, his head resting in your lap. You relaxed into it, meeting his half lidded eyes with your own.

“Is this alright?” His words came out slower than usual, nearly mumbles. “I assume so, but feel free to tell me if I’m the one overstepping.”

Of course you were alright with it. Prompto pulled this kind of crap all the time. So instead of responding, you shushed him. “This is the best part.”

You’d lied. Another person was about to have their face horribly removed. He groaned when it happened, and you laughed unnecessarily hard.

—

The movie ended, but neither of you made a move to get up. He grumbled about how bad it was, especially the ending. Quiet music filled the room as the title screen played across the television. You stared at the ceiling, head bent back against the couch.

“I just realized that I’m your dark secret.”

“What?”

“You don’t remember?” Tilting your head down to look at him, you frowned. “That first night we met at Prompto’s party. I asked you what your dark secret was.”

After a moment, his eyes widened slightly in recognition. “Yes, I remember now. I suppose you are, in a way.”

“I finally found out your dark secret. It was me all along.” You looked back up at the ceiling. “Now that’s a shitty movie ending.”

He hummed in agreement, then pushed his glasses up, rubbing at his eyes. “Care to know another secret?”

You let out a small laugh. “You know I do. Tell me.”

Replacing his glasses, he said, “Prompto’s party wasn’t the first time I’d seen you.”

You looked down at him again, this time in surprise. “We met before?”

He looked ridiculous, his hair at odd angles and glasses slightly off balance. “Not met. I only saw you. It was early September of last year. I was walking from the train station to Prompto’s flat, and I saw you on your balcony.”

You noticed his face growing slightly red. He was totally gone, higher than someone probably should be for their first time.

“You were smoking and singing to your plants. It was completely bizarre. I remember stopping because I couldn’t believe someone so beautiful could make such a horrid noise.” He chuckled, closing his eyes and tilting his head away from you. “Every time I visited Prompto, I passed this very building and thought ‘that’s where that strange woman who sings to her plants lives’.”
You snorted, forcing yourself to ignore the part where he’d called you beautiful. He didn’t know what he was saying, breaking his own anti-flirting rules. “And what did you think after you met me?”

Turning his head, he looked up at you, face still a little pink. “Lately I’ve thought ‘that’s where my strange friend who sings to her plants lives’.”

Bringing a hand up, you brushed the stray bits of his bangs back in line with the rest, though it was a lost cause at that point. “Still strange, huh?”

His eyes drew closed at your touch, and his voice became a little softer. “Very.”

You laughed quietly. “I’ve never seen you so relaxed.”

“Hm,” was all the response you got.

Not a line of worry marked his face. It was a welcome sight even though he’d likely make up for this experience by worrying doubletime once the high wore off. You slid his glasses off his face, and he opened his eyes to look up at you.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to help you relax,” you answered plainly, leaning slightly forward to put them on the coffee table.

“Trying to smother me, more like,” he said, voice muffled by your chest.

You laughed again and leaned back again. “There are worse ways to go.”

“Indeed.” His eyes closed again when you brought a hand up to trace gentle shapes into his face with your fingertips. Prompto had done this to you when you were incredibly high once, and it had felt amazing. You hadn’t realized until after the fact that he’d been drawing obscenities on your face with a marker.

“You can’t be allergic to magic, by the way,” he murmured, completely off topic. “I did a bit of research. I’d meant to tell you earlier.”

“That’s good.” You snickered at his sleepy insistence. “Maybe I’ll take another lesson with Gladio and learn how to use magic next.”

“Don’t be silly. I’d be the one to teach you if it were even possible.” He lifted a hand and the slightest shift of light, sharp and electric, danced from his palm and along his fingertips. It dissipated as quickly as he’d made it appear. “It’s simple. I’d demonstrate if I weren’t so ill at the moment.”

He was completely out of it, breaths evening out into long, slow draws. You stared at every perfect line of his face. All the little beauty marks, every nearly imperceptible dip in his skin. You were going to have a hard time staging the breakup with this man.

Falling asleep that way, his head in your lap, you sank into the comfort of his closeness. It wasn’t like Prompto, and it wasn’t like any lover you’d had. You really wanted him to stick around in your life long enough for you to figure out just what this feeling was.

—

The next morning, he was gone and you lay alone on the couch. The balcony door had been shut,
the television was off, and there was a blanket over you. Sluggish, you got to your feet and stumbled to the kitchen. On the fridge was a note in simple script. You read it as you chugged water as quickly as humanly possible.

*Please take care of yourself.*

You snorted. He wasn’t your boss. His handwriting was nice, though, and you left it there as a reminder that someone, somewhere gave a shit about you.

—

Aranea was in your apartment the next day, sitting at your tiny kitchen table with you and eating stale coffee cakes without a care.

“I saw your newest fling. He’s not your usual.”

Gazing at her over your laptop, you frowned. “What, who?”

A smirk formed on her face. “The guy you were sleeping with the other night. You forgot your laundry so I had to bring it up. The place was freezing. Why did you leave the balcony door open?”

Oh, yeah.

“We got hot,” you said, shrugging and returning your attention to the computer screen. You had an essay in Altissian due by midnight and didn’t need the distraction.

“It was the most innocent thing I’ve ever walked in on.” She tapped her fingertips on the tabletop.

You didn’t look up. “That’s because he’s just a friend.”

“Oh, like the shortcake?”

You nodded, knowing she meant Prompto.

“Now when will you give him a chance?”

Okay, that made you look up. “He’s on some photography retreat for a whole week, and he told me he hopes to grow a goatee by the time he gets back. Can you imagine? Ew.”

She laughed, a deep, lovely sound. “If he does, send him my way.”

You sighed. Prompto would keel over if you told him that, but you wouldn’t. The reason you admired Aranea —despite her sometimes gruff attitude and weird penchant for wandering your apartment as she pleased— was because you saw a lot in her of who you wanted to be. A single, self sufficient woman who took no shit. You had the single part down pat. The rest would come eventually.

It was also the reason you’d never send Prompto her way. He was the sweetest person to ever exist, and he deserved someone equally as sweet.

She stood up in the face of your prolonged silence. “I got some of your mail, by the way. I left it on the counter. Thought I’d let you know since you were waiting on some good news about that internship.”

“Thanks,” you mumbled, only half paying attention as she left.
You: Work is boring without Prompto.

Ignis: Sit in on a film.

You: :O

Ignis: It was only a suggestion.

You: First the drugs and now the illegal film hopping. You’re out of control, Lord Ignis.

Ignis: That was an unfortunate accident.

Ignis: Also, for the sake of our friendship, never call me Lord. It’s unsettling coming from you.

You: Why, Lord Ignis, I do declare, you are the finest Lord in all the land.

You: I’d go to the Lordphanage where all the unwanted Lords are, and I’d pick you because you’re the best one, Lord Ignis.

You: If you were a rapper, your name would be Tha Yung Lord Ignis

Ignis: I wish I were properly courting you so that I could end it over this.

You: I think we got our breakup plan.

Ignis: Not quite, but admirable try.

—

The envelope stood out against the rest once you actually decided to look at your mail halfway through the week. Normally you spent at least one day a week marking out your name and address on every piece of mail with a black marker before throwing them away.

For safety reasons.

This particular piece of mail wouldn’t be going in the trash, though. It was atop the pile of mail on your counter between an empty can of Ebony that you’d yet to clean up and your toaster.

The Altissian Film Academy’s insignia was printed in a corner on the face of it. You tore it open carefully, unfolding the pages inside with deliberate slowness. This was it.

It wasn’t good news.

Chapter End Notes

I reference both real and fake movies, for whatever reason. Also dream sequences are impossible. Nothing has meaning in this mess.

Thanks for reading, guys!! Work has been busting my balls lately so I’ve been pouring my soul into this crap. <3
I’m offering you my body, and you’re offering me semantics.

Chapter Summary

You're getting whiplash from this many mixed signals.

Chapter Notes

Writing this chapter was harder than Prompto after seeing Cindy in a swimsuit. Whatever typos or inconsistencies you see are due to me being really tired of looking at it.

Be warned, I'm coming right at ya with some REALLY BAD SMUT toward the end of the chapter. Get ready for the most UNSEXY DIRTY TALK IMAGINABLE. I’m avoiding the explicit tag so it doesn’t get too descriptive. Even so, I’m unbelievably shy about posting this so I’m going to leave this here while I go off somewhere to scream.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Prompto wasn’t available to talk —part of his retreat had been to turn off all outside communications to really get into photographing landscapes and shit— so you were stuck pacing your apartment in distress alone. The Altissian Film Academy had a lot to say about your submission, but it all boiled down to three things.

They didn’t like your film.

They wished you luck in the future.

They basically called you a hack.

Not knowing what else to do, you went outside and ran downstairs to knock on Aranea’s door. She always came through for you in situations like this. She’d trash talk the Academy, and you’d feel so much better.

When she opened the door, her hair was half up in pins, and she wore the nicest dress you’d ever seen on her. She was clearly getting ready for something special.

“Aranea,” you said, trying desperately not to whine. She hated whining. “Is this a bad time?”

“Yeah, it is.” She let you in anyway. “What’s wrong?”

You followed her inside. “I didn’t get the internship.” It hurt to say it out loud. As if it weren’t true until then.

She continued getting ready, keeping her bedroom door wide open. Pulling pins from her hair, she looked at you in the reflection of the mirror. “I’m sorry to hear that. Did they say why?”

“Because I have no talent,” you responded immediately and began to pace again, this time in her
hallway. “I sent them trash. They hated it, and they hated me.”

“You’re being way too harsh right now, kid.”

You hated when she called you that. She was like ten years older than you at most. With a scowl, you stopped in the doorway of her bedroom. “I’m just being honest.”

She turned around, eyeing you over. Then, as if she’d made a decision, she nodded. “Biggs and Wedge are picking me up in half an hour to take me to a meeting. You should come.”

You gave her a flat look. “To a meeting?”

She nodded again, advancing on you and resting hands on your shoulders. “It’s at an upscale bar on the east end. Go put on your best dress. Or your filthiest, I don’t mind. You need a distraction.”

That sounded very nice. Not what you’d come downstairs for, but maybe even better than just hearing her trash talk. You ran upstairs to find the right sweet spot between your best and filthiest dresses.

—

Biggs and Wedge weren’t what you were expecting. They were just dudes. So far on the drive across the city, they hadn’t spoken much, but seemed nice enough. You still wondered who they were to Aranea, and what her job was for her to travel so much and have an important meeting at a bar of all places.

“So who are you meeting?” You weren’t sure if she would tell you, but took your chances anyway.

Looking boredly out the window, she said, “A couple of pencil pushers from the Citadel. I’m negotiating something on my boss’s behalf.”

You nodded. “Who’s your boss?”

She turned to you, smirking a little. “All you need to worry about is how much you’re going to drink tonight.”

You gave her a doubtful glance. You didn’t have the money to go wild like that.

As if reading your mind, she waved you off. “You’re covered; they’ve offered to pay for me and my guests. Having you around will make it less boring, so we both win.”

This was one of those moments where you felt the Astrals were apologizing for giving you such bad luck. Didn’t get the internship that you were counting so much on, but damn if you didn’t have a great friend who knew important people that would essentially pay for you to get wasted.

Which was the only plan on your agenda.

—

The bar was sleek, and you were glad you’d worn a dress on the nicer side rather than filthy. Lighting was dim, even at the tables. Aranea led you past the bar and across the dance floor in search of the blowhards, as she called them. She didn’t seem much a fan of this part of her job.

“This doesn’t seem like a great place for a meeting,” you said, raising your voice over the music.

“I know, right?” She smiled at you. “I don’t want to make it too easy for them.”
“Who are they, anyway?”

“I’ve only met one of them before,” she said, scanning a row of low-lit booths that lined a wall. “If I find her, then— there they are.”

She grabbed your hand, pulling you toward a large corner table. Biggs and Wedge were right on your heel. Once you got up to the table, you froze.

“Amicus, I’m here.” Aranea dropped your hand and looked between the Citadel workers. Then, she shot you a quick look you didn’t see because you were too focused on the surprise in front of you.

Sitting in the booth next to Mirum, Ignis adjusted his glasses and looked up at you in confusion. “What are you doing here?”

“She’s my guest,” Aranea answered before you could say anything. She sat down across from them, pulling you along with her.

Ignis and Mirum were shoulder to shoulder, squeezed unnecessarily close together in such a large space. Neatly stacked papers and files sat on the table in front of them. Biggs and Wedge stood at the booth, faced away toward the crowds. Like… bodyguards? You still didn’t know what they were meant to do.

“This is exciting, Ignis,” Mirum spoke up, looking directly at you. “Maybe this negotiation will go well since she’s here.”

“We’ll see about that,” Aranea said, raising a hand and getting the attention of a nearby drink server. “A bottle of Cabernet please.”

You remained quiet, uncertainty filling you at what you’d just walked into. You’d left home with the sole purpose of having fun. Sitting at a table with Ignis and Mirum would be the total opposite of that.

Ignis had yet to look away from you, surprise still on his face. You forced a small smile, but he didn’t return it. This was already uncomfortable. If you’d known, you wouldn’t have come. This had to be another way you were unintentionally crossing his boundaries. Every time you met, it was one step forward and two leaps back in your friendship.

“How do you know one another?” he asked, gaze going to Aranea.

She arched a brow. “Shouldn’t you introduce yourself before asking questions?”

He blinked, gathering himself for a moment before nodding. “I’m Ignis Scientia. We corresponded earlier in the week. Apologies for the interrogation; I am merely surprised.”

“Me, too,” Aranea chuckled. “The last time I saw you, you were draped over this one like a pinup.” She hooked a thumb in your direction, and your eyes widened.

This was bad.

Ignis’ confused gaze flicked between you and Aranea. You covered your face with a hand, wanting to be anywhere else but there.

“Isn’t that expected?” Mirum placed a delicate hand on the tabletop. Her eyes were sharp, the smirk tearing across her pretty face in bright red lips. “He’s courting her.”
This was worse.

The wine came, and everyone was quiet as the server opened it and poured everyone a glass. You were the first to drink, downing it in record time and pouring yourself another glass.

“I’m gonna go dance,” you said, standing up. “So you can, uh, get down to brass tax.” You took your drink with you, fully intent to get the fuck down and dance your problems away.

—

You weren’t lonely on the dance floor. This type of place attracted wealthy businessmen that were old enough to be your father or older, and women who looked unnaturally beautiful. You weaved between bodies, finishing the wine in your glass as you let what you’d realized was an older couple grind on you from both sides. It was pretty weird, but somehow less weird than going back to the table.

A hand snaked around your arm, pulling you from the crowd, and you turned to the person interrupting your fun, expecting Aranea or, gods forbid, Ignis holding your arm.

But it was Mirum, who let go, eyes wide and smile long.

“You are a wild one,” she said. In the dim neon lighting, she was lit with purples and greens. You appreciated how good she seemed to be with makeup, trying not to compare yourself. “Dirty dancing with strangers when Ignis is right there? I’m beginning to think he’s a masochist.” You could barely hear her over the music. When her thin eyebrows arched, and she leaned in to ask, “Tell me, he’s not a cuckold, is he?” she practically had to yell it out.

You laughed, looking down into your empty glass, then back up at her. “Buy me a drink, and I’ll tell you whatever you want.”

She considered you carefully. “You’re on.”

—

Mirum couldn’t be this nice. You both sipped on some sort of fruity drinks, elbow to elbow at the bar. Nothing she said so far was particularly mean, and you wondered why she was trying to get you into a place of comfort. Joke’s on her, your guard was always up.

“Tell me,” she said, facing you with an expectant look. “What is it that you like about Ignis?”

The straw fell from your mouth, slowly sinking back into the depths of your bright drink. You could’ve lied here, say you were in love with him, say that he was the kindest man you’d ever met. You could’ve told the truth and admitted that it was fake. Who knew what Ignis had said at the table when you’d ran away to dance. Maybe he confessed, and her asking this was a test.

Either way, you didn’t want to fall into whatever verbal trap she was laying out for you. So you said a truth, but not the truth.

“He’s hot.”

Mirum’s smile froze for the barest moment before growing a little. “Oh my. Is it merely physical, then?”

You sipped more of the drink, fighting a smile. She was so absurd, expecting that you’d divulge this kind of information. Then again, if she’d been a friend, you probably would’ve. If there had been
anything to divulge.

But she liked Ignis, and you thought, she just might be a bit envious that you’d seem to have caught his attention with no issue. Part of you wanted to tell her that you’d burped aloud the first time you’d ever spoken to him on the phone. Or that the fake courtship token he’d given you was a compact mirror because he thought you didn’t know how to eat without making a mess. But she didn’t need those kinds of assurances; she was a marchioness, and anything you could say would seem more than a little condescending.

It was all a very complicated game that you had no interest in playing despite how fully invested she was. She seemed pretty set on competing with you over Ignis — as if he truly were a prized chocobo — and would somehow use your words against you later, no matter what you said. She had to have a plan if she was being so amicable.

“No,” you said, thinking carefully of your words. “We’ve only kissed a couple of times.”

There, another truth. She didn’t need to know that both kisses had only happened because you’d both felt the need to prove a point to each other.

“Hmm.” Her smile waned, and she took an unladylike gulp from her glass. “That is a bit of a relief.”

You pushed your straw around and looked at her in open curiosity. So she was a little envious, after all. Instead of smug, you felt confused. “You’re above Ignis in status. Why even go after him?”

Her manicured nails tapped against the bar. “I’m not above him. The royal retainers are above most. He’s my superior despite the title difference.”

“Oh.” You looked down, twirling your straw harder in the glass. You didn’t understand the politics of it all, the meanings behind titles and the ranks. You didn’t care to. “So it’s a status thing?”

“Not at all,” she answered quicker than you expected. Looking up, you found her idly stirring her own glass. “When I took my father’s position and became a marchioness, I met Ignis while making my rounds. I was charmed by his passion for his work.” She let out a laugh into her cup. “I made up a lie that I was a proficient marksman to impress him, told him I had won many a duel because I was bulletproof.”

You stared at her, a bit confused at the outpouring of information you were barely following. Was bragging about gunfights something nobles did regularly? She kept going before you could ask any questions.

“I didn’t see him again until it was my first day at court. I arrived at the throne room with a proposal I’d spent weeks perfecting, and Ignis was there to contest me. He won in the end. On the way out, that—” she pointed in the general direction of where Ignis was sitting. “That gorgeous bastard said, right to my face, I was under the impression you were bulletproof, Lady Amicus.” She finished her drink in one final swallow. “I’ve fancied him ever since.”

That was a lot of stuff you weren’t sure you got, but the last bit definitely sounded flirty. If what she said was true, it seemed pretty clear that Ignis held some sort of interest in her. You pushed your drink away, no longer wanting to talk about this or talk with her at all, really.

“Don’t you need to be schmoozing with Aranea right now?”

She checked her fingernails, shrugging. “I was on my way to the restroom. Until I witnessed your blatant disregard for the man who, for reasons that remain a mystery to me, wishes to marry you.”
As if you didn’t already feel uncomfortable with this conversation, a creeping blush grew on your face and your stomach plummeted. “Marry?”

She nodded, dropping her hand to look at you flatly. “That’s what courtship leads to, my dear.” With a condescending little pat to your cheek, she stood from the bar seat. “Don’t you worry, though. I’ll make sure it never gets that far.”

You couldn’t tell if she liked you or hated you. Her attitude fluctuated too much for you to pin her down. Tonight was not the night for trying to figure her or anything else out, though; you didn’t have the mental energy after spending a lot of your brain power repressing the thought that you’d failed the internship application so badly.

Waiting for a minute to really squash the thought, you went back out to the dancefloor.

—

Dancing was sweaty and tiring, but you loved how mindless it could be. You looked at the table occasionally, finding Ignis most often adjusting his glasses as Aranea leaned onto the table with a hard look. You wondered what the negotiations or whatever were about, but no one ever told you anything, least of all those two people in particular. So you were content to writhe with perfect strangers and maybe get a little irresponsible.

You’d caught the eye of what could be the youngest man on the dancefloor —still older and better dressed than you— and entertained the prospect of finally, finally breaking that dry spell. It had been fifty eight days since you’d been to bed with someone.

Not that you were counting.

He held you close, hands sliding over your form appreciatively. It made your breath hitch and your back arch in reaction.

Fine. You were definitely counting.

It should be a crime for you to go fifty eight days without someone’s touch. *Fifty eight days.*

Your back to his chest, the man grinded into you with smooth, forceful movements. By the Six, you were going to ride him tonight if it was the last thing you did. You didn’t even know his name, and you wanted him to fuck you until you forgot your own. Until you forgot everything.

Pulling him by the hand, you left the crowded floor for a quieter place to tell him all the things you wanted him to do to you and how. Before you could get even the first filthy word out, an arm snaked around your waist, separating you from the man.

You turned to the intruder, surprise becoming annoyance at the sight of Aranea. She smirked at you, squeezing once before letting go of your waist.

“Playing dirty, huh?” She flicked a quick glance at the man. “I think you’ve riled up your boyfriend enough over this loser.”

“Boyfr—” You looked at the man. “I don’t have a boyfriend. I dunno what she—”

He shrugged, cutting you off. “It’s cool. I’ve got someone, too.”

Oh. What a shame. You stepped away from him slightly, bumping into Aranea. “And they’re… okay with you hooking up with someone else?”
With a laugh, he gave you an incredulous look. “What? Don’t be stupid.”

Aranea took a step toward him, coming between you. “Get lost.”

His eyes widened, and he looked at you over Aranea’s shoulder. You avoided his gaze, having lost the desire to sleep with him. What kind of person goes out looking for other people to sleep with if they already have something good going on? You’d never knowingly be a part of that.

“Fine, whatever,” he said curtly, pushing through the crowds and disappearing.

You’d expected him to call you a slut or something, so really, this was the least exciting rejection you’d ever dealt with. You were suddenly grateful Aranea was there. She’d never cockblocked you before, but her comments on your bad choices were endless.

“You really know how to choose ‘em,” she said, turning to you. “Four-Eyes has been distracted all night.”

Ignoring what she chose to call Ignis, you sighed. He probably had a few questions for you. Like, for starters, how Mirum knew about the courtship and thought it was real. You didn’t want to admit that you’d made a careless slipup on your very first visit to the Citadel, letting Mirum see the courtship token. Mirum, of all people, who was Ignis’ friend and who you realized, after hearing their meet cute story, was crazy about him.

There was a short mental list of things you could deal with right now and this wasn’t one of them.

—

You gave Biggs and Wedge a pleading look as you approached the table. They looked at each other without saying anything, a quick, silent conversation passing between them. Then they looked at you, and didn’t offer to save you from Aranea. Figured.

Sitting at the table after Aranea, you were faced with Ignis and Mirum again. They spoke quietly, turned toward each other, but not quite meeting each other’s eyes. He had a strained expression on his face, brows furrowed and a frown pulled taught at his mouth. You couldn’t hear what they were saying, but neither seemed particularly pleased with the conversation.

Aranea slapped a hand on the table, unabashed as she laughed at the way Mirum jumped. You wanted to shrink when Ignis looked at you. Sweat was at your brow, and your makeup was surely a mess by now.

“May I have a word?”

You avoided his gaze, picking at the label on the wine bottle. “I just sat down. I don’t wanna leave yet.”

One of his fingers hooked yours and pulled it from the label. The leather of his glove was soft against your skin, finger curling around yours. “Darling, please.”

Your head snapped up, eyes meeting his in alarm. That was a weird thing to say. You looked at Mirum who frowned into her wine glass. Uncomfortable, you uncurled your finger from his and sat back. Someone who genuinely liked Ignis, like Mirum, would hate hearing him call you by a pet name. Not that you liked it much yourself.

Aranea bumped your shoulder with her own. “Go ahead, kid. He’s not as good at negotiating as this one, anyway.” Her statement made Mirum perk up the slightest bit.
Chewing on your lip, you shrugged. Better to just get it over with. You had to tell Ignis at some point that you weren’t good at keeping up with your end of the agreement. Together, you left the table for the bar, sidestepping the dancefloor entirely. You ordered something strong, and Ignis adjusted one of his gloves as the bartender served it to you.

“I’m sorry if what I said was inappropriate.”

You held your breath and swallowed a generous amount of the liquor in your cup, then let out a small laugh. “Are you kidding? I’ve been grinding on strangers all night, and you’re worried about calling me ‘darling’?”

He chuckled quietly, a sound that made you look at him. His eyes were a darker green in the low lighting. You rested an elbow on the bar, chin on your palm and smile growing on your face despite the situation. He was a lovely sight, as always.

“Did Aranea strongarm you into admitting that we’re more than friends?”

“In a way.” He shifted to face you. “Commodore Highwind can be quite intimidating. Mirum believing we’re courting hasn’t helped matters.”

Commodore? That information was very interesting, and your mind buzzed with questions. Rather than let them spill out to Ignis, you decided to save them for a time when Aranea was hanging out in your kitchen, eating your food. It was nearly impossible to squeeze answers out of her, but now you could casually mention that you knew she was a commodore. Whatever that was.

His slight smile slowly became a flat line. “I’m curious as to how Mirum came to think such a thing.”

You drew in a deep breath. “I fucked up.”

One of his careful eyebrows arched. “Please explain.”

You downed the rest of your drink, pushing the cup away. “She saw the compact, okay? I denied it at first, but she kinda glosses over things! So I let it go and let her assume just in case— I don’t know — she talked to your uncle or something.”

Ignis studied you with narrow eyes. As if you could even lie about this. What a joke. You pursed your lips and decided to answer the questions he’d yet to ask.

“Aranea is my landlady. She saw you the other night because she was bringing up my laundry. Also,” you said, poking him in the chest. He was wearing a rather casual suit tonight, probably due to the location of the meeting, and your finger was met with soft layers of fabric over hard muscle. “I didn’t get the internship in Altissia. That’s why I’m here. Aranea thought I could use a night out to cheer me up.” You smiled and gave him a look that just begged for him to give you shit over it.

Instead of chastising you as you expected, his expression softened. He rested an arm against the bar, leaning toward you. “You weren’t chosen for the internship?”

You shrugged. “Why would I get picked? They hated it, Ignis.”

His face became annoyingly sympathetic, which was totally unwelcome. You rolled your eyes and held up a hand before he could say a thing. “I knew they wouldn’t pick me. I don’t care. They’re just confirming what I already know to be true.”

One of his gloved hands came up to grab yours. “They’re absolutely wrong. You’re brilliant.”
“No way,” you said, jerking your hand from his. “They know what they’re talking about. Those aholes told me that the— the denouement of my film was forced.” You ran a hand down your face. Admitting this was difficult. “Like I didn’t already know the ending was shitty. They had to point it out.”

“You had admitted that you phoned it in,” he said matter-of-factly.

“You’re really bad at this, y’know.” You gave him a severe look, hands coming up to clutch the arm he rested on the bar. “You’re terrible at comforting people.”

Another chuckle from him, and you were squeezing his arm in annoyance. “Darling, you’re not the first to tell me this.”

You squeezed extra hard, frowning at him. “Are you gonna keep calling me that just because Mirum and Aranea are here?” He was being incredibly annoying, underestimating just how irritated you were at the entire situation.

He leaned forward just a bit more, face inches from yours. “I say it because you get a rather fetching little crease on your nose each time I do.”

You breathed in deeply again, letting his arm go. It was hopeless. “Ignis, remember the promise I made about no more flirting? It goes both ways. I’m too stressed to deal with this.”

Drawing away from you, he seemed to realize his odd behavior. The lights danced off his glasses, the bass of the music rattling your empty glass. “How may I help ease you?”

He had no idea how terrible this night had been for you thus far, and he wasn’t qualified to make it better. “Don’t worry about it. I can’t win no matter what I do. My film was a failure, and I haven’t been with someone in fifty eight days.”

He let out a breath. “You can’t be thinking of sex at a time like this.”

“But I totally can,” you assured him, arching your brows. “I don’t want to be alone tonight. You just don’t get it.”

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, looking at you carefully. “I assure you, I do.”

His eyes searched yours, green flicking back and forth as he frowned at you. It was disconcerting, this serious face of his. He made you start when he suddenly said, “Come home with me.”

He couldn’t be serious, you thought. There was no way. He kissed people to prove points, but sleeping with them just to show that he understood sexual frustration— that was ridiculous.

“What?” was all you could say.

A gloved hand came up to adjust his glasses again, and he straightened his posture as he looked at you. “After our conversation in your flat, I acquired Midnight Sunrise, but haven’t had the chance to watch it. I’m interested to hear your commentary since it is your favorite film.”

You stared at him, at his sharp eyes behind the glasses. He was seriously asking you go come home with him. He was gorgeous, you were a little drunk, and you hadn’t had someone touch you in so long that there were probably cobwebs between your thighs.

“Yeah, I’d love to.”
His arms dropped to his sides, slight surprise on his face. “Perfect. I’ll go let them know we’re leaving.”

“Right now?”

He nodded once. “I have a feeling the commodore won't mind so long as you have a nice evening.”

“Oh, I see,” you smiled wryly, thoughts plunging further south. “You're taking one for the team so you land whatever deal you're making.”

“That's not at all the case—”

“No, I don't care at this point,” you interrupted. Just on the cusp of drunkenness, the light feeling waning already, you felt like nothing mattered at all.

There was a pause as he adjusted a cuff that was already perfectly in place. He looked from it to you. You could tell he wanted to say something, but he didn't. Not that you'd listen, anyway. He could express concern all he wanted, but you weren't offended at the idea of him sleeping with you for work. Maybe you should've been, but that was a personal problem of your own and didn't have much to do with Ignis himself.

You stayed at the bar, watching him go back to the table. Aranea said something that had him nodding and Mirum taking long sips of her wine. You wouldn’t let yourself feel bad for taking the man she liked to bed. This could’ve been her if she would’ve just admitted it to Ignis. One day, it probably would be, when he was ready to actually court someone. But for now, he was yours, and you were tired of waiting around for another person to pass your time with.

You were tired of pretending you didn’t want him more than anyone else.

—

You didn’t say much on the way to his apartment. It was in the opposite direction of yours, on the nicer side of the city. The sidewalks looked safer, and the homes extravagant.

He held your hand as he led you from the car lot beneath the building up to his apartment and let go only to turn on the lights when you entered.

“Ignis, we don’t really need those,” you said, even as you used the new lighting to examine his home. It was utilitarian, almost as bare as your own place, but everything was much nicer in quality. You noticed immediately that he didn’t have a tv.

“I’d rather not stumble about in the darkness,” he said as he took off his shoes.

You kicked yours off haphazardly, walking further inside and dropping your bag next to the sofa. “As long as you’re stumbling into me, it should be fine.”

He halted just in front of you. “Pardon?”

You stepped forward, resting a hand against his chest and leaning up to kiss him squarely on his perfect mouth. He didn’t return the kiss, instead bringing a hand up to yours and gently prying it from his shirt. You dropped back onto flat feet with a sigh. Had he changed his mind already?

Glancing up at him, you chewed on your lip. He looked down at you with one of the gentlest looks of patience that you had no way of interpreting. You just knew it wasn’t the sexy kind of look a person gave before they carried you to their bedroom. You covered your face with your hands and
sighed again.

“Are we really just here to watch a movie?” So he hadn't brought you home to fuck you for the sake of his job. You didn't know what made you feel worse, the fact that you'd thought that lowly of him for a while or the fact that you had been pretty okay with it.

“That was why I invited you here.” It sounded like he was smiling, and when you peeked between your fingers, he definitely was. The bastard.

“You're worse than Gladio,” you groaned, lowering your hands. It had come out before you realized, then you reminded yourself that it didn’t matter. This was Ignis, and you couldn't care less what inner judgments he'd hold against you over this. “He tricked me, too. You guys must be in on some joke together, right? Making fun of the woman who no one finds attractive.”

One look at him told you he had no idea what you meant.

“You went out with Gladio?”

“Yeah,” you shrugged. “Lot of good that did. He was just trying to be a good friend, apparently. Taking me out and keeping me company. Like a... pity date.” The words tasted sour in your mouth. You'd become such a broken record, self doubts making you question if you ever had an ounce of charisma from the beginning.

Ignis seemed to think about that for a moment, shrugging his jacket off as he looked at you curiously. “Are you so surprised? What sort of friends would we be if we took advantage of you?”

You gave him an incredulous look. “Since when could you ever do that?”

“Your sensibilities may be sharp,” he said, draping his jacket over an arm. “But throwing yourself at others isn’t very conducive to lasting relationships.”

“I don’t throw myself at people!”

He walked past you toward a hallway. “Even with your insatiable desire for a warm body?”

“I’m a sexual being,” you defended and followed after him. “Not a robot like you.”

A soft chuckle came from him as he opened a door. The floor went from hardwood to plush carpet underneath your feet. He walked to a closet, rummaging through it as you peered around and stepped further in. A bed that was bigger and nicer than yours sat against the wall. It was perfectly made, and you had the urge to jump on it. You lowered a hand, running it across the soft blanket. It was a damn shame he hadn’t brought you home to pound you into his expensive mattress.

“Here we are,” Ignis said, disrupting your thought. “These are for you, should you wish to be more comfortable.”

He placed a stack of neatly folded clothes on the bed. You jerked your hand away, feeling stupid. The more you thought about your misunderstanding, the more embarrassed you felt. How could you have thought Ignis would want to sleep with you? There was a full mirror against one of the walls that bared everything. You didn’t like seeing how ruined you looked, makeup all smudged and dress rumpled.

“Is something the matter?”

You turned to him, dispelling your thoughts with a shrug. “There's a lot on my mind. Can I change
“in here?”

He nodded once and made to leave.

You curled your toes into the carpet, speaking up before he shut the door. “Ignis.”

He stood in the hall, looking at you through the doorway, hand on the door. “Hm?”

“Did you really ditch the meeting just to watch a movie with me?”

His mouth twitched with a small smile. “I did.”

Blinking, you shifted your weight from foot to foot. A blush was beginning to burn on your face. “You’re bad, Iggy.”

His smile grew, and he looked away. “I didn’t want you to be all alone tonight. Is that so bad?”

Your heart warmed. Now you were feeling embarrassed for an entirely different reason. “Oh gods, don’t be so sappy.” You walked quickly to the door, pushing it shut because you didn’t want him lingering and saying more dumb things that would only make you blush more.

You could hear a muffled laugh from the other side of the door.

——

Even his loungewear was nicer than anything you owned. The pants were too long, and you had to cinch the waist to keep them from falling down. The sweatshirt was too big but felt incredible, like being hugged by a cloud. You wondered if this was some kind of an official uniform because the Crownguard crest was stitched into the breast. Standing in front of the mirror, you scowled at your reflection. You couldn’t believe you’d tried to kiss him with this busted face.

As much as you wanted to snoop around his room, you needed to clean up before more negative thoughts brought you down. You left your wadded up dress on the floor and opened the door to call out, “Where’s your bathroom?”

“Across the hall.” His voice carried down to you along with the sound of quiet music.

——

You did snoop in his bathroom after washing up. Everything looked expensive, and half of his colognes had Altissian names alluding to sex. An unopened box of condoms sat in a cabinet above the toilet, and you found that strange. Why the bathroom and not the bedroom? Did he have a lot of bathroom sex? Since the box was unopened, you doubted it.

Opening the lowest drawer near the sink, you found an array of candles, and a bottle of lube next to something in a small, black mesh bag. He just stored whatever he wanted in the bathroom, apparently. You picked up the bag; whatever was inside it had a light but solid weight.

Peeking inside, you grinned. So Ignis wasn’t a complete robot after all. It was plain looking for a dildo, but you recognized it as one from an expensive brand. With your curiosity satiated, at least for now, you put it back and closed everything.

You wanted to put Ignis into a box and consider that he might’ve been gay. The hints were all around, and the sex toy only added to your wonder. But you weren’t going to make the same mistake again like you had when thinking he was ace. Ignis’ sexuality didn’t matter so much,
anyway. He was just your friend. Your very handsome, very kind friend.

—

You wandered toward the living room, barefaced and cozy. On the coffee table sat his laptop, emitting peaceful music. Ignis appeared from the kitchen, handing you a bottle of water as he walked past.

“That’ll help combat a hangover in the morning,” he said over his shoulder. “I’ll be but a moment.”

You looked at the bottle in your hand, fighting an eye roll. It wasn’t like you were that drunk, especially at this point, but his continued kindness was appreciated. You gave it a small sip before putting it down next to the laptop. There was a high shelf of books against one of the walls that was just asking to be meddled in. Cookbooks, including the one you recognized from his birthday party, lined a small part of one shelf. Most of the books seemed to be historical or political reference material. Yikes.

Lower shelves made you bend down to read the titles along the spines. Classical literature and science fiction. Okay, that was better. You were about to give him a hard time for having such terrible taste in books. Squeezed in one of the corners on the lowest shelf next to a copy of *Snow Country* was an unmarked and unassuming little, brown book with a ribbon peeking out from its pages.

You began to pry it from the shelf, curiosity coursing through you. It had to be some kind of journal. Ignis clearing his throat made you jump, falling back onto your behind. You gave him a sheepish look, ready to pour out an excuse, but the words were lost when you caught sight of his bare hands.

“Hey, the gloves are off,” you said, grinning and standing up. “That’s a rare sight.”

He sat on the sofa and flexed his hands inadvertently. “See anything interesting in my books?”

You stepped away from the shelf and took a seat on the other end of the sofa. “The only interesting thing I see is our matching outfits.”

He wore the same kind of lounge pants that you had on, and the t-shirt he wore was detailed with the same Crownguard crest. It seemed weird to you, but maybe every member of the Crownguard had these sweatsuits just in case they had to defend king and country right before a nap.

A smile ghosted over his mouth briefly. He turned off the music, bringing up the movie and giving you a side glance. “Can you see it from there?”

You chewed on your lip, scooting closer until your elbow touched his. That one point of contact distracted you through the entire opening scene. You leaned forward to get the bottle of water and allow yourself a brief respite from his touch. You entertained the idea of just going home and masturbating; the amount of stress and frustration within you had to be incredibly high if you were getting worked up over something so small.

You were somewhat surprised when you leaned back and didn’t feel his elbow against yours anymore. Peeking at him, you realized he’d rested his arm along the back of the sofa. Just above your shoulders. As if the elbow thing hadn’t been enough trouble.

Halfway into the film, a modern retelling of what happened between the gods once upon a time, Ifrit declared war on humans. The actor’s yell that you’d known to expect somehow startled you even still. Your small jump had Ignis’ arm coming down to rest on your shoulders. He didn’t remove it, and when you shot him a glance, he was focused on the movie, not at all bothered by the situation.
Which was fine. You weren’t going to be bothered either.

You leaned into him, propping your head against his shoulder. His arm became a little firmer, holding you rather than just draping over you. Your heart beat fast and your face burned. This felt more intimate than any sexual experience you could’ve thought of.

—

You yawned right before Shiva had her last date with Ifrit in a diner. Because of course their love story was the major plot point for added drama. Looking at Ignis apologetically, you smiled. This movie really was your favorite, but it was past midnight and you’d spent the better half of the evening dancing like a madwoman.

He squeezed you a little before removing himself and pausing the film. “I’ll make coffee.”

“Now?” The loss of his warmth had you drawing your legs up, curling inward to hug yourself. “It’s like one in the morning.”

“One fifteen, to be precise,” he corrected, standing up and stretching. The light from the laptop’s screen underlit his face, glinting off his glasses. “We can’t go to sleep right before the final battle. My being gone will give you a moment to snoop into my old journal, in any case.”

“You saw that?” You snickered as he walked to the kitchen. “Can I really?”

“Be my guest.”

The second he crossed the threshold into the kitchen, you hopped up and pried that little, brown book from the shelf. Flipping it open, your eyes ate at the words. Poetry. It was filled to the brim with poems along the lines of heaving bosoms and intertwining souls.

Sweet Shiva, what kind of intense shit had Ignis been into when he wrote this? You looked at the date of each poem as you went from page to page. All of them seemed to have been written in M.E 751, six years ago.

A smile curled your lips, and you went to the kitchen with the journal. Ignis finished grinding the coffee beans and began to deftly move them into a press, setting water on to boil. He let out a small sigh when he saw your eager face and the book in your hands.

With only a little difficulty, you hopped onto the counter and cleared your throat. “Ode to the Shield. Is this— Is this what I think it is?” You couldn’t help your wide smile as you began to recite. “The ripe flesh shared in secret—” He snatched the journal from your hand, giving you a severe look.

“I regret giving you such an allowance,” he said, putting it on top of his fridge, too far away for you to reach.

You laughed and swayed your legs, heels hitting the cabinet below you. “I think it’s beautiful. Even if it’s pretty obvious that you had a crush on Gladio.”

“It’s easy to believe yourself in love when you’re a teenager, flush with hormones and spending hours at a time in the training room with one another,” he said, tending to the coffee. He poured water into the press and stirred it carefully before letting it sit. He turned around, leaning back against the counter, and faced you with crossed arms. “I’m glad it amuses you so.”

You stilled your legs, feeling a little bad for laughing. “You’re such a romantic,” you blurted, playing with the switch on the toaster.
“As are you.”

Gaze flicking up to him, you frowned. “Oh yeah? Enlighten me.”

“I believe the Altissian Academy’s response to your film is proof enough.”

Ouch. You pulled at one of the sleeves on your borrowed sweatshirt. “Kinda rude to bring that up so soon, Iggy.” It was still a very sore spot; you hadn’t even gotten a day to get over the rejection yet.

He sucked in a quiet breath. “My apologies. I only mean to say that you actively fight romance. Too much objection is most often an indication of interest.”

You scowled, looking away from him, though it held little anger. “Whatever.” Who was he to tell you what kind of person you were? You weren’t a romantic in denial. Romantics were idealistic. You knew better.

When he didn’t respond, you returned your gaze to him as he went about making the coffee. His shoulders were broad, and even in the lounge clothes, he retained an austere presence that made you want his approval. It was terrible. Your eyes followed him around the kitchen, meeting his when he stopped in front of you.

“You’re blocking the cupboard.”

Staring him down, you rolled a shrug over your shoulders. “You gotta pay a toll.”

He rested his hands on the counter, one on either side of you. The gesture would’ve made you tense if you hadn’t just spent an hour under his arm on the sofa. His eyes searched yours playfully. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” you breathed, letting your gaze linger on his lips. “For being mean.”

He smiled, enough that you could see a flash of teeth. Then, with a fluid motion, he leaned forward and kissed you. It was chaste, and he was drawing back to look at you again before you had any time to react.

“Is that sufficient?”

The heart in your chest thudded, working hard to pump the blood needed for your flushed face. Your hands went to his, slowly sliding up his arms. “No.”

His cute little smile waned, mouth parted slightly. Eyes roaming your face, he said, “Is that not—”

You gripped his biceps and interrupted him with another kiss, this one just as quick and impossibly platonic as the one he’d given you. Looking to the side afterward, you inhaled deeply through your nose. “Th-that should be good.”

Hot breath hit your neck, and he chuckled, sending chills over your skin. Instead of saying the expected sassy comment, or if you were really lucky, giving you a pun and backing off so you could get down, he nipped gently at the spot beneath your ear. You jumped, facing him with surprise.

His eyes were shining behind his glasses and the corners of his mouth were turned up in amusement. What a cheeky son of a bitch. You slid your hands up to his shoulders, bringing them to his neck where you played with the soft hair at his nape. Testing him.

He inclined his head again, meeting your mouth with his own. As soft as you remembered, his lips worked against yours in smooth movements. His hands found your waist, pulling you closer and
holding you in a gentle grip.

The smell of the coffee began to permeate the room, yet Ignis persisted, tilting his head to deepen the kiss. You had one hand curled at his neck, the other trailing through his hair. His chest fell flush to yours as he pressed into you, leaning on the counter between your legs. You pressed back, scooting forward because you were aching for more contact.

Breaking the kiss far too soon, he let out a breath that fogged his glasses. You smiled at the sight. Then you dropped your head to his chest, gathering yourself. His heart was beating a hard, quick tune that matched your own. It was encouraging to know he wasn’t unaffected by you; a relief after the disparaging thoughts you’d had earlier.

“How about now?” His voice was breathy and low. “Sufficient enough?”

You drew back, looking up at him. His lips were wet and his eyes danced between yours, a brilliant green. With a nod, you smiled softly.

He didn’t move at first, hands still at your waist and face inches from yours. His adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. Then he let go, stepping back and righting himself. His hands were a little shaky as he brought one up to adjust his glasses.

Getting down from the counter, you went immediately for another room. Whatever just happened only added to the things your mind couldn’t deal with tonight. No flirting had been a rule, right? You hadn’t imagined that? Nope, it was too much. You weren’t even going to think about it. You sat on the sofa and stared blankly at the paused movie on the laptop screen. Good old disassociation.

When he came in with two mugs, you took yours and drew up your legs to act as a barrier. More so you’d keep your hands off of him rather than the opposite. He seemed much calmer with a cup of coffee in his hand, barely glancing at you before unpausing the movie.

On the screen, Ifrit and Shiva sat across from each other at a booth in the diner. While they spoke, you looked over your mug at Ignis. There was a small gap between you now, both of his hands holding the cup in his lap. Not awkward but a noticeable difference from earlier. You wanted to be close, but you couldn’t trust yourself. But gods you wanted to be touched, and he was right there.

Feeling brave, you lowered your legs and placed your mug on the coffee table. You closed the gap, leaning into him. He looked at you, then followed your lead by putting his own coffee down and wrapping an arm around you. Comfy, just like before. Except now you knew, with the quick thump against your cheek, his heart was racing.

Because of you.

You casually rested a hand on his stomach, intent to keep it there for the duration of the movie. Because if cuddling was all you could get out of him, you were going to take it and run.

—

It peeved you when people spoke through movies, but you couldn’t help saying something as it came to your mind. He’d wanted your commentary, anyway.

“This is my second favorite scene in any movie ever. The setting is perfect because it parallels their first date, which is my first favorite scene. They fall in love at the diner and break each other’s hearts there, too.”

His chest rumbled against you as he spoke. “Why do you like these scenes in particular?”
“I dunno. I like the small interactions. I like how on their first date, he tosses a sugar packet on the table and tells her she dropped her name tag. Oh, your name isn’t Sweet Thing? It’s corny as hell. And the way he brushes her hair behind her ear even though he knows she’s about to betray him.”

“These small intera—”

“Shhh, the best lines are coming up.” You mouthed them as Shiva glared daggers at Ifrit.

_The world doesn’t give a damn what you want, Ifrit. And neither do I._

Ignis didn’t say anything for a while, the scene playing out into the next. “I can’t believe you remain adamant about not being a romantic.”

You frowned a little, confused by his consistently incorrect assessment of you. When Shiva convened with the other gods on the screen, looking pouty but resolute, you murmured, “You know what’s romantic? Shiva’s DSLs.”

“Which are?”

“Dick sucking lips.”

He let out a small sigh. “I’m not sure what else I was expecting.”

He’d pretty much asked for it, bringing up the _you’re a romantic and here’s why_ crap. Feeling impish, you said, “You have some good DSLs, Iggy.”

As if he’d been ready for you to say just that, he responded smoothly, “Not as nice as yours. Though mine certainly have less mileage.”

You gently dug your fingers into his hard stomach to get a reaction because how dare he insinuate that you’ve sucked a lot of dicks! It might've been true, but still! Unfortunately, he wasn’t ticklish. Then, in a different move, you slid your hand downward, past the defined muscle, to play with the drawstring of his pants. He tensed, his arm around you squeezing lightly. With a tug, you untied the string and loosened it.

Before you could slip your hand under his waistband, he caught you by the wrist. “Don’t.” His voice was low and breathy. “We shouldn’t.”

You fought back disappointment, feeling the minor sting of shame at crossing another line. “But we already broke the rules tonight.”

“If we go so far,” he shifted, a quiet sigh hitting your hair. “It changes everything.”

Conflicted, you didn’t say anything to that. He was right. Sex wasn’t that big of a deal to you, but you didn’t know where Ignis stood. He let go of your wrist so you dropped the subject and returned to the film.

You couldn’t help but trace light circles with your fingertips against his abs as you tried to focus on the movie. Like with the attempt at tickling, he didn’t react, but the closeness was enough tide you over until the movie finished.

—

The bed in his guest room was smaller than his own, and the place was bare of anything personal at all. He explained vaguely that Gladio slept there when too trashed to go home, otherwise it was
normally unoccupied.

He shut the door behind himself before you could really get a word out. Which was fair, you guessed, because it was pretty late. He had to be exhausted.

You paced the room. It wasn’t that you weren’t tired, too. But you were tightly wound, had just finished an ill-advised cup of coffee, and were left wanting. This was so much worse than what Gladio had done. Gladio hadn’t kissed you, cuddled with you, or bought your favorite movie just to watch it with you.

Looking out the window at the cityscape provided a brief distraction for all of two seconds. Then you made a decision. You were imaginative and free; nothing was stopping you from taking matters into your own hands. What Ignis didn’t know you were doing in his guest bed wouldn’t hurt him.

Crawling into bed, you made yourself comfortable. It took a moment because the pillows were unfamiliar and lumpy. Then, it felt too hot. Then, too cold. Forcing your turbulent thoughts away, you settled down and made yourself think about nothing for a moment. You wished you had something other than your hand, but that would have to do. Sinking into a familiar rhythm with yourself, you let your mind go.

Your thoughts seemed fixated on a particular fantasy, and you didn’t fight it.

Imaginary you had to tell Imaginary Ignis you were going home now because you couldn’t let him keep teasing you with his hot and cold behavior. You imagined walking down the hall and knocking on his door. “Ignis?”

No answer.

He was probably already asleep. It was beyond late. You’d just leave a note or something for him to see in the morning. You opened the door quietly and stepped inside to get the dress you’d left wadded up on his floor, and that’s all. Zero alternative goals in mind.

The lighting was low, giving you a perfect view of Ignis sitting at the foot of his bed the moment you walked in. He had his eyes closed, head tilted back. You froze in the doorway, eyes going directly to the hand he had gripping himself. With strokes that seemed painfully slow, he drew his hand up and down, his chest heaving with silent pants.

You remained in the doorway, stricken by the situation. Oh? You caught him jerking it? Guess you had to fuck him now. That’s how it worked in porn so why couldn’t it be this easy in your fantasies?

Lifting his head, Ignis opened his eyes and looked at you. His hand stilled, but he didn’t make any move to cover himself. A silent standoff, in mere seconds that felt much longer, as your curiosity met his, eating at his lidded eyes and the expectant look that slowly overtook his features.

You took his lingering gaze as an invitation and stepped into the room. When you closed the door, he continued the slow strokes on himself.

You touched yourself a little harder, fingers reaching deeper. The orgasm was fighting you, not wanting to come out. You were dragging the fantasy out too long, but you couldn’t imagine it differently. Why couldn’t you imagine something better? There was no time, you told yourself. You were overthinking it. You let out a frustrated sigh before jumping back into the daydream.

“Let me touch you.” You stepped closer to Ignis, feeling the heat in your stomach and between your thighs grow more intense at the sight of him.
His eyes met yours. He’d taken off his glasses and shirt, but his sweats were only pulled down enough so he could grip himself. As if he’d been in a hurry. “Ask me nicely.”

“Can I touch you, please?”

“Hmm, I don’t know.” He grunted softly, his face so flush that you could tell even in the dim light. He was enjoying being watched. Imaginary Ignis was filthy. You wanted him to be a lot filthier, but you were too tired to think of much more. “May you?”

A small huff of laughter escaped you as you took another step toward him. “May I touch you, please?”

At that, he let go, revealing his full length. He rested both hands on the bed at his sides, leaning back slightly to gaze up at you. He was panting slightly, eyes following you as you kneeled between his legs.

Nope. Your mind needed to get a move on if you were ever going to come. Why the hell had you focused so much on that weird grammar fixation? Ignis would never do something like that, would he?

You really hoped not.

Squeezing your eyes, you rolled onto your side and curled your fingers inside, breathing heavily into the pillow. The new perspective and change of position gave way to different thoughts.

Ignis’ hand tangled in your hair, pressing your head into the pillow as he bent you over his bed. He made you beg for it, made you writhe as he slammed into you with—

A loud knock on the guest room door had you jerking your hand out of your pants. As if Ignis would walk in any second and demand you to stop fantasizing about him, you pulled the blanket around you tighter and didn’t say anything.

His voice carried through the door, muted and tired. “Are you awake?”

Face flushed and flustered as all hell, you got out of bed. Wiping your hand on your borrowed pants, you steeled yourself and opened the door. “I’m up. What is it?”

Eyes widening a fraction, he tore his gaze over your face. Another instance where you felt like he might say something, but he didn’t. Maybe you weren’t able to read him so well anymore. That thought wasn’t one you liked entertaining, least of all right now.

He lifted a hand, offering you a toothbrush. It was packaged and unopened, and when you took it, you were careful that your fingers didn’t touch his.

“Thanks.” Brushing your teeth hadn’t even crossed your mind.

He nodded, and when you made to close the door, he rose his hand to stop you. “Wait.”

You froze, tensing at the quiet word. “W-what?”

“There is a charger in the nightstand. It should work on your phone.”

Right. You relaxed reluctantly at the words, a small wave of disappointment washing over you. “Good to know.”

With that, he dropped his arm and walked down the hall. Tempted to lean out of the doorway to
watch him disappear, you fought the feeling and shut the door with tempered frustration.

Ignis Scientia was a tease. He practically seduced you *Netflix and Chill* style all night, and then talked you out of fooling around on the simple rule that *everything would change*. What you knew to be true was that things were always changing.

You weren’t entitled to his body, but you felt deserving of a solid, straight forward “I don’t want you” rather than the confusing mix of signals he’d been sending from the moment he told you to come home with him.

You felt, not for the first time, but definitely more intensely than ever in your life, that you were going absolutely crazy. You’d never worked so hard at trying to work out complicated thoughts over someone who was only a friend.

Prompto was only a friend, and he was easy to get. He didn’t make you feel weird, and at least the confusing things he did never involved you specifically. You walked over to the nightstand and opened the drawer for the charger. You hoped he was having fun on his retreat because you were really beginning to miss him.

Sitting on the bed, you plugged your phone in to charge and sighed. If Prompto were here, you thought, he’d probably tell you to talk it out with Ignis, right?

No, he’d think that was too uncomfortable to bear. And he would’ve been right.

Prompto’s advice would’ve been to distract yourself. You considered playing a game on your phone, then the sudden rumble of your stomach reminded you that you hadn’t eaten in hours.

And what was a better distraction than food?

—

Leaving the room, you walked down the hall toward the kitchen. You didn’t know what Ignis had, but there had to be something easy to make. Actually, the more you thought about it as you began to peruse through cabinets, if you could find something full of carbs, you would pass out in no time.

Veggies in the fridge, meats in the freezer, fruit on the counter. He had nothing that was microwaveable. You didn’t know why you were surprised by this.

When you found bread, you peered at its whole grain, nuts and all, gluten free label dubiously. He had some kind of unlabeled jam in the fridge that you weren’t afraid to try out with it, but the party really began when you located the peanut butter.

Washing your hands, you considered how annoyed Ignis would be if you made a triple decker pb&j. That could knock anyone out. Or maybe... quadruple? You imagined the possibilities as you began to make your masterpiece.

“What are you doing?”

You froze, a slice of bread in each hand as you turned around. “It’s feeding time?”

Ignis frowned at your statement, walking further into the kitchen to look at the things you’d accumulated on his counter. He wasn’t wearing his glasses and his hair looked like he’d combed his fingers through it several times over since you’d last seen him. “If you were hungry, I would’ve made something for you.”
You looked down at the bread in your hands. “I think you’ve done enough.”

It hadn’t meant to come out salty, but it did, and then you were looking back up at him apologetically even though you didn’t really understand what was going on, with yourself, with him, with any of it.

“I can make you something, too, if you want,” you offered.

He shook his head, giving your mess one more look before leaving the room.

Okay...

You were pressing the slices together, meal finished, when he came back with the coffee cups you’d both left in the living room. Leaving everything out on the counter, you cut the sandwich in half and watched him as he cleaned and dried the cups one at a time.

After he put them away, he turned to you with a taught expression. He must’ve been just as keyed up as you were. His tolerance for caffeine was impressive, though, and you’d thought he would’ve been able to coax himself into rest by now even after a past midnight cup of coffee.

Taking a bite from your half of the pb&j —you hadn’t eaten anything like this in ages— you offered him the other half. He looked between it and your face, then took it with a small thanks. Shaking his head a little at the mess you made, he leaned against the counter next to you.

The silence was tense as you both ate, but you felt like it was all one-sided. You worried that he would get a good look into your eyes and figure out what you’d been imagining him doing earlier. So you avoided his gaze and tried to fill the air with something other than the uncomfortable quiet.

“What did you think of the movie?”

There. That was something.

“I enjoyed it,” he admitted. “Even knowing what happens in the end, I was surprised by the intensity of the plot.”

“Yeah,” you nodded, finishing the food and wiping your hands on the sweatshirt. “I’m glad. It’s really underrated.”

More silence. You hated this. Preparing to let him know you were going to go crash in bed and try to get some semblance of sleep, you cleared your throat.

But he cut you off before you could even begin, finishing his half of the meal and crossing his arms casually. “Why hadn't you wanted to watch the extended ending?”

You had to look at him for clarification. “The what?”

He rose a brow. “The ending that was cut in editing that supposedly reveals what became of Ifrit and Shiva.”

Your own brows furrowing, you tilted your head in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“You don't know?” He dropped his arms, looking mildly confused himself.

“I think if there was a deleted scene that was that important, I would know,” you said, narrowing your eyes. “Are you messing with me?”

“I'm not. We can watch it now if you don't believe me.”
You followed him to the living room where he opened his laptop and began to search for the apparent file that had been included when he'd downloaded the movie.

“I swear,” you said. “If you're about to show me a jump scare video, I'll punch you in the dick.”

He didn't say anything to that, playing the video and leaning back to watch it with you.

On the screen, Ifrit smoked a cigarette and brushed his hair out of his face as he sat on a curb. That threw you off because he'd died in the final fight scene against Bahamut. As Ifrit stood and flicked his unfinished cigarette away, a car pulled up next to the curb. He approached the black-tinted passenger window, and it rolled down to reveal Shiva behind the wheel. Without any lines of dialogue, he opened the door and stepped into the car. Then the camera panned out as the car drove off.

“What the hell was that?” You looked at Ignis. You needed answers.

“My speculation is that it's meant to be his final fantasy.”

You had nothing to say to that. The scene made no sense even in the context of the movie. He and Shiva had literally tried to kill each other at the end, and Ifrit had for sure died. Maybe Ignis was right, and if that were the case, the potential for Ifrit's final fantasy had really been wasted. You were glad they cut the scene.

Covering your face with your hands, you giggled, still a bit disbelieving. “His final fantasy could've been so much better.” You dropped your hands and smiled at him. “I can't believe—”

Ignis leaned down, cutting you off with a hard kiss. The force of it pushed you back against the sofa, and he broke the contact to look at you with wide eyes as if he’d surprised himself as much as he had you. The tip of his nose touched yours, and you could smell the coffee on his breath and taste the peanut butter in your mouth.

Mind lulling, you opened your mouth to say something, but no words came. Your immediate reaction was irritation, but it gave way to want as he lifted a hand to your cheek.

You closed the distance, lips meeting his. Unlike the frenzy that assaulted your mind, the movements of your mouth against him and your hands sliding underneath his shirt felt serene, a ripple in the well of frustration within you. Why couldn't he have done this earlier? Why was it suddenly okay for him now? What had happened for him to make a move after all this time? You forced your confusion away, enjoying him in the moment, the ever-present feeling in the back of your mind reminding you that he'd end it soon, as he always seemed to.

He met you hungrily, taking what you were giving and tilting his head to persuade more out of you. Fingertips brushed your side as he grasped at you, gentle at first until he held you against him.

His skin was smooth, muscle hard against your splayed hands. You were all teeth and nails, pulling at his shirt until he broke the kiss to pull it off for you. That was a surprise. Pressing hands to his chest, you pushed him back. He let you climb on him as he lay down. Lingering above him as your mind raced for what to do, you wondered why he wasn't stopping you as you'd expected.

Something hard pressed against you, and you sat up, straddling him at the thighs. Afraid he'd change his mind any second, you pulled impatiently at his waistband. He lifted his hips long enough to aid you in tugging them down. You were thankful for the slanted light from his laptop that lit him up in a muted grey. It wasn't like your fantasy, and you were okay with that because this was tangible.

He covered his face with an arm, breathing into his bicep as if he were too shy to look at you as you
looked at him. Something about that tore through you, had you swallowing thickly.

Your fingertips trailed down the sensitive skin along the underside. As soft as you remembered, it twitched in your palm. He wasn't entirely hard, but you knew with attention that it would only take seconds.

“Look at me,” you murmured.

When he listened, dropping his arm to hang limply off the sofa, you felt that tearing sensation again.

You kept your eyes on his, not looking away until you felt precum wet your hand. That was the catalyst you needed. An eagerness filled you, welling and burning in your chest and stomach. Without your usual amount of reservation, you leaned down and licked the precum dripping from the tip, rolling the salty taste over your tongue. He sucked in a breath, and you delighted at the sound.

You’d never tasted cum before —ironically you were usually disgusted at the thought— but Ignis was different. He was a friend. That was new territory for you. You were too focused on the feeling of him in your hand, to the taste of him in your mouth, to leave for the bathroom where, for whatever reason, he kept his condoms. So he’d better appreciate the special treatment for being someone you trusted.

You curled your hands around him, testing out a slow rhythm. It twitched again when you swirled your tongue over the head. You wet your lips, keeping eye contact as you sucked the head into your mouth. A low moan rumbled from his chest. You prodded his slit with your tongue, enjoying the look of his parted lips and green eyes as they followed your movements.

Working in sync with your hand, your mouth took more in as you worked him. His subdued groans were perfect, urging you on in strained breaths. He was salty and musky in your mouth. You gagged slightly when taking him too deeply, but the moan he let out had you doing it again and again.

Heat sparked within you, overwhelming your focus. It was dizzying, and you sucked him harder to fight the feeling. The action became sloppy, saliva slicking down him to the hand that massaged his balls. Usually better than this, you tried to pace yourself, but it was too late. The only warning you received was a hitch in his breath right before cum spilled into your throat. Warm and surprisingly difficult to swallow, it warmed you thickly as you choked it back. You weren’t a swallower by any means —had obviously never done it before now— but your body trembled too much, legs a bit too shaky to get up and spit it out somewhere.

You licked the remnants of cum from him, and looked up to see his chest heaving. He leaned up and ran a hand over his face. You feared it was over when he pulled his waistband back up, hiding his waning arousal. But he raked his gaze over you, lust still in his expression.

Then, bringing a hand to your cheek, he smashed his lips against yours. You pressed back, hands coming to his shoulders to hold him against you. He kissed fervently, almost pleading as if you hadn’t just devoured him seconds before. Then, before you realized his intentions, he gripped underneath your thighs and stood. No one had ever carried you someplace like this, with the intent to keep going in a more ideal location. It wasn’t as sexy as you’d imagined; you were oddly worried he would walk into something because his mouth hadn't left yours.

Apparently, he was a pro at multitasking.

Your back bounced against his mattress when he let you go. You sat up, immediately pulling the sweatshirt over your head. As you began to tug the sweats off, Ignis watched you but didn’t seem as frantic to get undressed.
You sat on his bed in your bra and panties, hoping he wasn’t having second thoughts. He wouldn’t back out now, right? He’d already gotten off, so there was a good chance he could, even if that literally made him the worst lover in Eos.

Dispelling your worries as if he knew, he joined you on the bed, cupping your face in a way that was far too tender. Just get on with it, you thought impatiently as he took a beat to gaze over your form again.

Then, his mouth came to your neck, where he bit and sucked at the skin. It distracted you from his hands dropping and wrapping around you. The cool air against your nipples made them harden, and you realized he was making quick work of your bra, tossing it aside. That was more like it.

You fell back, letting him roam your body with his hands. You liked that he didn’t say anything, using his mouth to touch every part of you instead. It was everywhere. By the time you grew somewhat accustomed to the thrill of him raking his teeth over the soft flesh of one breast, he was already trailing his tongue across the other, then placing featherlight kisses against your navel. The sensations had you whimpering. You wanted him to fuck you already. He kissed down your thigh, sliding your panties off with a languid slowness you couldn’t believe he was managing. You were beginning to hate him.

“Ignis,” you whined. “Please. I—”

A small flash of pleasure set you ablaze, silencing you. He caressed you with a finger, slippery with wetness. Feeling abnormally shy in the moment, you rose your head to look at him. “Wait, are you —”

Bad timing. He parted the lips, delving in without preamble or hesitation. His tongue flicked lightly, then lapped and circled in long caresses. You tossed your head back, crying out.

Your hands reached down as your back arched. Catching a firm grip on his hair, you writhed under his attention. This. This was it. You weren't going to last very long.

He swirled the pad of his thumb against you, this time entering as he sucked at your soft flesh. One finger, then two, and he curled them within you, eliciting a long moan that became a whimper at the end. You rocked against him in a steady tempo and felt his light chuckle against your skin.

“I’m going to have you like my favorite dessert.”

“Shhh,” you breathed, unable to form coherent words. He needed to shut up; why was he talking now? Your hips bucked sharply against the come hither motion of his fingers.

He placed wet kisses on your inner thighs, lifting one over his shoulder. Withdrawing his fingers, he buried his tongue in you with a force, eating you like he’d promised.

That did it. Every flick of his tongue, the gentle graze of his teeth, the press of his nose, it all evoked a surge of passion, electric and thrilling. It didn’t tumble out of you as it usually did, the buildup almost nonexistent as he pushed you to the edge. Suddenly you were there, right there.

You pulsed with a loud moan, body shuddering as you clenched at his hair. Your legs locked around him, holding him in place for a moment as you came undone. In the come down, you panted heavily and smiled at the ceiling. Through lidded eyes, you watched Ignis leave the bed and pick up a wayward towel he had hanging from the back of a chair. He wiped his face with it before tossing it into a hamper.

You sighed, replete with bliss. Then, in an effort to maintain a polite distance, you rolled out of bed
and stood on slightly wobbly feet. You picked up your undergarments and the sweats, slipping everything on with a practiced ease. You'd dressed and undressed in much less ideal situations. This had been pretty straightforward, if unexpected, and you were ready to pass out now. You felt his eyes on you but chose to ignore it until you were dressed.

“What time do you need me out in the morning?”

Standing by the bed, he turned away, raking a hand through his hair. His voice was quiet, a low timbre that reflected your recent activity. “I leave at seven.”

You nodded, though he couldn't see it, and left the room. The guest bed was noticeably colder when you crawled back in. Your mind was turbulent, but your body was jelly. Sleep came with the thought that you'd deal with the repercussions of your actions in the morning.

—

At six thirty, the alarm on your phone blared. The events of the previous night played out in your mind as you went down the hall to the bathroom. You looked at your reflection in the mirror, feeling like you should look different somehow. The dry spell was over. You were a wellspring of potential casual encounters once again. Too bad you were tired and kind of grumpy from such little sleep.

Slipping everything off and wishing you had something clean to change into, you took a shower. Small clues let you know Ignis had already been there earlier, the wet tiles on the shower wall and the distinctly fresh smell in the air. You lathered yourself down with everything he had, probably taking longer than you should've.

For the first time in a long time, you went down your mental checklist of good one night stand behavior. Keep a polite distance, check. Ask when they needed you to leave, check. Leave when they ask, pending. It wasn’t yet seven so you had a little bit of time left.

Prepared to be seen by a certain discerning eye, you wandered to the kitchen after redressing in the sweats. The unsurprising smell of coffee greeted you. Ignis, fully dressed for work already, leaned against the counter and sipped from a mug between writing into that small black notebook of his. You’d never been more attracted to a person in your life, and this was him being casual.

“Morning,” you said, shuffling past him and pouring yourself a cup. On the counter next to the carafe of coffee sat a covered plate. You lifted the cloth to find a single musubi sitting on the center of the plate. It even had a garnish, which was, in a word, incredible. Only he would take such a common food and try to make it look fancy. You wondered when he could've found the time to make it.

Looking over at Ignis, you met his eyes. “Mystery meat sushi?”

With a small smile, he put the notebook and pen into a pocket. “Have a distaste for it?”

“No way,” you answered quickly, picking it up as if he would snatch it away. “You’re such a gentleman. Making me breakfast and everything.” You took a bite of the musubi and eyed him, wondering if you should've brought it up.

His smile disappeared, his cheeks shading just the lightest pink as he lifted his coffee cup from the counter and looked into it. “It’s only courteous after making love.”

Suddenly choking, you coughed and washed the bite of food down with your coffee. Once clear of it, you said, “I wouldn’t call what we did last night love making. I mean, I swallowed your—” You cut yourself off, not wanting to think about what you'd done. It kind of grossed you out now that you
were reflecting on it. “And you, I had no idea you were so—”

He cleared his throat, face a bit more flushed. “Alright. We had sex,” he sighed. “Satisfied?”

You grinned into your cup. This wasn't such a bad reaction from him. You'd anticipated something much more uncomfortable. “Very.”

He smirked slightly but kept his gaze away from you. Smug, almost, if there wasn't the hint of something else you couldn't quite place. He seemed tired, and you understood that on a nearly visceral level.

Finishing the musubi and coffee, you asked, “Why only one? Not hungry?”

“If you recall, I have breakfast plans with Gladio.” He checked the time. “I’m to meet him at a cafe in fifteen minutes.”

Oh, yeah! That had been your idea. They were going to make up and be friends again. All thanks to you. Cue a guitar solo as you silently celebrated being a good friend who actually did things that helped the others.

“We should leave soon. Where’s the nearest train station?” You walked into the living room, gathering your bag.

His voice carried through the archway from the kitchen. “Two blocks east. Caelum Station.”

Nice, you thought. That train went directly to the station near your home so you wouldn’t have to transfer. It was something like twenty stops, though. You were going to be late for classes today. Worth it.

“Before we leave,” he said, coming into the living room with his coffee. “I wanted to impart a bit of good news.”

“Oh yeah?” You threw your bag over your shoulder, trying to remember if you’d kicked off your shoes at the door or somewhere else in your hurry the night before.

“We’re having dinner with my uncle a week from tomorrow.”

You paused, stopping to look at him. “Already? We never talked about that.”

He looked down into his mug, a frown tugging at his lips. “It was a recent development.” Eyes flicking back up to you, his frown eased only slightly. “A week should be enough time for us to prepare for the dramatic separation.”

You nodded, not exactly sure how you felt about it coming so suddenly. You’d known it was going to happen sometime soon, and you were ninety nine percent sure the compact was cursed so getting rid of it would be nice, but that didn’t mean you were ready. You still hadn’t come up with a good break up line.

As you both put on your shoes, you pointed at the Crownguard insignia on the front of the sweatshirt you wore. “Is it alright that I’m wearing this? Is it official or something?”

He opened the door for you. “Official, no. But I don’t suggest wearing it in public for long if you don’t wish to attract attention.”

“So I can land some babes with it,” you half-joked, walking out the door. There was no way you
could attract the right kind of attention in this get up. Crownguard sweats and the flats you’d worn to the club the night before were not exactly the sexiest sight.

“I suppose so.” He sounded bothered, and when you turned around, he was entering a code to lock the door, his brows furrowed.

When he faced you, you gave him an encouraging look. He had to be even more tired than you after the night you’d had and how early he must’ve gotten up to make food for you. He was genuinely a great friend. “Thank you. It means a lot that you didn’t want me to be alone.”

His expression softened. “You know that you needn’t be alone. Your friends are here for you, myself included.”

You shared a small smile with each other. Very rarely did you ever get mornings after one night stands as nice as this.

“Well, this is a surprise.”

You froze at the unexpected voice. Ignis backed away from you as if the distance already between you hadn’t been enough. You both looked down the hallway. With the biggest shit-eating grin on his face, Gladio walked your way.

You tore your eyes away from him to look at Ignis. “Well, good luck.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” Ignis grabbed your hand to keep you from walking off.

A gruff laugh rumbled from Gladio as he stopped next to you. “What’s going on, guys?”

Ripping your hand from Ignis’, you crossed your arms. “None of your business.”

Gladio looked at Ignis, who adjusted his glasses and nodded his head. “Precisely.”

“I’m so glad I didn’t wait for you at the cafe,” Gladio said, laughing again. “I was gonna sneak in and make you cook something for me, but this is so much better.”

You sighed, making your way past Gladio to the elevator. “I gotta go.”

“Aw, don’t run away,” Gladio called after you.

You ignored him, getting out of there faster than Noctis spotting a fishing hole.

Everything was very slowly, very surely falling apart, and you didn’t want to be around for this particular part of the disaster that was your arrangement with Ignis.

Gladio was his best friend. He could deal with him. You just wanted to sleep a bit more and take some time to figure out just what you were going to do all summer since going to Altissia was only a dream now.

Chapter End Notes

If you're still here... bless.

nsfw content is not at all my wheelhouse. If there is a sexy word for balls, somebody let
me know. Otherwise it's balls all the way down.
You are so money, and you don’t even know it.

Chapter Summary

You are, for lack of a less cliche phrase, playing with fire.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is all over the place, and I have no excuse.

Warning for low quality jokes, even worse flirting, contrived misunderstandings, too much dialogue?, abuse of texting as a literary device, and half baked schemes.

The set was in full motion. You, as the production designer, skittered across the set from prop to actor to camera. Every little bit was important to make sure everything felt and looked right. As you focused the camera, your phone rang in your pocket. You ignored it the first time, but by the second round of ringing, your crew mates told you to answer it already.

You stepped off set into a corridor —the location today was an office building— and answered your phone with an unenthusiastic, “What’s up?”

Expecting Prompto, who’d called earlier to invite you to Noct’s, you were pleasantly surprised to hear Ignis on the line.

“I trust you’re not getting up to too much trouble today.”

Narrowing your eyes at such a greeting, you walked down the empty corridor to get a little further away from the set. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You told everyone, in no uncertain terms, that you were attending an, as you called it ‘incredibly wild four twenty blaze it party’.” He sighed. “Forgive me for being concerned.”

Suddenly remembering what you’d said just days before, you laughed. “I was kidding about that.”

“Oh.” The line went quiet for a moment. “So you aren’t high, then?”

“Just the regular amount.”

“Of course. I needn’t have expected much else.” His voice was flat with a touch of disapproval. Normally, you were annoyed by this, but it came as a bit of a relief, the familiarity of the tone almost comforting.

It had been a week since you’d spent the night with him. You hadn’t seen him in person since, but talked as usual through messages. Only in groups with the others, like when Prompto returned from his retreat and spammed everyone with his photos. This was the first time you’d spoken to him privately. You didn’t like the way your body responded to his voice involuntarily. You were
standing in the middle of an office building, smiling like an idiot, for Astrals’ sake.

The distance he’d placed between you had been nice, and you’d appreciated it immensely for a few days, but there had come a point where you’d type out messages meant for Ignis only to erase them because there seemed to be an unspoken agreement to just pretend like nothing happened. Ignis was always busy anyway so you doubted it had been very hard for him to put it out of his mind. You suspected it was only so easy for you because Gladio hadn’t bothered you about it. Yet.

“How, uh,” you cleared your throat, dialing down the smile. “How’ve you been, by the way?” You seriously hated niceties, but you wanted to be sure that things weren’t going to be unbearable between you.

You’d both known that sleeping with each other would change things, but you were determined not to let the change be a bad one. It could be a funny story you told the others one day… maybe.

There was a pause. “My thoughts have been occupied by the dinner tomorrow.”

Yours had, too. A lot, actually. The big break up was happening soon. You and Ignis hadn’t coordinated with each other in preparation. At all. Because things had changed.

“It’s gonna be great,” you said with false excitement. Then you backtracked because you knew that was a lie. “No, it’s gonna be weird, but we’ll get through it.”

He chuckled on the line, and you felt it down to your toes. You’d missed him just a little. “Yes, we will. Have you yet come up with that dramatic one-liner?”

With a smile, you shrugged even though he couldn’t see it. “I guess you’ll have to wait and see. I actually have a foolproof plan.”

He began to speak again, but you pulled the phone from your ear as someone at the end of the corridor called your name. They needed you back on set.

“I’ve gotta go,” you said, making your way back. “No four twenty parties for me. I’m helping with a film today.”

“Ah, at least you’re merely the regular amount of under the influence.”

“Very funny. You’re not the only one who’s busy and important, y’know.”

“I’ve no doubt you’re important to many. Good luck with the production.”

You thanked him, hanging up and fighting the warm feeling you felt at his words. Maybe it would be okay. Maybe the friendship wasn’t completely ruined. You could only hope.

—

Gladio: so wanna tell me what’s up with you and iggy

You: Nope.

Gladio: really because he told me some interesting stuff

You: Oh so he told you we sixtynined each other for like five hours?

You: Then we put things up each other’s butts. Big things. Small things. Things that would surprise
You: My favorite part was when your dad came over and spanked us for being so naughty.

Gladio: ok that's enough

Gladio: there's no shame in going down on a friend in need

You: So he really did tell you.

Gladio: no details sadly but yeah, i didn’t take you for a hair puller

You: Gods kill me now. You just said he didn’t give details.

Gladio: he didn’t but he kept touching his head and wincing

You: Maybe he got a headache from dealing with you.

Gladio: nah trust me, I know that look on him, he was the same way after we tousled too

Gladio: though I bet I'm rougher

You: What are you talking about?

Gladio: oh I thought he told you we dated in high school

You: I just saw the sappy, borderline pornographic poetry he wrote about you.

Gladio: he still has those? Titan that’s great

You: He should be a dirty poet. I only read a few and they were pretty hot.

You: Why aren’t you together anymore?

Gladio: sometimes things just end

Gladio: look juicy just tell me your intentions

You: ?

You: You’re kidding, right?

Gladio: he’s my best friend

Gladio: i won’t hesitate to kick your ass, i know you can’t hold your own in a fight

You: Spare me. He’s a grown man. He can handle one night of casual sex.

You: And I don’t fucking appreciate whatever you’re implying.

Gladio: ok don’t be a dick about it

You: You’re the dick.

Gladio: for fucks sake forget i asked
*You:* I'm sorry. I just don’t buy into the whole knight in shining armor/protective big brother thing.

*Gladio:* I can tell

*You:* And if it’s a jealous ex thing, I don’t want any part of it.

*Gladio:* It’s not

*You:* I do care about Ignis. Just FYI so mind your own business.

*Gladio:* That’s all I wanted to know

You read and reread the conversation as you sat in the tub, relaxing after the long day of filming. Getting so annoyed so quickly wasn’t usual for you, but you’d spent the last week preparing for some kind of shit from Gladio. So when he finally said something, you’d already pre-annoyed yourself.

Your main takeaway from it was that Gladio knew and didn’t seem inclined to tell the others. Which was fine. The extent of his knowledge was questionable, but he hadn’t asked about the courtship so Ignis must’ve only revealed what he thought was necessary.

You didn’t really understand why Ignis had even told him that much. Gladio didn’t need to know exactly how you’d gotten down on each other. It didn’t make you mad so much as confused. Guys did do that kind of thing, telling each other about their conquests. Even you did that sometimes. But you’d thought Ignis would’ve been a kiss and take it to the grave kind of person.

Dropping your phone to the bath mat by the tub and sinking down into the hot water, you closed your eyes.

You were in way too deep. Good thing it was almost over.

—

Prompto leaned over a display case of guns. He couldn’t afford any of them, some having intricate designs etched into the barrels or grips. You had to admit they were very pretty, however impractical.

“So I’ve been thinking,” he said, looking over at you.

“That’s a first.” You rolled up the target sheet the range master handed you from across the counter.

“No, seriously, dude.” He walked with you to the range, picking up hearing protection on the way. “You’ve seemed pretty happy since I got back. For someone who didn’t… get the internship.”

He’d noticed. You’d noticed that he’d noticed, but hadn’t said anything because you didn’t want to give him details. You weren’t going to be as free with information as Ignis had apparently been with Gladio. Completely avoiding the topic would raise suspicion. You had to tread carefully. Then again, it was Prompto. He was one of your favorite people, but damn could he be dense.

“My dry spell isn’t so dry anymore,” you said, shrugging.

His face lit up in understanding. “Oooohhh.”

You’d been using your newfound confusion over sleeping with a friend —it was a completely different experience than the usual one night stand—to block out the disappointment you felt at not being chosen by the Altissian Academy. To an extent, you were still in denial.
“Yeeaaahhh,” you drug out the word to make fun of him. “It was a Boy I met at that club Aranea took me to.”

“Cool. Are you gonna see him again?”

That was a common question. With a small snort, you shook your head. “I doubt it.”

And that was that. Potential crisis averted.

“Oh my. What are you doing here?”

Looking past Prompto at the unexpected voice, you saw a completely different potential crisis appear. Mirum stood there, reloading a handgun with precise movements.

Prompto turned around, looking between both of you. “Who’s that?”

You didn’t even try faking a smile, raising a hand unenthusiastically. “Hey, Mirum.”

She walked toward you, sharp eyes going to Prompto. “Mister Argentum, I presume?”

“Oh,” he waffled. “Yeah, how did you know? I mean, nice to meet you, I-I guess?” He looked to you for help.

You didn’t want to get into this. You didn’t want to interact with Mirum at all. Not out of any sort of anger at her or her inconsistent behavior, but because you weren’t going to be in the right headspace for the breakup that evening if you had to pretend you gave a shit about the one-sided rivalry she wanted to have with you. Introducing them as quickly and casually as possible, you made your way to an open lane and set up your target sheet.

She wasn’t going to let you go, apparently. Leaning into your area, she smiled. “I can’t wait to see what I’m up against.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

You pulled your hearing protection over your ears, taking a stance you were used to. But your hands shook. You didn’t like being watched. Glaring at her over your shoulder, you hissed, “Go away.”

She laughed. “That’s not very sporting of you, dear.”

A succession of shots from the neighboring lane grabbed your attention. You both peered around the barrier once it was over to see Prompto reloading with a big grin. Mirum whistled, and his grin grew wider. He was showing off.

Rolling your eyes, you went back to your business. Hopefully she’d bother Prompto instead now. Your first shot was off the mark, just ripping the edge of the target. Typical. You sighed, making a few more attempts and only getting worse. Your aim always veered off to the side.

Mirum tisked behind you, and you went rigid. “You’re gods awful.”

Inhaling a slow breath, you turned to her. “Go away, Mirum.”

She placed a manicured finger to her chin, ignoring you. “Perhaps you need a little guidance. May I offer some advice?”

Without waiting for an answer, she pointed at your right hand, which held the gun. “I can see you’re right handed. Are you left eye dominant, by chance?”
If you hadn’t taken the self defense class, you wouldn’t have any idea what she was talking about. Iris had made you do a silly exercise to determine which of your eyes was dominant so you could properly swing the practice sword without hitting yourself all the time.

Hesitant to play along with her, you gave her a scrutinizing look before answering. “Yeah, why?”

She snapped her fingers, a smile stretching across her face. “That’s your problem, dear. You’re shooting as if dominance doesn’t matter.”

You looked down at the gun in your hand, not really following. “So?”

“So close your right eye when you aim,” she said, huffing out a breath. “Really, must I spell it out for you?”

With a scowl, you turned around and followed the advice. One eye closed, arms straight but not locked, you took a shot. And it hit much closer to the bullseye than any you’d ever done before. Mild astonishment filled you, and you looked back at Mirum. “What the fuck.”

“Indeed.” She smirked, and you thought she looked pretty that way. If only her personality weren’t so unattractive and fluctuating.

“I feel so scary powerful right now,” you admitted. It was freeing, in a way, to suddenly have a modicum of control over something you never thought you’d grasp. You gave her a wary look. “Why are you helping me?”

“Because,” she said, crossing her arms. “I shan’t have a romantic rival that doesn’t know her arse from her tits about marksmanship.”

Part of you wanted to ask what the hell that had to do with anything, least of all romantic rivalries. But a bigger part of you just wanted to practice your newfound accuracy.

You turned away from her and unloaded everything into the target, aiming directly for the heart.

—

“So that was her, huh? The woman who has it for Iggy.”

You followed Prompto out of the exit, the late morning sun hitting your eyes. “Yep. How’d you know?”

Prompto gave you a side glance, a slow grin coming to his face. “You guys were pretty much yelling your conversation for everyone to hear.”

With a snort, you adjusted the bag strapped over your shoulder. “Oh.”

“You didn’t tell me you were leaning into it.”

You smiled, looking at the ground. The sidewalk was heavily cracked and only got worse the closer you made it to your home neighborhood. “I’m not leaning into it.”

“You aren’t denying it either,” he pointed out.

“Because she ignored me when I denied it before. I’m pretty sure she’s just a harmless weirdo so it’s not a big deal.”

He nodded and tapped his foot on the ground as you stopped to wait for a walk signal. “I wonder
why she’s being nice if she thinks you’re her rival.”

You rolled a shrug over your shoulders. “Beats me.”

“She’s hot, though,” he said, scratching the back of his head shyly. “You sure you aren’t just flirting?”

You tried jumping from one white line to another across the crosswalk, and a car honked at you for going too slowly. Scrambling to the corner, you huffed out a sigh. “Someone like that, all proper, doesn’t really suit someone like me.”

An extension of that thought went through your mind left unsaid. An upper class person like that really didn’t suit a commoner like you. Not Mirum.

And not Ignis.

—

The morning visit to the shooting range with Prompto had helped your confidence more than you’d anticipated. You planned to meet with Ignis in the Citadel just before dinner. You arrived with determination, a half-empty can of Ebony in hand, and what you thought was a passable breakup plan. You'd told Ignis it was foolproof, but the truth was you hadn't figured much out in the week of near radio silence.

On the elevator up to the appropriate floor, you struck up a conversation with a Crownsguard. You hadn't worn anything spectacular for the dinner so when the man gave you what he seemed to think was a subtle once over, you felt a small well of excitement pool within. School had been so busy the past week—seemingly endless final projects—that you hadn't gotten the chance to put yourself out there again.

“I love Ebony,” he said, nodding toward the can in your hand. You’d been nursing it since you left home, needing the caffeine to fuel you through the dinner. The Crownsguard’s smile was nice, and when he spoke, he used his hands in gestures that didn’t quite match what he said, as if he didn’t really know what he was doing. It was cute in an awkward way. “I slam probably five of those a day.”

“Wow.” You arched your brows, pretending to be impressed. You tapped a finger against the can, taking a drink. When a drop of it caught at the corner of your mouth, you kept eye contact as you licked it from your lip. “I like to take it slow. It's more enjoyable that way.”

With a smile, he braced a hand on the railing that lined the elevator, leaning toward you slightly. “I can appreciate that.” Now his once over was much less subtle.

The elevator dinged for your floor, and you lamented the end of the flirting. It had been so long, and you were rusty. A little bit of practice in a confined space with a cute guy wasn't so much to ask for. You gave him a smile, wishing the trip had just been a few floors longer.

Ignis had waited just outside the elevators in the residential area, and when the doors opened for you to see him standing there looking far too serious, you hesitated before stepping out to join in him the corridor. He looked disgustingly flawless, you thought. Which was all kinds of weird because he wasn’t wearing anything out of the ordinary.

"Wait."

The word made you look back, finding the Crownsguard holding his hand out to block the elevator
from closing. You slowly faced him in confusion as he stepped out.

“What’s your name?”

Taken with small surprise at the man’s sudden decision to continue the conversation, you introduced yourself.

“I’m Bombulum,” he said. “But my friends call me Bomb.”

Oh, you bet they did. That was just the kind of bro name that someone would have being a Crownsguard.

“Nice to meet you, Bomb.” As if it were a reflex, you retrieved your phone with a swift movement and held it out to him. “If you wanna share an Ebony sometime.”

His smile grew, and as he entered his contact information, you looked over your shoulder to roll your eyes. The gesture was lost, though, when you realized Ignis wasn’t paying attention to your situation at all. He was facing a painting, hand on his chin as if in thought. It was probably annoying him that you were wasting time like this.

“I look forward to it,” the Crownsguard said, regaining your attention.

“Me, too.” Your reply was halfhearted. You watched him get back into the elevator, giving him a small wave as the doors closed.

Now, you thought, to the matter at hand. You and Ignis would have a quick huddle, put on your game faces, and have the best break up ever.

You walked over to him, ready to get started. The hand he’d had at his chin closed into a loose fist as he lowered it and faced you. His brows were drawn, his eyes guarded. Was he seriously mad that you’d wasted one minute of his precious time to ask someone out? It wasn’t like you’d meant for it to happen, the guy had followed you out of the elevator.

No. It wasn’t going to be like this. Your first meeting post-one night stand was not going to be bad. You refused to let things turn sour already.

“Can you believe that’s his name?” You hooked a thumb over your shoulder, pointing toward the elevator. Affecting an accent, you said, “My friends call me Bomb ’cause it’s sick as fuck, bro. I love to party, serve the Crown, and slam Ebony all day, erryday.” It wasn’t working. This kind of nonsense only worked on Prompto, apparently. Ignis’ expression eased a little, but what you really wanted, unrealistically, was to see a smile. “I think you have a lot in common with him, Iggy. He could be your soulmate.”

He crossed his arms, expression still guarded but less severe. “What are you doing?”

You shrugged. “Making fun of somebody who doesn't deserve it.”

His eyes quickly flicked over your face, as if searching. “Why?”

Way to make you feel like an ass. You didn’t understand why he would try to make you feel bad about that. It was the most innocent negging, and it wasn’t as if the Crownsguard was around to hear it. “I dunno. Because it's fun?”

“That’s—” He cut himself off with a sigh. “Apologies. I’m merely disquieted by my current workload.”
You chewed on your lip. That made sense. You shouldn’t have been wasting his time; unlike you, he was actually a very important and busy person. “I’m sorry, Iggy.”

“Worry not,” he said. “I’m more concerned about the dinner, if you could believe it.”

You knew exactly what he meant. You’d stressed about it all week. Not talking to him had been a mistake because you didn’t feel fully prepared.

“Care to tell me this so-called foolproof plan of yours before we arrive?”

It was like he could read your mind and knew you had very little idea what you were doing.

“Nope.” You smiled at him tentatively. “I want your genuine reaction. It’ll be more believable.”

Mercifully, his expression slowly eased into a stern wariness. “I want to be clear, I will object if your plan is to seduce my uncle—”

“No.”

“—pretend you have a deadly illness—”

“Nah.”

“—imply that I won’t do that thing you enjoy—”

“What?” Your smile grew into a grin at his ridiculousness. “Where are these ideas coming from?”

He rolled a shrug over his shoulders. “I know you well enough by now. I’m merely trying to match your level of absurdity. I want to stop it before the dinner becomes a slapstick nightmare.” He uncrossed his arms and checked the time. Giving you a side glance, he began to make his way down the corridor. “Should something horrible befall my uncle, I won’t hesitate to blame you.”

You scoffed. “If anything horrible happens, it’ll happen to me.” Meeting his glance with one of your own, you found him gazing at you carefully. “What?”

Looking away, up to the high ceiling, then forward, he took a breath. “I want to thank you.”

He let the words hang, though you expected him to elaborate. He just kept walking, slowing whenever you stopped to look at paintings. Some of them were of Noctis at various stages of his life, and you took it upon yourself to take a picture of each one so you could send them to Noctis with commentary on how cute he was as a kid.

The corridors in this part of the Citadel were long and maze like. You’d only been in this part of the palace when you’d stayed in the Amicitia guest room, and nothing looked familiar. It was a city within a city, the Citadel, and you didn’t envy people like Ignis who seemed to spend their entire existence within the grand building.

While you typed out baby boy, baby in a picture message to Noct, you asked, “So you gonna tell me what you’re thanking me for?”

He motioned for you to get a move on. “This arrangement has been strange, to be sure, and you’ve handled it with more grace than I’d given you credit.”

Looking up from your phone, you frowned a little. He was wrong about that, but he didn’t even know it. You’d messed up so many times. You felt like you didn’t deserve the praise, so you shoved your phone into your bag and shrugged. “It’s not a big deal.”
He shook his head as if he’d expected you to say something like that. “I asked something of you that was unreasonable, especially considering how little we knew each other at the time. I’d thought…” He was gathering his thoughts, you realized by the slight movements he made of adjusting his gloves. “I’d thought you unremarkable enough to not draw attention and desperate enough to do it as long as I’d offered something worthwhile.”

You gave him a flat look. “Desperate?”

His mouth twitched with a smile. Oh. That was nice. “Only in that you likely would’ve helped me had I offered you a paid Altissian vacation or something of the like. And I’ll be quite honest, I’d expected you to demand compensation of some sort by now.”

That hadn’t occurred to you. When he’d presented the idea, you’d been so confused by his intentions and excited at having such a Big Secret that you’d only asked for a small favor. You knew you couldn’t ask for one now, and even if you did, he wouldn’t fulfil it because all you really wanted to know was what the other Big Secret was that the rest of them had without you.

But a paid vacation to Altissia? You couldn’t believe you hadn’t thought of that. Then again, you’d really been hoping for the internship to take you there, anyway.

Ignis seemed to grow tired of your extended silence. “I merely wanted to thank you for everything. I never anticipated you helping me to this extent or that we would become close.”

His words felt emotionally charged, and you didn’t want to touch them. But he was right. Somewhere in that serious, pragmatic man, you’d found a good friend. This was what you’d needed to hear from him. It was the tiny bit of reassurance that let you know that things were going to be okay, even if they had changed.

“That makes two of us,” you said, slowing to look at another painting. You had to scramble a little to catch up when you realized Ignis wasn’t slowing down for you anymore. “It’s been… interesting.”

“That’s a word for it.” He nodded, finally slowing a little to match your pace. His legs were too long, his strides too quick. He was in a real hurry to get the breakup over with. You were too, but you didn’t want to break a sweat doing it.

—

Uncle Scientia’s home was exactly what you expected. The place had ornate walls holding paintings and photos of people who looked similar to but not quite like Ignis and a sense of obsessive compulsive tendencies as everything seemed to be perfectly in its place.

The man himself walked you through a small foyer and into a dining room as he talked about something that fell to the wayside of your attention. Ignis held up the conversation, thankfully, as you looked about with abject curiosity.

The foolproof plan was to exaggerate all of your negative qualities. Really, it was the most ingenious thing you could come up with. You wouldn’t consider yourself the kind of person a body would take home to meet their parents.

Breaking Ignis’ heart seemed like an impossible task to fake. You couldn’t think of what could possibly hurt the man. He was a romantic —the most surprising thing about him so far— but he wasn’t emotionally forthright at all. If he were, he would’ve been able to tell his uncle how he really felt about the pressure to court in the first place.

So, despite his unfortunate infliction of being a romantic, he was pretty emotionally impenetrable.
In the end, you’d decided that you didn’t need to pretend to break Ignis’ heart. You just had to wear down his uncle’s patience. If you acted as uncultured as possible, which wouldn’t be hard, you’d give his uncle the assumption that Ignis simply must be in love with you if he put up with you. So when you dumped him, his uncle would think oh, this is devastating for my poor nephew, but good riddance.

Then, he’d have to give Ignis a break, right?

—

As you went through the first course —there were several and you were kind of intimidated— Uncle Scientia smiled gently at you. “I heard tell that you received defensive training recently.”

You took a large bite of food and spoke around it, crumbs falling from your mouth. “Yeah, Iris and Gladio trained me.”

“That’s wonderful. You couldn’t ask for a better trainer than from a Shield.” He nodded, unaffected by your bad manners. Though, you could practically feel Ignis frowning at you.

“Oh, yeah. I was completely pathetic. I couldn’t even learn how to hold the practice sword,” you said. “I think Gladio only went along with it because we’re both... uh, DTF.”

That was enough subtext right? Let him know you're weak and also slutty. You were killing it with the plan. For sure.

Except, apparently, Uncle Scientia didn’t understand what you meant. “DTF?”

Ignis sighed next to you.

“It means ‘down to…’ you know,” you supplied, hoping he understood. Sure, it was tactless and juvenile, but it wasn’t like you ever planned to come back here.

His uncle’s face lit up in understanding. “I see. Down to fight. Gladiolus is a nice young man, but I do imagine he’s the type to always be DTF. Your generation has such a fascination with acronyms.”

You stared at him for a beat, then looked at Ignis who shook his head slightly. He clearly didn’t like this approach. But that was okay, you had a lot of other bad qualities to accentuate. There were as many layers to this plan as there were faults in your personality, which you thought were too numerous to count.

—

The plan was hindered when you became distracted by Uncle Scientia telling you a story about Ignis sneaking Noctis out of the Citadel when they were younger. You listened and laughed, sending Ignis a surprised look. Would it be weird if you stuck around to hear more stories or look at pictures of him as a kid or other typical meeting-the-parents type of nonsense before dumping him? You bet he’d been a cute kid. Probably serious and polite to a fault.

When you realized where your train of thought was going, that you were actually enjoying the dinner, you felt a bit of the wind leave your sails. None of your ideas were going to work, no matter how many layers your plan had. You’d just have to do it, just hand Ignis the compact in front of his uncle. It was as much for yourself as it was for him.

Ignis had promised you wouldn’t be under any obligation to follow courtship practices, and officially meeting his uncle was a big box being checked off. You hadn’t signed up for this.
While you waited to be served dessert, you dipped into your bag for the compact. You were going to find an opportune moment and get it over with. Then you’d leave the Citadel, hopefully never to return unless legally obligated, and you could just be normal friends with Ignis instead of the lying pair of liars that you actually were.

The compact wasn’t there. You shook your bag a little as if it were hiding, but it didn’t magically appear. Then, you looked up at Ignis.

“Um,” you whispered. “We have a problem.”

He looked at you, saying nothing but raising a brow in question.

“I left the compact at home.” You could envision where it was sitting on your kitchen table. You’d left it there next to your apartment keys specifically so you wouldn’t forget it on your way out. The irony of it made you sigh.

“You’re not serious,” he said, voice low. Agitated lines formed on his face. “Tell me that’s a poor joke.”

You shook your head, expression becoming apologetic. You’d gotten a little high in preparation before coming to the Citadel, and you must’ve forgotten it in your haze. You’d been more concerned about the Ebony at the time. “Can’t we come up with an alternative for now, and I’ll give it back to you later?”

“How do you propose that?” Ignis whispered, brows furrowing. “It’s not as if I carry courtship tokens with me like lucky baubles.”

Uncle Scientia seemed to be in his own world, talking with someone from the Citadel’s kitchen staff who’d brought up the food. He’d yet to probe you with overly personal questions like you’d expected and had taken every odd interaction with a grain of salt, as if he’d been around far too long to be bothered by your attempts at wearing out his patience. Your sidebar with Ignis was halted when he turned to both of you with a kind smile you were beginning to realize was just his resting expression.

“Ignis has told me of your aspirations to direct.” Uncle Scientia was a well of patience, it seemed, unbothered by your heated whispers. “I can’t say I know much about film, but it seems an honorable profession.”

You tucked into the dessert without reservation, giving Ignis’ uncle an openly scrutinizing look. There wasn’t much honorable about the entertainment industry, you thought. It wasn’t like you were a Glaive or anyone who actually helped the world.

“Thanks, but I doubt I’ll make it very far. I’d have to actually have talent.” You were a little caught off guard at learning that Ignis had shared something personal about you with his uncle. You’d been under the impression that he told his uncle nothing beyond the original lie. With a side glance at Ignis, you thought he seemed so suspect suddenly. “I never told you I wanted to be a director.”

After a second of surprise that you were addressing him, Ignis straightened in his seat. “It wasn’t difficult to surmise. You only appear happy when you direct.” His fingers found his fork, and he cut a corner of his dessert. Before taking the bite, he looked at you. “You have a knack for bossing people about.”

You scoffed, feeling a little insulted. “You’re one to talk, dude. You have an inability to let people do what they want if you think it isn’t the right way to do something.”
Ignis pursed his lips, grip on his fork tightening imperceptibly. “Is that so?”

“Yeah. It is,” you said lamely, taking another bite of food. It was delicious, but you couldn’t appreciate it fully because of the budding irritation you felt at the man next to you.

—

You both followed Ignis’ uncle to the parlor after dinner. It sounded boring, but when he offered to pour you a drink, you were suddenly all for it. You took the small glass of cognac with a grateful smile. You needed this.

Tipping it back, drinking it faster than you probably should’ve, you caught Ignis frowning. He was still upset at you. So you’d messed up and forgot the token; you’d figure something out! You closed your eyes, feeling the burn of it go down. You were going to fix this. You just needed a little bit of liquid courage first.

Uncle Scientia seemed ready to say something when someone poked their head into the room.

“Sir, the files on the western islands are in. You wanted someone to get you when th—” The visitor looked at you, then Ignis. “Oh, Lord Ignis. This might interest—”

“No, no, don’t bother Ignis when he has company.” Uncle Scientia excused himself, walking just out the door to speak to them privately.

You peered into your cup and drank what was left. Looking around the room, you found yourself looking at Ignis. Despite the books, the odd little statues everywhere, and the piano that sat in a corner, he was the most interesting thing in the room. Catching the glint of the tiny golden chain that held his pocket watch in place, you were struck with an idea.

“Give me your pocket watch,” you told him in whispers, putting your glass down on a nearby table. “Take off the chain, and I’ll pretend it’s the compact.”

Looking down at you, he frowned. “That won’t work.”

“It will,” you argued. You held out a hand, but he made no move to comply. “I’ll just hold onto it for a minute and then break off the courtship when your uncle comes back inside.”

He shook his head. “He’ll notice that it’s not your token.”

Giving him a flat look, you said, “He thinks DTF means down to fight.”

His expression eased, as if he were considering your argument for a moment. Then he shook his head again. “How could you forget what is undeniably the most important—”

“You just give me the watch.” You were running out of patience.

His brows arched over his glasses, the edges of his mouth forming a careful frown. “I won’t.”

You scowled at him. He hadn’t appreciated a single thing you’d done since the visit had begun. He’d sent you annoyed looks the entire time to make sure you knew how much he hated every part of your half-assed plan. He was the tactician here so why he couldn’t have just come up with an idea himself was well beyond you.

If he was leaving all of the work for you, the very least he could do was play along. You waved your hand out at him, palm up expectantly. “I’m trying to help you. Give me the watch.”
“No.” He was digging his heels in on pure stubbornness at this point.

You took a step toward him and gripped his jacket with both hands, quietly hissing, “Give it to me, Ignis.”

His eyes widened, green bearing down on you in soft surprise. You weren’t fucking around. You were going to end this today so he could get rid of you just like he wanted.

The clearing of a throat made you jerk away. When you faced Ignis’ uncle, you smiled sheepishly, a small blush forming on your face.

“I truly apologize, but I have to cut the evening short. There is a matter I must attend to,” Uncle Scientia said. “If you wish to stay for a bit longer, you are welcome.”

Ignis took your hand and bowed slightly. “Thank you, but I think we will be going shortly.”

You resisted the urge to tear your hand away.

Uncle Scientia smiled at you. “It was a pleasure to officially meet you.” Then he left you there with good tidings, striding down the hall with purpose. Much like Ignis had on the way there.

As soon as he was out of sight, you pulled your hand out of Ignis’ and returned to scowling at him. “Great. Now we’ve done the total **opposite** of what we came here to do.”

He returned the look, his frown sharp. “Who’s fault might that be?”

You threw your hands up. “I forget stuff! You know that about me! You’re so inflexible, y’know that?”

“You stated as much at dinner. Was that your plan all along, to insult me?”

“Is it even an insult if I’m right? You refused to even try my idea because it wasn’t the **proper way**! He wouldn’t have known the difference!”

He pushed up his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Don’t yell. Someone may overhear.”

With a sigh, you lowered your arms and crossed them. You weren’t mad at him or even at the situation. His unwillingness bothered you, but it was your own fault for not bringing the one thing you needed for this to work. That was a recurring theme so far in this farce, accidentally letting people in on it and never having the token when you actually needed it. Why had he ever thought you were a good choice to play this part?

He was probably regretting everything. No wonder he’d been in such a rush on the way there. He wanted to get rid of you that badly.

You looked at him with a heavy frown. He’d just complimented you earlier on handling things so well, and here you were already proving him wrong. “I’m sorry. I know you’re tired of the courtship, and I’m sorry I ruined it.”

He seemed surprised at your apology, straightening his glasses before shaking his head. “It’s my own fault for not following through on the promise of having it ended today.”

You looked away, chewing on the inside of your cheek. Why was he apologizing? You didn’t get him. His expressions were easy to read, but it was like being able to read a word without knowing its meaning.
“Do we have to break up in front of your uncle?” The idea seemed silly and awkward, but you remembered Ignis stressing the fact that he needed to witness it to make it most believable. It was all very convoluted, and you could hardly keep up at this point. “I can just give the token to you next time I see you. Then we won’t have to put up with each other anymore.”

He didn’t respond, and the silence stretched for so long that you had to look at him.

His eyes were cast away from you, the thrum of his voice low. “If only it were so simple.”

“I don’t think,” you sighed, feeling a heavy weight in your chest. Friend fights always hit you hard. Probably because you had so few friends. And you were pretty sure you were about to lose this one. “I don’t think it’ll be hard convincing your uncle since you spent most of the dinner glaring at me.”

He looked at you, eyes meeting yours. “I don’t know what sort of plan you seemed to be employing, but I didn’t enjoy being around the person you pretended to be tonight.”

“Oh, wow, big surprise.” You rolled your eyes. “You hate my bad manners. Guess you shouldn’t have asked a commoner to be your fake fucking girlfriend.”

“That’s not the issue.” He shook his head. “Insulting me was off-putting enough. The disparaging remarks you made about yourself were far worse. Had I known that was your plan, I’d have come up with something myself.”

“Then why didn’t you?” You were close to yelling again, and you didn’t give a damn. “If you want me out of your life so bad, you should’ve helped me come up with an actual plan instead of ignoring me for a week!”

Your anger was met with confusion. His eyes widened, brows arching over his glasses. “Why do you think that?”

A frown curled at your lips. “I know you’ve been ignoring me because of what we did. I can’t—”

“No.” His eyes searched your face. “Why do you think I want you out of my life?”

You looked away, touching the lip of your empty glass. The bottom of it hit against the wooden tabletop with a clink as you tilted it and let go. “Seemed pretty determined to get rid of me today. Until you refused to help me.”

He sighed, and you looked at him again. It was difficult keeping eye contact. What if he saw how much this was bothering you? You hated that. You hated everything about this.

“I’ve held you in an uncomfortable position for long enough. I only wished to have it done with for your sake.”

“It’s not like I didn’t want to be here. I said we were in this together.” You shook your head again, still not understanding where he was coming from, but calming down slightly in the face of his confusion. It was markedly better than anger.

“It isn’t your burden.” His insistence was gentle but firm. “I shouldn’t have forced you into this position.”

You blinked, giving him an incredulous look. “You aren’t forcing me.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, considering you cautiously. “Is that not how you see it?”
You met his gaze, and this time you held it. “Ignis, you can’t make me do anything.”

His brows drew together, and he looked away, his confusion only seeming to grow.

You were just telling the truth. You’d come here willingly to help him; that’s why it was so frustrating that he wasn’t helping you help him. It was no wonder he’d thought you expected compensation. Apparently, he felt like you were being held hostage.

For maybe a few minutes of the dinner when you’d asked Ignis’ uncle about his job, you might’ve felt like a hostage having to hear about the boring details. Otherwise, you’d never considered this something you had to do. You were just the kind of person who liked to keep their promises. Even to uptight nobles who didn't appreciate it, like Ignis.

“I want you in my life.”

The quiet statement pulled you from your thoughts. Ignis had picked up your empty glass, filling it with the cognac. His lidded eyes flicked to you as he took a drink.

Words failing you at first, you watched the way his adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed. He wanted you around. You felt a strong sense of relief veil your anxiety over nearly losing your friend.

“I want, um— right. I want that, too.”

He winced a little at the aftertaste, closing his eyes for a moment as he capped the decanter. “We will try this again with a more refined plan.”

Your nod went unnoticed. “Sounds good. I won’t mess up next time.”

He shook his head. “Never mind that you forgot the compact. I shouldn’t have reacted the way I had.” He looked down at the glass, pushing it away before looking at you again. “But I’ll not tolerate any more of your self deprecation.”

His use of words irked you. Tolerate. It made you want to spend the rest of your life dedicated to belittling yourself at his expense.

“What did I just say?” You crossed your arms. “You’re not my boss, Ignis.”

He actually smiled at that. It was brief but charming, a glimmer of teeth as he conceded. “I suppose I was due for a reminder on that front.”

Taken with his smile, you chewed on your lip, rolling on your feet from heel to toe. “So we’ll regroup and try again?”

With a nod, he made for the door. “We should get going.”

—

The walk back was silent as you passed by the same large paintings of Noctis that you’d seen earlier. You remembered the messages you’d sent Noct on the way there and checked your phone to see if he ever responded.

Noctis: why are you in that part of the citadel?

Frowning, you held back a sigh and looked over at Ignis. You were just messing up left and right. Inhaling deeply, you searched for an excuse to give Noctis.

Nothing came to mind. You couldn’t stop feeling bothered at how much Ignis was actually telling
people. You felt like you were losing what little control you had in this arrangement. This line of suspicion, at the very least, you could probably stamp down on before it became anything.

You: *It’s none of your business, Noct.* :)

Noctis: *ok cool*

Wow. That was... impossibly easy. You hadn’t thought he’d let it go like that, but Noct had never come off as pushy so you weren’t sure what else you could’ve expected.

He may be a contender as your new best friend.

—

On the main floor, just beyond the elevators, you turned to Ignis to part ways, but the goodbye wasn’t forthcoming. You shifted your weight from foot to foot, unsure of what you were about to say.

“I want that favor.”

He looked at you with mild interest, wary almost. “Is that so?”

You nodded. “Nothing major. Just one request. I think I deserve it since this courtship is being extended.” By your own causing, but still.

Ignis eyed you, wariness giving out to curiosity. “What favor do you need?”

Need? You didn’t need anything from him, but you wanted a lot.

“Let me flirt with you again.” It was flippant, but you really meant it. “I have so many things to say to you. I’ve been keeping count of every flirty comment that’s plagued me since we were in Galdin.”

A month of holding yourself back. Ignis had to acknowledge this as a legitimate request, right? Part of yourself was naturally flirty, and you really had to suppress that when it came to him. Then again, he’d been upset with you for the better part of the evening and probably wouldn’t be inclined to do you any favors, least of all one that would upset him even more.

In a surprising gesture, he looked down, hiding the barest of smiles. When he met your eyes, he’d controlled his features into a neutrality and said, “If that is what you want, I suppose I could handle it once per day.”

That was too strict, but you couldn’t say you were surprised. “Okay, I’ll take it, but it shouldn’t count if you make it too easy.”

He arched a brow. “What do you mean?”

You shrugged. “If you bend over in front of me, I’m probably gonna tell you your butt looks nice, and you can’t fault me for that so it shouldn’t count.”

His mouth twitched with a near smile. “That sounds fair.”

You nodded, enjoying every little indication he was sending your way. “Great.” As he checked the time, you began to back away, offering a small wave that he didn’t return. He’d wasted enough time with you already, and was probably itching to get back to his busy life upstairs. “Guess I’ll see you later.”
“Yes, take care.”

Several steps away, you turned back, raising your voice above the din of the busy floor. “Oh, actually, I had one last question.”

He sent an expectant look your way.

A slow grin grew along your face. “Would you consider yourself a cutie with a great booty or a hottie with a perfect body? Because I think you’re both.”

One of the guards standing by the elevators chuckled, and you waved at him again, enjoying the light blush that dusted Ignis’ serious face.

If he was only letting you get one flirt in a day, you were going to make it count. And damn were you rusty.

—

When it came to photography, Prompto had the timing down just right. In everything else, he needed a little help. Which is why you weren’t that surprised when he suddenly sighed and turned to you in distress as you bought an eighth of weed from a vendor. It smelled like your favorite flavor of ice cream and your curiosity was piqued over that alone.

“It’s my fault, right?”

You looked up from smelling the stuff. “What?”

He only went to pop up events like this with you because he didn’t like the idea of you going alone. The last time you’d done that, you’d gotten high with one of the suppliers, gotten kicked out of the venue for fighting with a cardboard standee, and lost one of your shoes on the walk home. You didn’t mind the company because this particular lowkey event was packed with people, and you were just trying to get what you wanted and leave as quickly as possible.

Prompto touched one of the patches on his vest, finger pulling at the threads that held it in place. “The movie,” he said, squishing against a wall as someone pushed past him. The place was way too crowded. “I didn’t get the right angles. And— and the lighting was off because I—”

“No.” You shook your head, putting the purchase in your bag before grabbing his wrist. “Come on, dude.”

“But we just got here.” He let you pull him through the crowds.

The event was held in a large, empty apartment. It had only been set up hours before and would be gone by morning. The laws in Insomnia over weed were vague so what you were doing wasn’t technically a crime. Still, you knew it made Prompto all kinds of nervous. He always left the venue paranoid over being questioned by any police that might catch you leaving. His nervousness seemed to be overpowered by his distress this time, big blue eyes that were usually scanning the area were boring into you.

You left through the back entrance, walked down a narrow alley and came out onto the sidewalk of an adjoining street. Letting go of Prompto’s hand, you looked at him. “It’s not your fault.”

Sighing, he crossed his arms, but it looked more like he was hugging himself. “It totally is. I’m sorry. I’ll make sure you get it next year.”
The distressed look on his face hurt your heart. He shouldn’t blame himself, but of course he did. Prompto was like that. You chewed on your lip, shaking your head again. “Don’t say things like that. You did a great job, okay?”

In this instance, your win would’ve been his win, and your rejection must have hit him harder than he’d let on before. He dropped his arms and looked away, shaking his head. “Nah, I could’ve—”

“They didn’t pick me,” you said, voice louder than you intended. It made him look at you. “It fucking sucks, but it’s not your fault so stop.”

He blinked, then gave you a smile, small but warm. “Okay.”

You nodded, relief filling you at the sight of his smile. “Good. Now let’s go back to my place, burn through some of this, and come up with an even better film idea to submit next year.”

Not often did he join you in getting high, but you could tell he really needed it today. He bumped your shoulder with his as he fell into step next to you, his smile giving away to something more genuine.

—

_Ignis: I’ve had your dress dry cleaned. When’s best to have it sent to you?_

You stared at the message, feeling a small bit of guilt. His Crownsguard lounge suit was piled on your bedroom floor, still dirty. You’d worn them twice since then, doing homework and laying around in them. They were comfy!

_You: You didn’t have to do that._

_Ignis: And yet I did._

_You: Are you going to Noct’s tomorrow night?_

_Ignis: I’ll make an appearance if I have time._

_You: Just come! Meet me outside and give me the dress before we go in. I can just say I picked up my dry cleaning on the way over or something._

_You: I can’t give you the sweatsuit back though._

_Ignis: Why is that?_

_You: Craziest thing, my apartment flooded and it washed away. Oh well._

_Ignis: If you wish to keep it just say so._

_You: Thanks, I think I need it now. Everything else feels like sandpaper against my delicate skin._

_You: Be careful not to seduce me again because you’ll be out of a wardrobe real quick. ;)_

Hitting send before you realized how flirty you were actually being, you smacked your forehead with a hand. Fuck. Way to make it weird. He was a friend, you reminded yourself. Things were never going to improve if you didn’t tone it down. Plus, you didn’t want to waste your one flirt on that.
Ignis: I have plenty to spare.

You didn’t know what to do with that. Plenty to spare because he wanted to spend another night with you? Or because he was just overloaded with Crownguard sweatsuits? You decided it didn’t matter because there wasn’t going to be a next time with him. There really shouldn’t even have been a first time.

You: So I’ll see you at Noct’s?

Ignis: I’ll be there.

—

Buried between rows of books deep within the library on campus, you flipped through one book before slamming it shut and moving on to another. Techniques of film, the importance of mise en scene, *blah blah blah*.

You couldn’t focus because you had an idea for a screenplay that burned to be written. It was really vague and didn’t have any sort of resolution so you’d held off on writing it. You had made a promise to yourself that you’d not begin something you didn’t plan to finish. Most of your projects went abandoned all the time, at various stages.

You didn’t want to backtrack on your vow, but it was becoming too hard to concentrate on homework with the idea bouncing around in your head. Opening your laptop, you sighed and gave in. Much like other things currently happening in your life, you’d just get it out of your system and completely forget about it.

—

Three hours in, your friendly librarian Craigory pushed a cart past your hiding place and stopped to give you a questioning look.

“I’m either writing a masterpiece or complete trash,” you said, typing even as you looked up at him.

He nodded in understanding, then pointed at the books.

“You can take them. They’re useless to me now.”

He picked them up, adding them to the cart and peering at your laptop screen. You moved it out of his field of vision, practically hissing.

“Stop being so damn nosy.”

He lifted his hands in defense, and you sighed.

“Sorry, I have a lot going on.”

He nodded again, pushing the cart away.

You leaned out of the aisle, quietly calling, “Thanks, Craigory.”

He gave you a thumbs up and disappeared around a corner. He was, hands down, the best listener you’d ever met. Back to writing, you blinked your tired eyes against the brightness of the screen. You needed an Ebony, stat.

—
The courtship token Ignis had given you was definitely cursed. Other than Ignis, you hadn’t so much as kissed another person since the fake courtship had begun. That in itself was depressing, but it was only multiplied by the fact that you hadn’t gotten the internship. It was sinking in that you weren’t good enough for Altissia yet, that your dream wasn’t nearly as close as you’d thought.

You found yourself opening and closing the messages on your phone, wondering idly if it would be okay to just… call him up.

Ignis wasn’t like other Boys, but you had an itch that you desperately wanted him to scratch again, if only to distract you from your depressed thoughts concerning the internship and your life, in general. So you opened your messages and typed something out. Something not too forward, otherwise you got the feeling he’d be turned off. It was definitely wordier than your usual come over texts to past booty calls.

You sent it, biting down on the bit of anxiety that welled in you over it. Gladio had said there wasn’t shame in it since you were just a friend in need…

You: You might be interested in coming over tonight. I have an Ebony with your name on it.

It wasn’t until moments later that you realized your mistake. Your most recent conversation with Ignis had been in a group with the other guys.

Prompto: ew

Noctis: what?

You: Ignore it! I’m sorry!!

Prompto: tbh this is tame 4 a bootycall frum u

You: Shut up!

Gladio: so your new squeeze likes coffee huh?

Squeeze? You frowned at the sentence. He was being so obvious.

You: Lots of people like coffee. I like coffee.

Ignis: What’s not to like?

You stared at the message, embarrassment stinging at you. Ignis was acting like nothing was out of the ordinary. He had to realize it was meant for him.

Prompto: ya idk y u like it so much its gross D:

Gladio: this is almost unbearable lol

Gladio: let us know how it goes when you send it to the right person ;)

Noctis: nah I’d rather not know

You: Good because this has been humiliating.

Gladio: does that mean you’re leaving Noct’s early tonight to get laid?
**Prompto:** ya its suppose 2 b a all nite hang :( will u srsly ditch us 4 sum boy??

**You:** Just forget you ever saw it!

**Gladio:** wanna tell us anything about this guy, do we know him?

The master of subtly, Gladio Amicitia.

**You:** Yeah, it's your dad.

You sighed, sending a bunch of eggplant emojis before leaving the conversation. It had been a bad idea from the start. You had hoped Ignis could give you a ride home after leaving Noct’s, and that things could happen from there. But now you were embarrassed and just wanted to forget you’d even entertained the idea.

Your friendship with Ignis was still recovering from your tryst and the dinner. He wanted you in his life, but you doubted he’d meant it as a person you called on to distract you from life's problems with sex.

—

You waited outside Noct’s apartment, dicking around on your phone, being sure to stand somewhere that couldn’t be seen from his balcony. You were there for fifteen minutes before Gladio showed up.

“Iggy’s gonna be late.” He opened the door and looked back at you expectantly.

“So? I’m not waiting for him or anything.” You followed him in to strengthen the lie. Ignis could’ve mentioned he wasn’t going to be there to meet you and hand over your dress.

“You waiting for *me* then?”

With a roll of your eyes, you scoffed. “For sure. I was so desperate to get you alone before seeing the others.”

Together, you got into an elevator that climbed up to Noct’s floor. “Oh, yeah?”

You shifted the paper bag you had in an arm, lifting the neck of a wine bottle from inside. Buying the wine had been a last minute decision when you’d remembered that Noct didn’t have any alcohol. And you’d found the most alcoholic wine you could get your hands on. “How drunk do I have to get you before you’ll dance with me?”

He chuckled, leading you into Noct’s place. “Let’s find out.”

—

The answer was very drunk. Noctis turned off the video game he’d been playing with Prompto to put on some music because it had been entertaining at first. Then, he’d gotten out his own stash of alcohol, something that had you grumbling about not knowing where his drink cabinet was this entire time.

By eight drinks, you had Gladio voguing with you while Noctis covered his face with his hands and Prompto recorded it all. You’d matched Gladio drink for drink and felt like you could just die.

You were incredibly thankful that no one brought up the earlier situation concerning the booty call. These guys were the best friends you could ever ask for, and you let them know that in your drunken
state, touching the stubble on Gladio’s face and pinching Prompto’s cheeks while Noctis expertly avoided your prodding. But wait. Where was the fourth one?

“Where’s Ignis?” You weren’t asking anyone in particular.

“He’s trapped at the Citadel,” Noctis said, sitting next to you on the sofa. He leaned back, closing his eyes. “He probably won’t make it.”

You gave him a questioning look, turning it over to Gladio when you realized the prince wasn’t paying attention.

“A noblewoman publicly announced her interest in him,” Gladio laughed. “He’s been stuck in his office, trying to avoid a confrontation.”

Prompto gasped and smiled, pointing at you. “I bet it’s her.”

You nodded. “Dude, yes! It’s definitely her.”

Gladio looked between you.

“Was it the marchioness?” you asked, reaching for your glass. There was a few more sips left in the bottom, and you weren’t going to waste them. “I bet it was the fucking marchioness.”

“Yeah,” Gladio said, looking surprised. “How’d you know that?”

“I know her. We’re acquaintances. Kinda.” You drank what was left in your cup. “She even told me about how they met. She’s crazy about him.”

Gladio stared at you in confusion for a long moment, and Prompto nodded, though he had no idea what you were talking about. You were all just a bit drunk. Maybe you more than the rest; your stomach was roiling.

In fact.

You shot up, quickly stumbling to the kitchen and throwing up into the sink. A hand patted your back as you remained hunched over just in case more decided to expel. Gladio said something, but your ears rang and your eyes blurred with tears. Minutes later, you were lifted like a sack of potatoes over his shoulder. Somewhere on the way to Noct’s room, you drifted off.

—

Waking abruptly with the terrible sensation of falling, you rolled over and sat up. A small headache, slight shakes rocking your body, and a dry mouth. You’d just gotten off the sleep train right into Hangover Junction. Gazing around, you tried to take in as much as you could and let your eyes adjust as your mind caught up with everything.

You were in a bed, that much was clear. Your feet under the blanket touched the body of someone sprawled across the lower half of the bed. Lifting the blanket, you saw Noct’s dark hair. The familiar sight was a relief; anchoring you to reality. You nudged his head with a foot, and he grumbled, curling in on himself.

The door opened, startling you into dropping the blanket. You wondered if this was a dream because Ignis came in carrying a bottle of water. He seemed startled himself to see you awake.

“Usually when I dream about you, the prince isn’t in the bed with me,” you joked, your voice
Igis stopped by the bed, handing you the bottle of water. His hair was disheveled, eyes looking tired. The sleeves of his button down were rolled to his elbows. Your hands trembled trying to take off the cap on the bottle. Without prompting, he did it for you and handed it back.

“Must you be so overindulgent?”

You rolled your eyes as you drank the water. Of course the first thing out of his mouth had to be a reprimand. He couldn’t just say something nice to ease your pain. You wanted to ask him why he never sent a message or anything about not coming to Noct’s, but you didn’t want him to know that you even cared.

“Did you finally show up just to fuss?” You leaned back against the headboard. When he made to leave, you grabbed his hand. “Wait. I wanna talk.”

“What about?” He sounded just as worn as he looked.

You pulled him by the hand. “Sit with me. I heard Mirum proposed or some shit.”

He sighed, but acquiesced, removing his hand from yours and rounding the bed to settle next to you against the headboard. “So Gladio told you.”

“Yeah, but I already knew she liked you.” Another drink of water, much longer, and he brought up a hand to stop you from guzzling it down.

“Slowly now. You’ll just make yourself sick.” He took the bottle from you. “How did you know she fancied me?”

You pulled the blanket up to your shoulders, shivers coursing over your body. Not that you were cold, but the blanket was a comfort all the same. “She told me. The time I visited your office. And at the nightclub.”

“You knew this entire time?”

You rolled your head against the headboard to face him. “Yeah. I’m sorry, but I didn’t really wanna get involved.” His expression remained exhausted. You wanted to touch his face, to ease the signs of stress. Instead, you twisted the blanket between your hands and kept talking. “I think it’s kinda brave, I guess, that she announced her intentions. Especially since she thinks we’re courting. Audentes fortuna iuvat. Y’know, fortune favors the bold?”

“I’m familiar,” he said, letting you take the water bottle from him. “Fortune isn’t the only thing to favor the bold.”

Another sip and you asked, “What does that even mean?” Your head ached, and you were so tired, but this was such a pressing thought to you.

“Making one’s intentions known…” He ran a hand through his hair. “It invites disappointment, confusion, and mild terror.”

His expression said everything; he’d hidden in his office to avoid Mirum, even late into the evening, because he felt all of those things? You knew he was adverse to beginning an actual courtship anytime soon, but the fact that he found it terrifying that someone had genuine interest in him was just a little hilarious.
“Isn’t that what makes it so great?” You put the nearly empty bottle of water on Noct’s nightstand, and looked at Ignis with interest. You were fighting sleep despite the juiciness of the conversation and needed to keep eye contact so you had a reason to keep your eyes open at all.

He blinked. “How so?”

You inhaled deeply. “Liking somebody is kinda like a punishment, and sometimes making a move is the only way out. If they don’t share your feelings it’s a disappointment but also kind of a relief?”

You leaned your head back, a soft thud against the headboard. “Like you’ll listen to sad music for a while, but you’ll get over it eventually.”

Ignis didn’t seem to be grasping your explanation. “And if the feelings are shared?”

That was an interesting response. Maybe Ignis could be pushed into moving his fake courtship business over to Mirum if he liked her back. She would definitely do a better job than you had so far. For some reason, the thought didn’t sit well within you. Probably because you’d hidden the truth from him for so long, even going so far as to sleep with him while knowing she liked him. But now you could make things right.

“Then you’re totally confused and terrified, like you said.” You smiled at him softly. “But she’s with you, like… in it. You’re not alone anymore.”

He only looked at you, not saying anything for so long that your eyes began to droop. A gentle squeeze of his hand on yours made you open them again to see his troubled expression. “I’m uncertain as to what to do.”

“My unsolicited opinion, full stop, is to go for it,” you said, squeezing his hand in return. “She’s petty and weird, but you’re kinda weird, too. And she’s in love with you.”

“I don’t share the feeling,” he said, a quick response that had your eyes focusing on him, a bit more alert. “I can’t imagine being in love right now.”

“Well, shit.” You sighed, an unexplained sense of relief filling you. “What are you gonna do about it, then?” You let go of his hand to elbow him, but there was no force behind it. “Huh, stud? Because she wants you super bad.”

He looked down at his gloved hands, fingers splaying and then curling in swift movements. “She’s invited me to her coming out ball this coming weekend. If I were to go, it would be seen as an acceptance of her affection.”

“You’re right.”

He nodded slightly. “My thoughts exactly.” Long fingers adjusted a glove, his gaze still avoiding yours. “Unless… if I were to arrive with you at my side—”

“Then don’t,” you cut him off. A frown pulled at the corners of your mouth. “I didn’t like her back, he shouldn’t get her hopes up. And he shouldn’t… Your head pounded at the thought of him going there to do whatever the hell nobles did at balls. You didn’t want him to… You were too tired to think about this. “Don’t go.”

He nodded slightly. “My thoughts exactly.” Long fingers adjusted a glove, his gaze still avoiding yours. “Unless… if I were to arrive with you at my side—”

“No,” you cut him off. A frown pulled at the corners of your mouth. “That would be kinda vicious. Isn’t she your friend?” Honestly, he shouldn’t be considering something so mean. You didn’t particularly like Mirum, but she was still a person with feelings. Plus, the idea of going to a ball sounded boring as all hell. “Think about how you’d feel if you were in love and told everyone, and then that person showed up to your party with someone else.”

He sighed. “You’re right.”
"I know," you said, your tone curt. Slowly, your eyes were drooping again, and this time, you weren’t even fighting it. With a yawn, you patted around, finding his hand again. "I’ll help you get out of it, I promise. Let’s just get some rest for now. You look like garbage."

You slid over, head resting on his shoulder. He was such a solid presence next to you. It made you feel safe without feeling small.

“You are ever the treasure.” His voice was softer, though his tone was purposefully drab. “Someone who drank themself sick calling me rubbish.”

“Mmm,” you hummed, his comments falling on sleepy ears. Rest came easily, filled with dreams where Noctis hadn’t been in the bed with you, and the conversation had taken a decidedly different turn.

—

Tumbling out of Noct’s bed, you stretched. A familiar ache bit at your head. You moved the blankets around so Noct, who still slept soundly, would eventually be hit by the sliver of sunlight that was ever so slowly traveling down the bed.

With heavy steps, you left the bedroom. An incredible smell had you walking directly to the kitchen where Ignis was chopping this and mincing that.

“G’morning,” you mumbled, sitting on a stool and watching him with sleepy interest.

“Morning.” He looked up from his ministrations, a small smile on his face.

You looked at all of the things he had going on. Multitasking must’ve been second nature to him. “Breakfast party?”

Returning his gaze to the veggie he was chopping, he said, “Not so much a party as it is necessary for everyone in order to recover from your tawdry night.”

While you looked around, he grabbed something from the fridge and handed it to you. Coconut water. You frowned, not so much a fan. But you knew it was good for hangovers, and it didn’t taste that bad.

“Thanks.” You took a sip, and asked, “Where’s Prom and Gladio?”

“I’ve sent them to the corner store.” He dropped the veggies into a pan with eggs. You supposed he was making some kind of omelet. “They were each complaining of a terrible headache, for which Noct has no medicine. They should be back momentarily.”

You nodded. “Good. My head feels like it’s gonna explode or melt or something else just as bad.”

Ignis kept at it, and you wondered if he was okay himself. He’d stayed up late to take care of you, and presumably the others, yet here he was in the morning, extending that kindness in such a gesture. The hollows his eyes were a little dark, and his hair wasn’t as perky as usual. It was cute, unkempt and swept back like the laziest almost pompadour you’d ever seen.

Getting down from the stool, you rounded the counter and stood at the edge of the kitchen. “Let me help.”

He looked up from a pan, a careful frown on his face. “Forgive me, but you’ll only be in the way.”
“No, I won’t,” you insisted. “I know a thing or two. Just give me a job.”

He looked at you for a beat before nodding. “Very well. Come here.”

Going to his side, you listened as he explained what he needed you to do. Which was to make toast. You rolled your eyes but set to work without complaint. Your head did hurt like hell so it wasn’t like you were up to cooking anything intricate.

Two slices in, Ignis said, “Do you suppose this is still fresh? Noct has had it for some time.”

He was holding a jar filled with honey. A honeycomb sat inside, slowly floating around the thick liquid. He’d opened it, and peered inside. Thinking the only option for testing it was pretty obvious, you reached up and dipped a finger in, drawing out a string of honey.

Ignis didn’t seem amused. You ignored him, popping your finger into your mouth to taste if it was off. You didn’t think honey really expired, but this stuff might’ve been special for all you knew.

“I can’t tell. It tastes a little fruity,” you said, smacking your lips. “Here, you try.”

You reached for more, but he held it out of reach. “No more of that,” he reprimanded, twisting the lid back on and placing the jar down. “I’ll trust that it’s alright since you aren’t immediately disgusted by the taste.”

Turning around with a shrug, you switched out the bread for more, piling toast onto a plate. Ignis was no fun. You’d wanted him to sexily suck honey from your fingers. Maybe it was for the best. You really shouldn’t have been pursuing thoughts like that about him.

“I found myself surprised to see you still here last evening,” he said over the sound of the frying pan. You took a secret bite out of a piece of toast, making sure he wasn't looking. “Why?”

He hummed as if he were thinking. “I'd thought you had plans to meet with that Bombulum fellow.”

Your mind was drawing a blank. “Who?”

Your mind was drawing a blank. “Who?”

He sent you a confused look. “The Crownsguard you met the other day. Your... casual inquiry for company yesterday?”

It took a moment, but once your aching brain really chugged, you pieced it together. “That, that was actually, um...” Your eyes widened. If he really didn't realize the booty call had been for him, you weren't going to embarrass yourself further by admitting it. “No, no booty call for me. Friends are more fun, anyway.”

His green eyes widened, face easing into mild surprise. With a small nod, he returned his attention to cooking.

Good. Yet another crisis averted.

You went back to the very important Toast Duty, focusing on that until you felt him bump against your back. You smiled when you turned around to face him, determined to avoid any further awkward moments. “Oops, I guess I am in the way aft——”

He’d bumped into you on purpose, hands finding the counter on each side of you as he leaned down. He didn’t hesitate, pressing his mouth to yours and gently moving his lips, coercing yours open with soft pressure. You lifted on your toes, kissing back with a gentle force. The ever present taste of
coffee along with a mild staleness hit your tongue as he opened himself up for you.

You imagined your morning breath was terrible, but the hand he brought to your waist told you he didn’t mind. The moment you reached a hand up to his chest, he broke the contact, drawing back to look at you.

“The honey does have a fruity flavor,” he murmured. “A tad sour. Citrus, I’d say.”

You blinked, dropping back to the flats of your feet as he let go of you. “Right.”

He returned to cooking again as if kissing you had just been another part of his morning routine. Toast production halted as you stepped toward him, eyeing the food he was making.

A tight feeling curled in your chest. Indignation, you thought. You'd beaten yourself up over almost calling him up, but he couldn't care less about what lines he crossed, apparently. “Was that another point-making kiss, or am I missing something?”

He lifted a pan, sliding its contents onto a plate. “For someone who enjoys the act so greatly, you’re sorely mistaken over the nature of flirtation.”

As he prepared another, breaking eggs and mixing in veggies and spices, you stood in place and tried to make sense of him. He'd been throwing you so many curve balls, you could barely keep up.

Finally, when he glanced at you with a small smirk, you found your voice. “W-what?”

He tilted the pan to even the burn on the dish before turning to you. “You treat it merely as a means to an end, but it's more than that,” he said, using his free hand to brush a lock of hair behind your ear. “It's a dance.”

The feeling in your chest tightened uncomfortably. His touch was searing, and you didn't like it. Knocking his hand away, you turned around and began shoving pieces of bread into the toaster as if you were force-feeding it. The ambient cooking sounds accompanied by the quiet thud of Ignis’ feet told you he'd went back to task. Good.

Noct's front door opened just in time to distract your tumultuous mind, Prompto trudging in with complaints about the brightness of the sun while Gladio grunted intermittently. You took a painkiller when it was offered, drinking the rest of the coconut water with mild chagrin. When you looked at Ignis again, he was frowning, attention on the last serving he was currently cooking.

“Just so you know,” you said, voice quiet. “That was your one flirt of the day.”

His frown eased, and he peered down at you gently. “One is all I need.”

You swallowed thickly, pinned by the gaze.

“What are you guys talking about?” Prompto asked as he sat on a stool, facing you both.

Ignis turned away and began to serve the dishes, placing one in front of Prompto. “How well we were able to hide vegetables in the food this morning. Noct will never suspect.” He wiped his hands on the apron tied at his waist. “I suppose I should wake him now.”

You watched him walk down the hall and disappear into Noct’s room. He was able to switch himself between faces so easily. Like an actor. Like a politician. You felt a twinge of something at being the only person who got to experience sides of him he clearly didn’t let others see.
The screenplay you’d created from nothing sat unfinished in your hard drive. Like you’d told Craigory, you couldn’t decide if it was a masterpiece or trash. You were leaning toward the latter because if you’d learned anything from the Academy’s rejection, it was that you still had a lot of growing to do as an artist.

You’d written three different endings for it, one of which had been done with Prompto’s help when you’d gotten terribly high, but none of them seemed right. Bogged down by the thought that you’d wasted hours of your life writing something that no one would ever see, you lounged around your apartment in Ignis’ sweats and threw yourself a pity party.

Then you remembered that you had a blog.

So, you posted the screenplay sans ending, and hoped that at least one person read the thing and got it. You didn’t even care if every production company in Lucis saw it and thought it was terrible. As long as someone read it and understood why an ending seemed impossible.

You were sowing the seeds of a lie. Because lying was your thing these days. At least when it came to Ignis.

You: *Great news, I need help this weekend.*

You: *I have to take a Conversational Altissian class and I need a fluent partner.*

Ignis: *That is convenient.*

A long smile spread across you face. This fool! You didn’t need help in Altissian. Language was one of the few things your mind comprehended fairly easily, and you sat at the top of your class in Altissian without rival.

What you really wanted to invite him to was a poetry class on campus that was open to the public. You wanted to see just what kind of raw slams he could throw down at a moment’s notice, but you knew he’d never go for that.

You: *Yes. I thought it could get two birds with one stone. No coming out ball for you, and I’d get to improve my language skills.*

Ignis: *Is it an all day affair?*

It wasn’t. The poetry class was only until lunch, but he didn’t need to know that…

You: *Of course! I wouldn’t have invited you otherwise.*

You: *Haha! I would never waste your time on something that didn’t help you! Silly Ignis!*

Ignis: *Are you alright?*

You: *Yes. :)*

You: *Pick me up at 8 am on Saturday?*

Ignis: *See you then.*
You: Yes. :) :) Be ready with your best and most romantic thoughts.

Ignis: What is that meant to mean?

You: Altissian is a romance language, Iggy.

Ignis: I’ll keep it tame for the sake of the course.

You: Don’t worry about that. Get as down and dirty as you want. :) :) :)

Ignis: Your abuse of smiley faces is concerning.

You: :) See :) you :) Saturday :) 

—

Fresh from a shower and determined to get your friend to open up this secret side of himself, you strode into your kitchen Saturday morning to scrounge up a last minute breakfast before leaving for the poetry class. Your phone rang once, going ignored when you saw that it was Mom. She never called, for good reason, and you weren’t really in the mood to find out what she would complain about this time.

The second time was shorter, and you waited until you were completely done with your breakfast before checking to see what could’ve been so urgent. A message sat in your inbox from Mom when you finally did check.

__Bokeh died last night.__

The simple statement made you freeze. Not your chocobo. Ignis’ face appeared on your phone’s screen, and you answered with a light, forced laugh.

“H-hey,” you stuttered, no longer feeling any sort of pull to seem genuinely excited about the poetry class. “I can’t make it. I’m sorry. Bokeh died and I— I have to go home. Right now.”

You rushed to your room, your phone tucked between your ear and your shoulder. On the line, Ignis let out a breath. “I’m so sorry.”

“Young, sure,” you said, throwing clothes into a small suitcase. Whatever. You just needed to buy the soonest bus ticket home. “Sorry I can’t help you today, but this is important, Ignis, I have—”

“Let me drive you home,” he interrupted. “I’m only a block away right now. I’ll stop just long enough for you to get in and take you directly there.”

“I dunno.” You struggled against the zipper of your suitcase. “I can take the bus.”

“Please.” He sounded resolute already, and you knew you’d have an argument on your hands. There was no time for that. You wanted to rush home now to prove to yourself that Bokeh was actually just fine, and Mom was just a jerk with the worst sense of humor in the world. Ignis’ voice broke you from the train of thought. “Allow me to drive you. It would be quicker than the bus. I don’t mind in the least.”

Looking out your window, you spotted him parked along the sidewalk, his black car standing out against the rundown street. “Okay, I’m coming down.”

You practically threw your suitcase down the stairs without a second thought and shoved it into his
car before climbing in. “Thanks, Ignis.”

He nodded. “Just lead the way.”

Chapter End Notes

The comments and kudos I’ve received are the most positive encouragement ever, and I appreciate all of you! It’s given me such a steady drive to write this so thank you!!! I really can’t express how surprised and grateful I am so I’ll just keep writing. :)

Also Bombulum is Latin for fart because I'm a fucking child bye <3
The drive was just over an hour, directly west. Ignis’ car smelled like leather, and the music playing was a soft ambient that went well with your brooding look out the window. He didn’t say anything for much of the drive, occasionally commenting quietly on something you passed. You didn’t say anything at all. The closer you got to the destination, the bigger a knot formed in your stomach.

At first, you’d absently checked your phone for any more messages from Mom. Within the first fifteen minutes of the drive, she’d sent you a small barrage of messages that had you sinking further into yourself.

Mom: *In having her cremated now Sorry for not waiting for you but it was beginning to smell.*

You: *That’s okay.*

The literal last thing you wanted to see was the best childhood friend you ever had be turned into ashes.

Mom: *I’m picking out an urn Is blue okay.*

You: *It’s good.*

Mom: *What about green There is a nice green one,*

You: *Green’s good, too.*

Who cared, you thought. Who the hell cared what color it was? You didn’t.

Mom: *What about a box instead?*

You: *Whatever you decide.*

Mom: *Honey she was your chocobo.*

You’d stopped answering after that, locking your phone in Ignis’ glove compartment for the remainder of the trip.

Now Ignis was driving you through the small farming town you’d grown up in, past the shops and the single local regency building. You’d went there on a field trip once when King Regis had been making rounds. It was a border town that sat close to the Wall, and the Marquess usually did things in Regis’ stead. Until his daughter took over his role a few years ago. It made you a little sick to think that Mirum was the one in control of this region.
People on the sidewalks stared at Ignis’ sleek black car as you passed. You slumped in the seat to avoid being seen. People talked in small towns. There was probably already a string of rumors about why a car from the Crown City was out this far. What other people said or assumed never bothered you, and since you’d moved to the city, you couldn’t care less about the people in this town. The only one whose opinion mattered was Mom’s.

You sent Ignis a side glance. Mom was going to have a lot to say if you showed up in this car with this man. On top of the loss of Bokeh, you didn’t want to deal with everything that might entail. She’d be aware that you were hurting, but you knew she’d grab at the chance to distract you with questions about Ignis or your life in the city. The idea of dealing with that was overwhelming.

—

When you were going past fields of wheat just beyond the town, you made him stop the car. He pulled over onto the dirt road that led to your childhood home and parked. A twist of pain was curling in your chest, and your breaths were coming out far too roughly. Ignis gave you a concerned look, and you rolled down the window for fresh air.

“I’ll walk from here,” you said, a breeze picking up and sending ripples through the flat expanse of wheatfields that surrounded you. “I’ll repay you when I get back to the city.”

He touched your arm gently. “I’m not leaving you.”

You shot him a glare, thoughts racing and chest heaving. “I said I’ll walk.” You got out, and he cut the engine, getting out to look at you over the roof of the car.

“Must you be this way?” He looked utterly abashed at your sudden decision, brows arching above his glasses. “I know this is a saddening—”

“Ignis.” You glowered at him. “Drop the chivalry for once and go home.”

“You’re being entirely unreasonable.”

“You don’t get it,” you told him, bringing your hands up to your face. “I can’t bring you to my house. I’ve never had a friend over— not even Prompto! My mom would make it a huge fucking ordeal, and I can’t deal with that when— damn it!” You began raking your fingers down your face, but a pair of strong hands pried them away. In front of you, Ignis held them tightly, his face easing into empathy. It was unwelcome, and you kept your glare strong.

“Might you be overthinking this?”

You jerked your hands from his, taking a step back. Thoughts overcame you with little room to think straight; it felt impossible to think at all. You squeezed your hands into fists, and when he brought a hand up to your cheek, you knocked it away.

Looking down at your fists, you forced deep breaths. You weren’t going to freak out. This wasn’t the time or place. It took several minutes before you felt calmer, but even then, you didn’t feel like you could meet Ignis’ gaze.

“Do you really wish to walk?” His voice was quiet, and you would’ve bet that he was still giving you that awful look of compassion. Gathering the courage to meet his eyes, you found that you were right. Anger flared in you all over again, but you swallowed it down.

“No.” You worried your lower lip, sending him a contemplative look. “But you can’t stick around.”
Back in the car, you kept giving him glances as he began driving down the gravel path. You couldn’t explain or understand your ire, but you knew it shouldn’t have been directed at him.

“I’m sorry.”

He kept his gaze forward. “Think nothing of it.”

That was an impossible thing for him to request. There wasn’t anything that you could think nothing of, ever. Your anxiety made sure of that. Coming to a stop in front of your childhood home, you were conflicted with even more emotions. Nostalgia, a sense of comfort, the feeling of being trapped and forgotten in time, and alarm at the situation you found yourself in.

The last time you’d been there, during the winter holiday, everything had been dead. Now it was all vibrant greens and flowers and sunshine. It was a cruel joke by the Six to make the day so beautiful when you couldn’t appreciate it.

Mom’s truck wasn’t anywhere to be seen, which gave you a sudden surge of confidence that you could get Ignis out of there before she got back from the crematorium with Bokeh’s ashes. You twisted your hands together, fingers tangled in your lap as you considered your words. “I’m sure you have important stuff to get back to, but since you came all this way, I guess I should invite you in for tea or something?”

He smiled softly, and it made you a bit less anxious. “I’m not one for tea, I’m afraid.” That was a pretty clear rejection, you thought, a little disconcerted. Then, he turned off the car and continued, “I’m not certain as to what important business you think I may have. If you remember, I’d planned to spend the day with you.”

You snorted despite yourself, easing up just a little more. “You always have something important to do.”

His thumb tapped against the steering wheel for a moment, the smile playing across his face as he looked at you. “Enough dallying. I’ll take a coffee, if the offer remains.”

—

By the time Mom arrived, you’d given Ignis a coffee and convinced him to leave. You’d spent most of his time in the house trying to distract him from all of the kitschy junk that littered the place, along with the endless number of humiliating photos of you that adorned the walls. You’d practically shoved him out the door when he commented on one of them taken during the time that you’d had braces as a teenager.

“How precious,” he’d said with a chuckle.

What an ass.

That’s exactly what you’d said when Prompto had shown you a photo of himself when he’d been a chubby kid. And it was true, Prompto had been precious. But you’d also said it to just be a little mean. It was easier to be firm about making Ignis leave when he was being mean.

Mom carried an urn in her arms when she came in, placing it on the kitchen table. She gave you a long hug and asked in smooth motions with her hands, How are you?

You shrugged. “Crappy. You?”
A smile broke her aged face. _Me, too. Are you hungry?_

Shaking your head, you took a better look at the urn. It was odd, made of some kind of brown paper-like material. You picked it up, examining the texture. _Bokeh_ was printed on the outside. Turning it over revealed smaller print claiming it was biodegradable, containing soil and tree seeds. You shot your Mom a look. “They mixed her ashes with dirt?”

She nodded. _It’s what I decided. She’ll become a tree._

You frowned. “What kinda tree?”

With a shrug, Mom smiled. _Something beautiful._

You looked down at the urn in your hands. Your chocobo had already been something beautiful. The ache in your chest spiralled deeper, and you were angry again. At yourself, mostly, for not being around to take care of her at the end.

Mom tapped on the tabletop, grabbing your attention. _Want to bury her?_

You held the urn a little tighter. “No.”

_We have to do it today._

Already? You’d thought she was alive just hours ago, and now you were supposed to leave her in the ground to be forgotten? You felt sick. “We can’t wait?”

She shook her head. _It’s better the sooner we do it._

—

You picked a spot in the backyard and dug a hole. Sweaty and upset, you tossed the shovel away. Mom handed you the urn, and when you stood there with it in your hands for several minutes, unmoving, she took it from you and put it in the hole herself.

“I’m not ready,” you said, staring down at the ugly thing. That big bird who had carried you to so many places, who had been there when you’d went through so many of your firsts, fit into such a small space now.

Mom didn't acknowledge your words as she tilted the handle of the shovel toward you. Begrudgingly, you took it and began to cover the urn. You didn’t get to say goodbye, and you were absolutely pissed at yourself. Mom didn’t even seem sad about any of it. Afterward, you shrugged off her half-hearted comforting pats and stomped inside.

On your way to the bathroom to wash your hands, there was a knock at the door. You heaved a sigh, changing course to answer it. Any number of people could be coming by, depending on who Mom told about Bokeh. You weren’t equipped to deal with anyone. Every one of your nerves felt frayed and raw.

Opening the door, your expression slacked at the sight of Ignis standing on the porch. He appeared collected, but you could tell there was uncertainty on his face. As if you hadn’t spent an hour of your morning pushing him away, it was such a comfort just to see him in all of his straightlaced glory. With a bit of relief, you spoke first.

“I’m…” You swallowed, chest aching sharply. “I’m so glad you came back. I don’t actually think I can do this alone. My mom’s here, but—” You curled and uncurled your dirty hands in loose fists.
"But she’s acting really indifferent, like she’s been expecting this."

His features softened as you rambled, eyes searching your face. Then, he looked down for a second, looking back up when he’d pulled something from a pocket. Your phone. “You left this in my car.”

Oh. Right. You bit your lip and forced a smile. It was awkward. “Thanks. I totally forgot.” You took it from him, shoving it into a pocket while trying to think of a smooth way to retract what you’d just admitted.

A hand touched your arm, and suddenly you were sharing the doorway with Mom. She gave Ignis a once over, then turned to you. What does this guy want?

Your eyes flicked from her to Ignis, then back. You decided sign language would be best so that Ignis wouldn’t know what you were saying. He’s my friend. He can’t stay.

She looked at him for a moment. He seemed unbothered, bowing a little. What a nerd. Mom wasn’t someone people bowed to. She faced you again, this time with an amused look. Aren’t you going to introduce us?

You shook your head. He’s leaving now.

“Actually,” he spoke up. “If it isn’t too much trouble, I’d like to stay for a bit.”

You shot him a wide eyed look. When Mom looked at him again, he signed, Nice to meet you.

You stared with blank surprise as Ignis and Mom introduced themselves. She led him inside, and you watched in confusion as he followed her into the house. You closed the door, going straight to the bathroom to wash your hands. Maybe even lock yourself in there for a while.

It seemed like a solid plan for the first minute or so. Then you realized you’d left Ignis to the likes of Mom. You glared at your reflection in the mirror before leaving the bathroom. If nothing else, having Ignis here would provide a good distraction from your feelings.

“She is rather stubborn, I’ve found.”

You practically tore around the corner into the kitchen at the sound of Ignis’ voice. He sat at the kitchen table with Mom, legs crossed, easy but reserved smile on his face. It was like he was in a meeting, and Mom was a council member whose favor he needed to garner. You didn’t like it.

“Hey, I’m gonna show Ignis around.”

They both looked at you, and Ignis bowed slightly again when he excused himself from the table. You rolled your eyes, leading him out of the house. You hoped he enjoyed those five minutes with Mom because he was never allowed to come back.

“You’re such an uptight dork. Did you bow like that when—” You were about to say Noct’s parents, but stopped yourself. “When you met Prompto’s parents?”

“I would, should I get the chance to ever meet them.”

You stopped just down the front steps and looked back at him flatly. “Well, you should cool it with the weird polite noble formalities. You’re in the countryside right now, and someone might beat you up.”

He took the steps down, stopping at your side. “Is there hostility in the area toward people from the
city?"

You shrugged. “No, just toward people with fancy clothes and accents and cars that are worth more than entire houses in this town.”

With a careful frown, he gazed down at you. “You’re having me on.”

A small smile grew on your face. “Maybe. Is it making you want to leave?”

One of his gloved hands reached up to the pocket of his shirt, a finger touching the small golden chain that held his pocket watch in place. “Is that what you wish?”

Your eyes focused on the tiny strip of gold. You wanted him to stay. Mom was acting shockingly blasé about everything, and now if Ignis left, she’d be asking you a million questions, beginning with are you dating that charming young man? Fucking ugh.

If you made him leave now, you could probably hole up in your old bedroom and call Prompto to let off steam. But he was working all morning and had big plans to hang out with Noctis for the rest of the day. Guy Time™ and you weren’t invited.

Ignis was right here, willing to stay, and had a presence you hadn’t realized had become so reassuring. Sure, he was just avoiding Mirum’s ball, but you would take what you could get.

You reached up a hand, gently touching the golden chain. He curled his finger around yours, and you looked up at his face. “I’d like it if you stayed.”

—

You showed him anything worth seeing, which was, by all accounts, not much. There was a pond nearby. At the edge there was a large rock that you’d climb to see who was coming down the drive. As a kid, you’d pretend you were a king or queen and that was your throne. As a teenager, you’d use it as a hiding-in-plain-sight location to get high without your moms catching you. All you told Ignis about it was that you’d jumped off of it into the pond once and broke your wrist in two places because the water had been too shallow.

He climbed up it with unsurprising ease, even in his silly, overdressed outfit, and you sat up there together for a short while. He listened to a few moody gripes and let you clear your head. The anger was dissipating. Just a little.

In the backyard, you pointed out the barn and the pile of dirt that marked the burial. You wanted to go into the barn to show him Bokeh, but she wasn’t there. She’d never be there again. You’d entertained the idea of bringing Prompto to meet her more than once, and now you didn’t even have that option.

Looking at Ignis suddenly, you forced those thoughts away. You knew he hadn’t eaten anything because he’d spent the morning driving, and it was nearing lunch time. “Are you hungry?”

He started slightly at your question. “Not particularly.”

The spring sun hit is dirty blond hair. You wanted to reach up and run your fingers through it to let loose the gel. Insomnian fashion was incredibly attractive this season, you thought, and Ignis was only following along with what was considered professional and trendy. But you had an unexplained ache for something softer from your friend.

You shifted your weight, dispelling those thoughts as well. “Well, too bad. You’re probably gonna
be fed a lot while you’re here.”

He chuckled, and it was soft, but not quite the softness you were looking for. “I daresay I’ll manage to survive.”

—

Mom drug out a photo album. You knew it was coming, but you didn’t want to believe she’d be so cruel. You complained that you and Ignis were very invested in King’s Knight, and couldn’t be bothered with such nonsense. Ignis betrayed you by putting his phone away, letting Mom squish herself between both of you on the sofa in the living room.

You were quieted when you realized it was mostly of you and Bokeh. Ignis liked the one where she’d hopped in the bath with you when you were five. You flipped the page quickly to spare yourself the embarrassment, but that only led to photos that hurt. Ones of you riding her without a saddle —painful, not recommended— and ones with hugs and your face buried in feathers. Ones where your other mom had still been alive, showing you how to take care of chocobos properly.

Mom lingered on a picture of you, so small, sitting on a tiny Bokeh while your other mom led the reins. You had no memory of that. Now, you were the only one in the photo left alive. You bit the inside of your cheek and stood up.

“I’ve gotta drop a major deuce.”

Slapping you on the knee, Mom began a string of signs telling you not to say crude things in front of a guest.

“What?” You backed away so she couldn’t slap you again. “He’s used to it. Right, Ignis?”

“Unfortunately,” he said with a small bit of amusement.

“Don’t fall in love while I’m gone,” you said as you left the room.

As soon as you locked the bathroom door, you sent Prompto a message.

**You:** I have a problem with my life.

He was working at his supermarket job today. You hoped he’d been put in the back room so he’d be more likely to respond.

**Prompto:** wat is it this time??

Smiling at the immediate reply, you sat on the edge of the tub. You could talk about what was really eating at you, but more trivial issues came to mind. It was more fun to think about boy problems rather than face the very real ordeal of losing someone you loved.

**You:** I’m at my mom’s, and the Boy is here.

**Prompto:** sry which boy?

**You:** The one who broke my dry spell.

**Prompto:** o ya, the coffee guy! dude how did this happen??

**You:** I’m an idiot. He offered to give me a ride this morning, and I took it.
**Prompto:** wait y r u at ur moms house?

**You:** My chocobo died.

**Prompto:** :( im so sry

**Prompto:** ill call after work

**You:** Don’t worry about it. It’s not like I’m alone.

**Prompto:** ya but still im here 4 u and if u want the boy 2 leave just tell him

**You:** The problem is that I don’t want him to.

**Prompto:** :O

**You:** I know! It's not like we’re doing anything important. We just wasted an entire hour playing King’s Knight.

**Prompto:** dude

**You:** I left him alone with my mom. Who knows what the hell they're talking about in there.

**Prompto:** i thought ur mom was deaf

**You:** The Boy knows sign language for some fucking reason.

**Prompto:** lol wat r u goin 2 do

**You:** I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking you!

**Prompto:** he seems cool

**You:** Trust me. He’s not.

**Prompto:** he has a car

**You:** So?

**Prompto:** i think u like him

**You:** Duh, Prom. I don’t sleep with people I don’t like.

**Prompto:** ya rite u slept w my roommate & i kno u never spoke 2 each other b4 that

**You:** That was one time!

**Prompto:** ok w/e im sry ur chocobo died & u kno ily but u need 2 figure out ur own feelings

**You:** There are no feelings, Prom.

**Prompto:** i meant being sad n stuff

**Prompto:** u r prob vulnerable rite now
Sliding off the edge of the tub, you sank to the floor. He was right. You felt really vulnerable, exposed to Ignis in a way you weren’t used to letting people see you. It freaked you out having him here. So far he’d been very casual about it all. Patient, even. That only made things more unsettling.

You: Thanks. I’ll let you know how it goes.

Prompto: u better!! i g2g b4 i get yelled at again

You sat there on the floor for a few minutes, gathering yourself and your thoughts. Then, you pushed yourself up and out of the room. Ignis was standing near the front door at the end of the hallway. He idly adjusted a glove, looking up when you got closer.

“We’re going to the market.”

“We?”

He nodded. “You and I.”

Just great. You left him alone for a few minutes, and he was already volunteering to do errands.

Giving him your most unamused look, you asked, “Why?”

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “I told your mother we would gather the ingredients for supper.”

“Shiva,” you sighed, walking past him and slipping on your shoes. When you got outside, you realized you’d be going in his car. Turning around, you attempted to smile sweetly at him. “Can I drive?”

He wasn’t buying it. “Are you licensed?”

You scoffed. “Of course I am.” Though you only ever used it to help prove your age when buying alcohol. Matching pace with him, you jabbed at him playfully with an elbow. “Please, Iggy?”

He deftly avoided your elbow, but stopped in front of the car and held out a hand. Car keys dangled between his fingers, and you snatched them before he could change his mind.

You spent a couple of moments adjusting the seat and mirrors, sliding your hands over the steering wheel in excitement. This would be the nicest car you’d ever driven.

Ignis cleared his throat. “Care to get a move on?”

You turned the ignition, smiling at the roar of the engine. Nice. As you pulled it into gear and slammed your foot on the pedal, it jerked out of the driveway like the tongue of a gigantoad, gravel spitting everywhere behind you.

If Ignis were any other man, he may have screamed or at least yelped. Instead he braced himself, muttering a “dear gods” as you took a turn far too quickly. The tires squealed when you hit the main road, and you thought Ignis may turn completely white before you made it to the market. So you slowed down just to give him a breather.

Until the wheat fields ended, and you passed a range of chocobos. They raced along the fence that separated them from the road, and you sped up to match their speed. The tight curl of pain in your heart unwound just a little. This was incredible.
The place was bustling, busier than you remembered. Since it was spring, everything was out in the open air, vendors calling out their wares and customers hefting their purchases around. It was a little overwhelming compared to the stores you were used to these days, but it was an even trade off because everything was fresher here than in the city.

Ignis didn’t hesitate to begin the prowl, as if he’d been here a million times. You stuck by his side until you saw a vendor selling tacky t-shirts. Yes, yes, and yes. You found him by a dairy stall ten minutes later with not one but two shirts in hand.

“I got us matching shirts,” you said, stopping next to him casually. “Since our friendship has went up several levels today.”

He was quick to respond, not even looking at you. “Is that what was occurring as my life flashed before my eyes?”

“You enjoyed it. I saw how much fun you were having.”

“I’m not letting you drive us back.”

You pouted. “Oh, c’mon, Iggy!”

He moved on to another vendor, sending you a side glance. “I’d rather not have to explain to the others why I had to have my car towed from a ditch in the middle of nowhere.”

“Hey, I’m a fast diver, not a bad one.” You crossed your arms.

“You’re a reckless madwoman,” he said, “With a strange need to be one with the chocobos.”

Your arms slacked and fell to your sides, a frown coming to your face. You were trying to be cheerful, but he wasn’t making it easy. None of this was easy. The pain in your chest tightened and bit at you.

At your silence, he paused in his examination of a potato to look at you fully. His eyes roamed your face carefully before dropping to the bag slung over your arm. “Let’s see them, then.”

After a moment more of pouting, you withdrew one of the shirts. It was black —you weren’t sure if Ignis would wear it otherwise— with a cactuar on the front. It wore sunglasses and had text that read Lookin’ Sharp.

His wary expression eased a little. “It’s somehow not as terrible as I was anticipating.”

“They had one with a sexy Kenny Crow on it,” you said as you shoved it back into the bag. “Wanna go back for that? He had some massive boobs.”

He frowned in distaste. “Absolutely not.”

“So I made a pretty good choice.”

His frown waned into something soft. “But why waste money on such a thing?”

You picked up a potato, pretending you were helping. “I just thought that… You might need something to wear if you wanted to stay until morning. That way you could avoid Mirum’s ball that’s happening tonight. Plus, I’ll need a ride back to the city tomorrow.” You peeked up at him, catching a thoughtful stare directed at you before he schooled it.
“There’s an idea,” he said, clearing his throat. “Are you certain I wouldn’t be intruding?”

Putting the potato down, you shrugged. “I said I’d help you get out of it. If he asks, just tell your uncle you were here to give me emotional support. I mean…” You rubbed your arm a little awkwardly. “I think he’d understand that something like this takes precedence over a party. Since he thinks we’re still courting or whatever.”

Gods, you felt awkward. The suggestion made sense to you logically, but it didn’t negate the fact that you were asking him to stay overnight. Sure, you were just friends, and if this were Prompto, it wouldn’t be awkward at all. But Ignis made you all kinds of nervous on even the best of days, and lately you’d spent long showers remembering what it was like having him licking every inch of you.

It was amazing, if not appalling, that the man who’d chatted with Mom so easily was the same one who’d said he’d wanted to eat you like his favorite dessert.

Now, he was looking at you with that same thoughtful look he had before. You looked down and away with a small frown. He’d backed off from being overly sympathetic all day, which you appreciated, but maybe he drew the line in his kindness at that. Asking him to stay until morning was a little selfish.

He broke the silence with a small chuckle. It was soft, and when you faced him, his eyes were alight. “I suppose our friendship has gained new levels, after all. I’d love to stay, if not just to hear more stories about you from your mother.”

Your frown grew as you walked with him to another stall. “What stories?”

He waved a hand dismissively. “I wouldn’t worry over it.”

“Dude, you know that only makes me worry about it.”

He smiled at you. No. No, he was smirking. “She told me about you catching a snake in a bucket when you were barely old enough to speak.”

You rolled your eyes. “I’ve heard that one a million times.”

“I rather liked the story about you kissing a turtle and it biting you on the lip.”

That hadn’t been your proudest moment. It had bled everywhere, and you’d been so mad because your moms had laughed for days. You sent him a withering look. “What else did she say?”

He hummed, pretending to think as he looked at an array of beans. “When you put makeup on for the first time. The accompanying photos were interesting. You seemed like a… creative teenager.”

You shoved him, but he didn’t budge. A light chuckle from him made your annoyance dissipate just a little. “When did she have time to tell you all that?”

“When you were hiding in the restroom.”

Leaving the bean vendor with him, you tried shoving him again. “I wasn’t hiding.”

He snatched your hand in one of his own before you could keep harassing him with shoves. “The only time you say crude things is when you want to escape an uncomfortable situation.”

His bare thumb rubbed soft circles into your knuckles while the rest of his leatherbound fingers took place between yours.
You pretended not to notice.

“So all the time?”

“Precisely.” He nodded, leading you into a large crowd of people. “Always crude. Always anxious.”

Huffing a breath, you pouted. “Gee, thanks.”

He stopped, the crowd around you moving nebulously, and looked at you over his shoulder.

“Always lovely, too.”

You worried your lower lip, unsure. Every brain cell you had hovered over the “flirt” button in your skull, but none came down to press it. Ignis had apparently decided to combat your flirtations with his own, and it was working because you were less and less inclined to make passes at him when he’d only turn it around on you in some way.

—

The midday market crowds were relentless. Someone yelling your name in excitement caught your attention. Nearby, appearing from within the crowd, one of your old childhood friends waved at you. You hadn’t seen her in years. A baby was in her arms, drooling and wide eyed.

“Hey,” you greeted, staring at the baby in amazement. She approached you and, without warning, put it right in your arms. You let go of Ignis’ hand and scrambled a little to hold it properly, though it was hard because it kept squirming.

“How’ve you been?” Old Friend didn’t wait for you to answer before going on about herself, telling you the baby’s name—it was a girl—and finishing with a look of pride.

You cooed at the baby, then without thinking —you didn’t want to hold her—you passed her to Ignis. He froze, holding her away from him with his hands cradled under her chubby little arms. Turning back to your Old Friend, you asked, “Who knocked you up?”

She laughed at your blunt question. “Do you remember Victus?”

“Oh,” you gave her a sheepish look, trying to backtrack. “That loser?”

Her amusement waned. “Yeah, he’s my husband.”

Yikes, you thought. You guys were barely into your twenties, and she was already married with a kid? What a nightmare. She was just as bad as the nobles who began courting at twenty. Old Friend’s expression became flat, and you realized you’d just insulted her husband.

“Oh.” You gave her a sheepish look, trying to backtrack. “That’s awesome.”

She rolled her eyes, looking past you. “So, who’s your friend?”

You looked over your shoulder to see Ignis holding the baby a safe distance from his person as if it were a bomb ready to blow. His entire expression spoke alarm, brows drawn and jaw slack. A long line of drool hung from the baby’s mouth, dangerously close to getting on him as she wiggled and giggled in his grip. She was struggling to reach his glasses, speaking in gibberish and holding her arms out.

You snorted. “Afraid of babies, apparently.”

His eyes snapped to you in a silent plea to free him. You wanted to make him stay like that until
drool covered his nice shirt, but took pity, taking the baby and cooing, “Aw, don’t worry, he’s rigid like that with everybody.”

Ignis looked at you as if you’d betrayed him, adjusting his glasses and clearing his throat. “I’ve never held a child before.”

You snickered, holding the baby in your arms with much more care than he had. It was second nature, and you weren’t even sure you liked kids. “It’s more like you’ve never seen a baby before.” You looked back at Old Friend, but she was still staring at Ignis with a smile. It was almost… flirtatious. Well, you couldn’t have that. You got her attention by handing the baby back to her. “We’ve gotta go. It’s been great catching up.”

“Hey, wait.” Old Friend followed you as you began to push Ignis further down the market. “You never introduced me.”

“Right. This is Iggy.” You let out a small laugh. “In the city, we have lovers instead of husbands. So, y’know.” You shrugged, and left her in the throng of people.

Still pushing him, you were slightly startled when he grabbed the hand you had pressed against him. He began to tug you along instead, weaving through the stalls until you squeezed at his hand and snickered. “Ignis, she was totally married. You need to cool it with your bedroom eyes or whatever you were doing that got her attention.”

He looked down at you, unamused. “Shouldn’t be a problem since she believes me to be your lover.”

A wicked grin grew on your face; you’d enjoyed claiming him because it gave you a brief, if false, sense of superiority. Beyond that, you liked the rise it got out of him. Have you ever mentioned how much you liked his reactions? Because you really did.

You stopped at one of the stands, letting go of his hand to inspect vegetables. “I thought you were gonna die with that kid in your hands.”

He held up two tomatoes to compare them, looking thoughtful. “That’s precisely how I felt.”

Your face was going to split from how hard you were grinning. You pointed at the tomato in his left hand, and he nodded, putting the other one down. “You’re a trained fighter,” you said. “And you were afraid of some slobber getting on your fancy boy clothes.” The last three words were heavy with a fake royal accent.

Frowning, he leaned down to examine something else. “Of all the many things I’m trained in, handling children isn’t one of them.”

“Isn’t Noct a kid, pretty much?”

“At times it feels that way.”

“You can’t tell me he hasn’t ever drooled on you before.”

That made him smile, and he looked away, hiding a soft chuckle. “Fair point.”

—

Mom: Is that boy really your lover?. I just got a call from...
You sighed, not even opening the message. Word did spread fast in small towns.

She was probably freaking out. As far as she knew, you were still the virginal girl who’d left for college only years before.

—

Once you were back, food in arm and ready to relax, you let Mom know that Ignis wasn't leaving until morning. She wasted no time letting both of you know that Ignis would have to sleep in the guest room downstairs.

“I truly appreciate your generosity,” he said, attention primarily on his phone. It had beeped several times on the drive back. Unsurprisingly, he hadn’t let you answer the messages for him while he drove.

“She thinks you’re gonna get me pregnant if we sleep on the same floor.”

Ignis’ head snapped up, looking from you to Mom. “I beg your pardon?”

Mom slapped you on the back of the head, and you rolled your eyes. “That stupid joke I made at the market somehow got back to her because people are idiots and everyone thinks I have a lover in the big city.”

“Ah.” His expression eased, though he seemed uncomfortable now. You could read it in the slight downturn of his mouth and the way he kept touching his glasses.

_I wasn’t going to let you sleep on the same floor anyway_, Mom signed.

Ignis nodded. “I respect your rules, ma’am.”

You rolled your eyes again. What a kissass. “That sucks. I was looking forward to having a pillow fight and talking about boys.”

—

Mom practically shoved you and Ignis out of the kitchen when it came to preparing dinner. You expected it, but Ignis seemed disheveled, his plans for making dinner apparently ruined by Mom taking over. He sat with you in the living room, and you sighed at the sight of the old tapes stacked on the coffee table.

Mom had clearly done some digging in the attic while you were away. She must be really excited that you had a friend over. The handwritten labels were worn, but you knew what they were. When Ignis picked one up, you resigned yourself to sharing this with him, too. There didn’t seem to be an end to the amount of your life that he was witnessing today.

Once you got back to the city, you were going to demand Ignis take you to his family’s estate so you could rummage around his past in return. It was only fair. The dinner with his uncle hadn’t shed nearly as much light about him as you were beginning to wish for.

When you played the tape, you were greeted with your own face, gap toothed and young. Even back then, you’d liked making movies. They were arguably better than the ones you made now.

“It’s Cactuar Queen and her magical chocobo sidekick Chocomancer!” Younger you announced, putting the camera down somewhere to stand proudly in the frame. You were outside, the barn in the backdrop of the video as you twirled your green cape around.
This was so much more embarrassing than you remembered.

Editing wasn’t a thing that you knew about back then, and even if you had, you really doubted you would’ve figured it out, anyway. So there were just hard cuts between scenes of you running around corn fields and Bokeh tearing off the cape you kept putting on her.

“Bokeh, no! I’m gonna make you a star!”

You laughed as you watched your younger self try and fail at making the chocobo listen. She had been the best bird. You missed her so much, and you hated yourself for not being there.

Ignis’ hand found yours on the empty space between you on the couch. You let him curl his fingers around yours, enjoying the thrill of it. The smallest things from him felt different. Despite everything, you were glad he was there.

“You should’ve submitted this to the Altissians.”

You snorted and got up to switch the tape out with another. “The next one is even better. You get to see me as an eight year old who thinks she can breakdance.”

—

Half an hour past the imposed bedtime that night — because Mom was the epitome of old fashioned — you snuck out of your room. It was impossible for you to get to sleep so early, even without the knots of grief in your stomach. You felt hopeless and restless and all the other -lesses that made you incapable of lying around.

You were cut off by Mom on the stairs. She shook her head at you.

“No sneaking to see your friend.”

That hadn’t even been on your mind. You could hear the shower running downstairs, and had thought that with him being busy with that, you could avoid him on your way outside. You didn’t want to talk to anyone at this point.

“I’m just getting a drink of water,” you lied. “Gods, old woman, get off my back.”

Her expression softened, and she brought her hands to your arms, rubbing them gently before drawing away. I’ll get it for you. Go back to bed.

Suppressing a sigh, you went back to your room. Five minutes later, she brought you a glass of water. Ten minutes, the shower downstairs cut off. Fifteen, you slowly opened the window and crawled onto the roof.

You’d done this a lot as a kid, out the window, down the trellis, hello freedom. As you climbed down the trellis for the first time in years, it creaked with every step and shook under your weight. You were too damn old to be doing this, but if you were going to be treated like you were fifteen, you were going to act like it.

Stopping for a moment by the mound where you’d buried the ashes, you felt your chest tighten all over again. That entire thing, the burial, hadn’t been much of a goodbye. You touched the mound, uncaring of the soil it left on your hands. She was going to be something beautiful. Then, you went to the barn, a place you’d avoided since arrival. It was mustier than you remembered, hay laying everywhere. It smelled terrible, but that was almost a comfort in itself.

Lighting a lamp that hang from one of the posts, you sat on one of the only remaining properly tied hay bales, looking around. So this was it. The place would be empty from now on. Along one of the
walls were smudges of paint. Handprints from you, footprints from a chocobo.

You dropped your face into your hands. This was really it.

—

The sound of footsteps crunching over the grass outside startled you from your quiet sobs. You’d left the barn door wide open so you suspected Mom was coming to lecture you on sneaking out. She’d be forgiving when she realized you were just grieving, you thought. Wiping at your wet face, you blinked the oncoming tears away. You hated crying in front of people.

A low voice called your name, and Ignis leaned a head into the doorway cautiously. “Are you alright?”

You took a deep breath, suddenly preparing yourself for a different conversation entirely. Ignis coming out here hadn’t occurred to you. “No, I’m not.”

He stepped further in, and you saw that he was wearing the dumb shirt you’d bought. His hair was down, still damp and mussed as if he’d tried and failed to go to sleep. He looked ridiculous. You almost smiled.

“I saw you come out here earlier,” he said, sitting next to you on the hay. It wasn’t the most comfortable seating, and you could see that he wasn’t a fan by the look on his face. “When half an hour passed, I grew worried.”

More tears threatened to cloud your eyes. You dropped your face into your hands again to avoid letting him see. Your voice was thick with a cry you were holding back. “You worry too much.”

He sighed, and you felt a hand go to your back, rubbing gently. “Perhaps.”

You sat there for a while, trying and failing to quiet your crying. It was humiliating. Every time you opened your mouth to tell him to go away, a sob escaped instead.

“She seemed to be well loved,” he told you, voice solemn. “Your mother told me she had lived longer than most chocobos should. It was merely her time to depart.”

You sniffled, looking at him and wiping your eyes. “You’re really super bad at this comforting thing.” His hand on your back paused. Sniffling again, you leaned into him. “I can’t remember the last time I cried. I never cry.”

His hand left your back, finding purchase at your waist. He hugged you to his side. “Gladio cried only days ago.”

A quiet breath, a laugh, bubbled up from you. “What, why?”

“It’s rather complicated, if I recall.” He hummed as if he were thinking, but you knew it was only something he affected. “Long story short, he spilled expired cup ramen on his favorite uniform.”

“I thought his favorite was to go shirtless.”

“While that may be true,” he chuckled and you felt it against your head at his chest. “This uniform was specially tailored for an important event. He’d been rather proud of it.”

You snorted quietly into a hand. Gladio was so weird. All of them were. That’s why you fit in so well.
“We’ve got time,” you said, sounding a bit calmer, feeling a bit better. “What’s the long story?”

“I have to preface this with the tale of our visit with the royal tailors.” He adjusted his glasses, shifting beneath you. “Noct thought it amusing to suggest tearaway trousers, an unfortunate remark as the tailor took it very seriously…”

His lilted tones comforted you into a state of relaxation. You were still sad, but you weren’t alone with it. He kept talking until he seemed ready to fall asleep right there in the hay. Crickets sang a song outside, and the night air was comfortably cool so you weren’t that far behind.

“I was going to trick you, y’know,” you admitted, eyes feeling heavy. “There wasn’t an Altissian class.”

“I know. I looked it up to check for any type of syllabus, and noticed the only class for today had been for poetry.”

You smiled. “Of course you did, you nerd.”

He shifted, stretching a leg out. He seemed ready to get up. You probably should; sleeping in the barn seemed like the worst idea. “Why poetry?”

Removing yourself from him, you stood up and yawned. “Because I like what you write. At least what I saw before you took it away.”

A long, lean stretch of a man, he stood up next to you and rolled his shoulders. Bits of hay stuck to the tacky t-shirt, and you mindlessly picked them off.

“Should I ever feel inspired, I might allow you to read whatever I may write in the future.”

You made for the exit, avoiding any direct looks at his face. You didn’t trust yourself not to come on to him, even in this location and in this emotional state. “I can’t wait.”

—

The next morning, your ancient alarm clock came on, belting out old tunes. You’d completely forgotten about how annoying that was. Slamming your hand on it, you effectively ended the wake me up, wake me up inside horror that had been emanating from it and sat up with a grunt.

You tumbled down the stairs without getting ready because you smelled breakfast. Sweet, made-with-Mom’s-love breakfast, one of the things you missed most about leaving home. She was in the kitchen with Ignis when you ran in. He sat at the table with coffee, already perfectly dressed for the return home —big fucking surprise— except for the loose way he had his hair. When he met your eyes, a slight smile coming to his face, you felt absurdly shy.

It had been easy to avoid looking at him the night before because of the situation, but now you were faced with an Ignis who was not only Adorable but Unbearable.

Looking quickly at Mom, you asked, “Food?”

Great job. Super articulate this morning.

Did you make your bed? she asked.

“No,” you mumbled, sitting in front of Ignis at the table. “It’s pointless.”

He made his bed. She pointed at Ignis with a smile. You should be more productive like him.
“Of course he made his bed.” You kept your gaze on the lines in the wood of the table, chewing your bottom lip to fight a smile. “He’d make every bed in the house if you let him.”

You peeked at Ignis through your lashes. He stared at you, a gloved hand curled loosely around the coffee mug. You self consciously touched your hair, wishing you’d checked your appearance before coming downstairs. The lure of food had been too powerful.

As you continued to avoid his direct gaze, Mom lavished both of you in food enough to feed a Catoblepas.

You were two bites in when Ignis leaned forward slightly, voice in a whisper that was entirely pointless. “You needn’t be embarrassed about last night, if that is why you’re behaving so peculiarly.”

Lifting your chin, you met his eyes. “I’m not embarrassed.”

You were embarrassed.

Also, looking at him had been a mistake. His hair was swept out of his eyes but lacked the careful preciseness you’d expected from him. It was his piercing eyes and perfect bow lips that made him look more like a model than a government worker. Especially now with his less severe hairstyle.

You felt a blush coming on, paused with your fork halfway to your mouth. The food on it fell to your plate. Looking at the fallen bite, you placed the fork down and cleared your throat. “I’m gonna go get ready.”

He gave you a confused look as you left the table. You practically ran away, smacking your damned cheeks for betraying how you felt. There was something unspeakably attractive about Ignis, in general. This version of him, specifically, continued to render you into a shy state of being that was nothing like yourself. Last time you had dealt with it by running away and taking Oracle’s Kiss. You very much doubted Mom had anything like that in her medicine cabinet.

How the hell you were going to make the drive back to the Crown City without melting into a puddle of blushing giggles was a mystery.

—

The car drove smoothly even on the bumpiest roads. You kept your eyes on your phone or out the window. Not a word had passed between you since your attempt to eat breakfast. You were overreacting, and you knew it. But that didn’t mean you knew how to stop.

“Have I done something to offend you?”

You sent him a side glance. His eyes were on the road, the corners of his mouth pulled down into a slight frown. Even his profile was perfect, you thought as you looked away.

“No.”

Checking your phone for what had to be hundredth time in just twenty minutes, you found a message. Finally, a distraction.

_Prompto: how r u??_

_You: Shitty._
Prompto: how did it go w/ the boy?

You: We’re coming back to the city now.

You felt Ignis look at you briefly, glancing at him again just in time to catch him returning his eyes to the road. With a thump, your heart rocked heavily in your chest.

You: Prom, I think I have a Titan-sized crush on this guy.

Prompto: called it

You: Thanks a lot. So glad you’re here to help.

Prompto: wat? u nvr needed my help b4

Prompto: ur just goin 2 dump him as soon as u get back 2 the city bcuz u always do that when ppl get 2 close

You: It’s more complicated than that.

Prompto: w/e u say dude

You: How was your guy time with Noct?

Prompto: idk the usual except noct said iggys sick so we had 2 order pizza

You: Noct seriously expected Ignis to cook for you guys?

Prompto: ya i mean iggy usually doesnt mind & noct was tryin 2 save him from that ball thing

You: That’s fair I guess. Is Ignis doing okay?

Prompto: idk last i knew gladio said it was just a cold

“So you told Gladio to cover for you?” you asked without looking up from your phone. “He told the guys you have a cold.”

Ignis hummed an affirmative.

Reading and rereading Prompto’s last message, you asked, “How much does Gladio know?”

He took a bit longer to answer. “Everything.”

You locked your phone and looked out the window. “Even the fake courtship thing?”

“I’m afraid so.” Ignis cleared his throat. “Please forgive my decision. It had been during his birthday breakfast, and I’d been compelled to share.”

The car passed fields of nothing, the occasional tree marking the distance you were making as you began to see the city in the far off distance. You chewed on the inside of your cheek, trying to understand what Ignis was saying. Gladio hadn’t let on that he knew so much. You didn’t get that. You didn’t get why Ignis had to tell him everything in the first place.

A large sign appeared at the roadside, whizzing past quickly, but not before you were able to catch the words ice cream.
“Hey.” You looked at him, lightly hitting his arm with the back of your hand. “Let’s stop here.”

You’d spent more than enough time at Mom’s but weren’t ready to go back quite yet.

The ice cream portions were large, and the only option was a cone. You sat on the trunk of the car as you ate, Ignis talking to someone on the phone a short distance away. When he approached you after the call, you were nowhere near finished.

The wind ruffled his hair. He didn’t try to fight it, checking the time on his pocket watch and gazing about the tiny rest area. Aside from the man at the window of the ice cream hut, you were the only people there.

“Are you upset with me?”

You blinked at his sudden question, tongue paused mid-lick. Collecting yourself, you shrugged.

“Dude, I don’t care that you told Gladio.”

A soft sigh. Gloved fingers adjusting glasses. Tawny hair picking up in the wind. “I meant the distance you’ve placed between us all morning.”

Playing dumb was an option, but that only ever worked on people who actually thought you were dumb. You thought —hoped— that Ignis didn’t fall into that category. So you lied instead.

“I’m just stressed. Finals start tomorrow, and I spent the weekend being sad and goofing off.” By all accounts, you should’ve been stressed about finals, considering you hadn’t studied yet. But you didn’t have much to study for aside from two exams. Every other final had been obligatory group films that you’d already finished.

He nodded as if that made sense. “I hadn’t realized your exams were so soon. I’d thought…” He became uncomfortable, eyes searching your face as his mind searched for the right thing to say. “Perhaps I had unintentionally slighted you.”

There was that little peek of awkward Ignis that you got to see on rare occasions. You were completely charmed.

“I dunno why you think I’d be mad at you,” you laughed, gazing down at the melting ice cream cone in your hand. “You’re perfect.”

Dust kicked up as he stepped toward you. Gently, he brought a hand to your chin and lifted your head to face him. His expression was soft, and it was everything you’d wanted. The little curve of his mouth, the certainty in his eyes.

You met him in a kiss.

The whir of passing cars and the whistle of the wind around you became muted, a disconnected track playing solely for you. Every bit of it felt surreal; just the two of you, alone.

The tight feeling you’d had in your chest all weekend unwound, your entire being becoming at ease. His tasted of coffee, a strong, bitter flavor invading the sweet remnants of ice cream in your mouth as he tilted his head and deepened the kiss. His lips were almost unreal in their pliable softness. When his tongue found yours, you melted like the ice cream that dripped down your fingers.

Your free hand grasped the lapel of his shirt, tugging him against you. He brought a hand to the nape
of your neck, fingers tangling in hair to hold you firmly as he kissed you harder.

“Hey, you kids!”

You were startled from the kiss by the yell. Faces only a breath apart, you both looked at the ice cream seller. He leaned out of his window, arms braced on the bottom of the sill. “Get outta here! Go home and do that!”

Facing Ignis, you met his eyes through smudged glasses. His lips were a wet pink, and when he quickly kissed you once more before letting go and straightening himself, a blush seared across your face.

“We should be on our way,” he said, glancing at the proprietor who continued to stare.

You jumped down and threw the remains of your ice cream into the only available bin. Ignis handed you a handkerchief when you got into the car, but you didn’t think it would help the stickiness.

If it were anyone else, you would’ve slowly licked the ice cream off, finger by finger. You would’ve asked if he wanted to take a detour down a back road so you could ride him until both of you were sweating in the late morning heat.

If it were anyone else, they probably would’ve said yes.

Because it was Ignis, you wiped off your hand and asked the ETA for when you’d get home.

Because it was Ignis, he gave you a simple answer without looking away from the road.

He was a complete picture of stoicism, as if he hadn’t, with a single kiss, just torn down every wall you’d created to protect yourself.

—

He helped take your bag out of his trunk even though you asked him not to. As he stood with you in front of your building, you felt a small bit of paranoia that Aranea was watching from somewhere in her apartment.

“If there’s anything you need, please let me know.” His expression was earnest, and it made you recoil inward.

You gave him a small nod and watched as he rounded his car to leave. “You’re so soft, Iggy.”

He paused after opening the car door. “Pardon?”

You cleared your throat, frowning at him. “I said fuck off, Iggy.”

Quickly, you climbed the stoop and went inside before you accidentally voiced any more of your thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

Finished this super early at the risk of burnout because I’ve been a depressed bitch and I needed this fluff and hurt/comfort.
Thank you for the kudos, comments, or for just reading silently like a sneaky ninja. You guys are the best. <3
Let's change the subject. I'm leaving.

Chapter Notes

There isn't as much Ignis as in the past few chapters, but bear with me because things are happening!

Warning for the most obvious and underwhelming reveal ever, a useless cameo, and, because I've failed to warn you so far, bad language and drug use.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You made it through finals in a haze of coffee, weed, and anxiety. The two exams you had to take weren't hard. You felt you could've drawn dicks on the essay pages and still passed, they were that pointlessly easy.

The hard part was sitting through all of the shittiest student films—including the one your own group made—and being forced to genuinely critique them as a final. You knew it was your lingering depression and grief over losing Bokeh coloring your mood, but you didn’t care. You ripped everyone to shreds. Too many one liners. Bad dialogue. Cliches. Terrible camera work. You judged everything with pinpoint accuracy, knowing you were guilty of doing each thing yourself.

Everyone tried too hard. Everyone wanted to be the next big famous whatever when they left the university for the entertainment industry. Including you.

So three of your days during finals week were spent reviewing all of the most contrived pieces of motion picture art to ever be spat out of the so-called tormented minds of amateur filmmakers.

This was supposed to be the best art university in Lucis, yet this is what your peers came up with. The future seemed bleak.

—

On your way home after enduring the last slew of poor films, you were accosted by messages and beeps on your phone. Prompto had opened a group chat, and kept typing the same thing over and over. So he was in one of those moods today.

Prompto: lads its hang time

Prompto: hang time

Prompto: hang time

Prompto: lads

Prompto: its hang time

Noctis: The fuck

Prompto: it’s been 2 long let’s hang 2nite i have the new assassins creed
You: Too long? It’s been a week.

Noctis: I’m down

Gladio: what’s in it for me?

Prompto: u get 2 see ur faves

You: I can’t make it. Sorry guys.

Prompto: wat but finals r over!

Ignis: I’ll also have to decline.

Prompto: my plans r falling apart b4 me D:

You: Don’t be so dramatic.

Gladio: why can’t you and iggy make it? have something to tell us? (°_°)

Wow, could he be any more on the nose? You knew exactly how to deal with this. Hopefully Ignis played along.

You: Yeah we’re going on a hot date. Right Iggy?

Prompto: wat

Ignis: Indeed. We will be far too busy at the cinema tonight.

Prompto: WAT

You: Which movie?

Ignis: The new superhero film?

You: Try again.

Ignis: No? I only assumed since you enjoy comic books.

Noctis: I heard it was overhyped

You: I thought you’d want to see that political thriller.

Ignis: I do. If only I had the time to spare.

Prompto: wat r u guys really doing

You: I’m going to that year end party at the DKA house tonight.

Prompto: ew a frat party srsly?

You: It’s free booze and you know they’re all just film nerds like me.

Prompto: ya w/e :(
Gladio: hey don’t worry shortcake i’ll be there

Prompto: thx gladio i see who my real friends r

Ignis: Some of us have responsibilities. Perhaps another time.

You: Yep this party is a big responsibility for me dude. I need to get trashed asap

Prompto: fine ok

Prompto: but since u r ditching us, u have to tell me something about the new boy

Noctis: Not this

Gladio: new boy?

Prompto: her new boy!! the one who broke the dry spell

Noctis: I hate this

Ignis: As do I.

Noctis: Yeah well you haven’t had to hear about it for the past week

Prompto: u guys dont get it!!! its a big deal ok

You: It’s really not.

Gladio: i’m game, tell us something good about this guy

So Gladio still wanted to try putting you on the spot. He couldn’t actually expect you to say anything that would implicate Ignis, right? Chewing on your lower lip, you thought for a moment before replying.

You: He’s super into feet and sucking toes.

Prompto: lol wow

You: He’s always like yum yum let me get my mouth on those sweaty little phalanges baby.

You: You guys remember how he likes coffee?

You: I dipped my feet in Ebony for him… I was pretty much drowning in jizz.

Ignis: How delightful. I think you’ve said enough.

Gladio: No I gotta hear more

Prompto: shes lying

You: No shit. I never give details about the people I hook up with. What makes you think I’d tell you anything about this one?

Prompto: bcuz u said u have a titan sized crush on him
Your amusement dissipated at the sight of the message. You’d told him that in confidence! How could he just say that in front of the others? In front of Ignis! Somewhere, at that moment, Ignis was probably reading those words with his own eyes.

**You:** I’m praying for Titan to crush you right now.

**Prompto:** dude lol y r u like this?? just admit u want 2 keep him

**You:** Keep him? He’s not a pet or property.

**Prompto:** u kno wat i mean

**You:** Keep talking and I’ll tell Aranea about that nasty thing you did in my bathroom with that picture of her.

**Prompto:** nooooooo pls dont

**You:** I’m calling her now.

**Prompto:** then im telling noct u had a crush on him when u were 13

**You:** All the girls had crushes on him back then. It would’ve been weirder if I hadn’t. Sorry, Noct.

**Noctis:** no big

**Prompto:** D: !!!!! dont tell aranea or ill tell every1 about that sex dream u had last week

**You:** It’s not as bad as the sex dream YOU had. About someone in this chat.

**Gladio:** this just keeps getting better

**Prompto:** im sry ok i just want 2 kno *sumthing* about this guy

**You:** It doesn’t even matter. I’m hoping to have some other guy balls deep in me soon enough. Bye jerks.

You silenced your phone and spent the rest of the train ride home trying to convince yourself that you weren’t freaking out about Prompto inadvertently telling Ignis that you might have a crush on him.

You’d told Prompto that during a moment of deep admiration because Ignis had been there for you at a vulnerable moment. That’s it! There was no truth beyond that now that you’ve had time and distance to separate you from the flustered woman you’d been on the way back from the countryside.

—

Between beer pong and body shots, you were wasted and feeling immensely better than you had all week. Your safety buddy, an acquaintance from one of your classes, had done a good job of keeping an eye on you all night. It was good that she didn’t drink. It was also good that she was into girls because you’d been vibing with her more than any of the drunken fraternity brothers in the house.

She had an adorable laugh. When you tumbled into her bed at three in the morning, she giggled against the kisses you were desperately pressing down her neck.

“You’re too drunk,” she said, smoothing your messy hair out of your face. “Just get some sleep.”
You pouted, seeing doubles of her in your vision. She was right. Her bed felt like a cloud, and she looked like a goddess with her bedside lamp lighting up her dirty blond hair like a halo. Her eyes were a bright emerald, and you were beginning to realize you might actually have a type.

—

You were kind of maybe a little mad at Prompto. Ever since he’d said you had a crush on Ignis, you hadn’t seen or heard a single word from the man for days. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t always been busy. You just felt some type of way about it that you didn’t really want to think about. You didn’t care what Ignis thought of you or your alleged crush. It was his fault for being there for you and flirting with you and kissing you and—

You groaned, rubbing hands down your face. Today wasn’t the day for thoughts like this. You’d signed up for a two day film contest held by the university. Everything was random—who your crew would be and the genre of your film—and would be decided right before the contest began. Then you’d have two days to write, film, and do post production. It was going to be fun. As long as the genre didn’t end up being romance.

You were met with good and bad news when you made it to campus. The good news: the genre randomly assigned to your group was one you loved. Dark comedy. The bad news: the person you hated most, that toxic person you’d worked so hard to keep out of your life, was on your team.

—

The first couple of hours were spent quickly putting together a script. Everyone liked your plot idea, so you were the one stuck typing out every stupid line of dialogue the team came up with. Too many one liners. Typical. Every line couldn’t be a dumb one liner, that ruined the effect, and it made no sense.

He insisted on going with you to the library to have the copies printed and organized. You checked your phone intermittently, avoiding any kind of confrontation. You wouldn’t even give him friendly small talk. What could you possibly have to talk about? Being near him made you feel hideous.

Hopeful to distract yourself from the situation at hand, you flipped through your short list of contacts to find someone to talk to. Some kind of reassurance was needed. Some kind of mental block you could put up between yourself and this horrible person so that you could actually enjoy this stupid contest. Prompto was working, Noctis was probably still in bed, and you had no idea what Gladio and Ignis were up to.

You: Juicy, am I pretty?

Sending the message to Gladio, you stood quietly by as a printer shot out page after page of script. He stood next to you, crossing and uncrossing his arms as if he were the uncomfortable one. When you walked back, your phone chimed, and he took the copies from you without asking.

“I’ve got it,” he said, shrugging when you gave him an annoyed look for finding a reason to touch you. You didn’t need his help, but if he was going to pretend he had a considerate bone in his body, you weren’t going to stop him.

Gladio: wow not even Iris asks me stuff like that anymore

You: Is that a no or a yes?

Gladio: hey you’re as cute as the other guys if that counts
You: Thanks, that's totally what I was looking for.

Gladio: sorry juicy you're fishing for compliments in the wrong place

You: Yeah yeah. I'm just feeling ugly and needy today.

You put your phone away, meeting with the rest of the team and passing out the scripts. Maybe an assurance of your physical appearance wasn’t what you needed to get rid of the slimy feeling you had around him. Gladio was terrible at giving compliments, apparently. You’d thought he’d be better because of all those lascivious romance novels he read. Flowery language and all that. But no.

—

You were stuck holding a boom mic, tensing every time he told you to do something. Because of course he had to take the lead, and everyone seemed to be miraculously charmed into letting him do it without issue.

When it was time to break for lunch, he put a hand on your shoulder, asking where you wanted to eat. You jerked away, eyes wide and glaring. He shared a look with someone else on the team as if there was something wrong with you. Then he laughed. It grated on you like sandpaper against an open wound. While you ate later, questioning why you’d even signed up for this stupid contest, he approached you alone this time.

“Sorry about earlier,” he said with a scratch to his head. As if he were nervous about approaching you. What a joke. “I see my touch isn’t welcome anymore.”

“Just keep your hands to yourself,” you spat. There was no room for patience with him. He didn’t deserve it. “It’s not that hard to respect boundaries.”

He held up his hands. “I get it. We’re professionals here.” Sliding down into the chair across from you, he grinned. “It’s nice working with you again.”

You rolled your eyes. “It’s just a two day contest.”

He rested his elbows on the table, leaning forward. “We were always good at small projects. Your ideas, my direction.”

Stabbing at your food with your fork, you sighed. Every part of you felt tense, internal screaming at his proximity. You didn’t respond to him, but met his eyes in a dead stare as you kept eating.

“I saw your blog,” he said. A smile stretched his face oddly. “Your film about fear and sexuality is impressive.”

You’d known there was a chance he’d find it since your blog wasn’t private, but you still felt as though your privacy had been invaded. You paused mid-chew, frowning and swallowing the bite almost painfully. “It’s not that deep. Just a guy afraid of boners.”

“Maybe.” He shrugged and leaned back in his seat. “Still, I loved it. I’m sorry for not realizing how good you are at directing.”

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“Maybe.” He shrugged and leaned back in his seat. “Still, I loved it. I’m sorry for not realizing how good you are at directing.”

“Don’t be,” you bit at him, more tired of this conversation than angry. You, seemingly, couldn’t have even a meal without him bearing down on you in some way. “It doesn’t matter now.”

Burying your attention into your phone, you ignored his presence. You tried willing him to disappear, not just out of your line of sight, but out of existence completely. Sadly, the gods didn’t
want to help you out with that one.

—

Feeling dumpy, you made a stop by Craigory’s dorm for an edible—a cookie that you hid in your pocket—and made plans to eat the entire thing in one go and listen to loud music for the rest of the night.

Upon arrival home, you were ambushed to by Prompto and Noctis to make up for your terrible crime of ditching them to go to a frat party. They forced you—though you didn’t fight it one bit—to join them in going to a festival that only you seemed to have no prior knowledge of.

The most pressing issue you were met with was seeing Noctis in a sombrero and matching outfit. It was meant to help him blend in because everyone at the festival presented a mishmash of cultures in their attire, and you had to admit, it was working. He led you and Prompto through the festival with surprising excitement. You hadn’t seen him in such a good mood since spring break and had begun to think he didn’t enjoy anything anymore besides sleep and video games.

The streets were closed off in an entire district, crowds everywhere, giving you reason to gently grip the hem at the back of Prompto’s shirt as you weaved through people from vendor to attraction. When you recognized one of the streets you were walking down, you pointed at a building not far away. “I love that tequila bar! Let’s make a pit stop.”

“Hell yeah,” Noctis agreed, throwing up a fist that had recently been tattooed. The henna was still setting in, brown designs etched onto his skin.

“I don’t think so, Prince Charmless.” The back of his collar was grabbed by a large hand, and you followed the arm up to an amused Gladio. “Gotta keep you together for the big meeting with his Majesty in the morning.”

Noct struggled a little, then teetered on his feet when Gladio let go. “When did you get here? And why?”

Pointing over his shoulder, Gladio grinned. “Iris wanted to check it out.”

You let go of Prompto and pushed past them to get to the young woman. Even the smallest bit of estrogen would’ve been nice. Having mostly men as your closest friends was fine, but you wouldn’t say any of them really understood you on a level that you bet Iris could if you got to know her.

When you caught sight of her, you were surprised to see that little boy you’d met at her home weeks before was at her side. Talcott, you remembered. So he was real.

They were a few yards away, talking to what you could only perceive to be some kind of shaman or fortune teller. He was dressed in showy black robes and wore a spectacularly tilted fedora. Upon better inspection when you grew closer, you saw that he was middle aged. It was kind of hard to tell. He gave off the feeling of being older, but you couldn’t really place it.

“If you’ve an item, I could inspect it for curses for a small fee,” he said to Iris and Talcott, waving his hand with a little flair. His red wine-colored hair was unique, and you wondered if he considered himself genuine, or if he just liked to swindle people prone to superstitions. He noticed you as you stopped next to Iris, his smile growing wider. “What about you, miss?”

It wouldn’t hurt to have fun with it; you had some gil to spare. Digging into your bag, you held out the token, the shine of the festive lamps glinting off its golden exterior. “Pretty sure this is cursed.”
He took it from you slowly, and you felt Iris poking you in the side with her elbow. One look over and you caught her mouthing *hey* with a smile before she walked off to join the other guys. Talcott was focused on the fortune teller who turned the compact over in his hands with considerable care.

“Oh, I sense a dark energy indeed.” Rather than the grave tone you expected, he sounded almost amused. “This was a gift. From someone close to you.”

You nodded. This was obvious stuff so you weren’t impressed.

“This person is dangerous and adept in magicks.” He looked down at Talcott as he spoke, and you knew then that he was putting on a show. “I would say… a level ten warlock with *terrible* intentions. He’s out for blood.”

Talcott gasped, and you smiled down at his shocked expression.

When the strange man returned his gaze to you, he continued, “He’s also likely after your maidenhood.”

Oh no, not your precious virginity. The guy would have to do better than that.

“But,” he continued, drawing out a dramatic silence for several seconds. “He will first take away everything you hold dear.”

That… surprisingly struck you. A faint remembrance of your dream about being married to Ignis and trapped inside coursed through your mind anew.

It was like the fortune teller could tell, a corner of his mouth curling with a smirk. “You’ve met with disappointment and grief recently. I’d say it was the machinations of this warlock.”

He could probably read that in your expression. You’d been down on yourself and your life even before losing your chocobo. So you eased a little, telling yourself he probably gave this exact spiel to everyone.

“You’re… afraid of something.” He rose a brow, and you realized he might’ve been asking you to play along.

“Maybe,” you said, shrugging. “So what can I do?”

He considered you carefully. “You could curse the person who placed this great burden upon you. Or you could make a wish.”

“What’s the difference?”

“A curse is straightforward, much like the nature of this object you carry.” He offered the token back to you, curling his fingers over it right before you could pluck it from his palm. “Wishes are boundless but require effort to enact.”

You furrowed your brow, hand hovering over his. You wanted your token back. “How does a curse work?”

“A verbal curse works anytime, anywhere, as long as you’re near the subject of your vexation as you say it. Always begin it with ‘may’ and don’t be afraid to chant.”

Slowly, you nodded. That was probably the extent of this act. Taking out some gil, you handed it to him without counting. The compact was warm when you gripped it in your hand again.
“Thanks,” you said. “I’ll give it a try.”

He took off his hat, placed the money inside, and put it back on. Shiva’s tits, this guy was good at being strange. Like some kind of whimsical, charismatic mystery man with just a dash of creepy.

—I

“I feel like I’m in an episode of Scooby fucking Doo,” you whispered.

Iris walked in front of you, Noctis and Prompto giggling just behind, all of you sneaking down a corridor of the Citadel. The lights were off and all the shadows that shrouded everything gave you the jeebies.

How had you gotten here, and why did it feel like such a hard cut? You’d split the cookie in your pocket three ways with Noctis and Prompto after dealing with the mysterious fortune teller. Anything to get rid of that odd feeling after the so-called curse reading he’d given you.

Then you’d talked cactuars with Talcott. He thought your imitation of one was hilarious, the warbles you made while doing poses eliciting deep laughs that had him leaning on Gladio. Kids were great, actually, you thought. At least this one. So you may or may not have, for just a little while, used him in a here’s-my-adorable-kid-brother scenario to pick up babes.

Ditching Gladio to look after him, the four of you walked eight entire blocks to the Citadel —legs burning, mind flying high, that’s why it felt like time had skipped, you didn’t want to remember the walk— because Noctis wanted to eat something that could only be found in the kitchens. Iris, not under the influence but young enough to think this was a good idea, led you through the massive building while the three of you laughed at literally anything and nothing at all.

Until the paranoia set in.

“I hope no baddies get us.” Prompto had a hand on your shoulder.

Noct scoffed lightly. “Not if we get ‘em first.”

You looked back just in time to see a flash of light as something appeared and disappeared in his hands. What the hell was that? You’d never seen things while high before. Whatever it was tipped back the sombrero, which slid off his head and hit the floor with a muted thunk.

“Shit.” He picked it up, and you stopped him from putting it back on.


He snickered, hefting it in his hands. He seemed thoughtful, the darkness hiding his full expression.

“C’mon, we’re almost there,” Iris called in a quiet voice. She was already at the end of the corridor, waiting at the corner. She was grinning, but you could tell she was a little confused by everybody’s behavior.

All three of you tumbled after her, bumping into each other and the wall you skirted. Prompto let go of your shoulder to pass you. Warm light emanated through small windows set in large doors. Apparently, that was the entrance to the kitchens because Iris stopped here and Prompto didn’t hesitate to peek through one of the windows.

“Good call, Noct.” His breath fogged the glass. “Iggy’s in there.”
Hearing that drew you toward the other window set on the other door. Luckily the doors were terribly heavy so the pressure of you leaning on them didn’t send you tumbling inside.

In the warm glow of the kitchen, Ignis kneaded at something on the counter. Occasionally, he would look at a small notebook that was propped up by a cylinder of utensils. Concentrating and focused, his expression was a soft seriousness. He suddenly stopped, dusting off a flour-covered hand on the apron at his waist and turning the page in the notebook.

“Yeah, I asked him if he’d give it another try.” Noct sounded close, right in your ear, and when you looked over, he was pushing past you, going through the doors.

Iris and Prompto followed, but you remained, hugging the door and watching through the window as Ignis looked up in surprise. Noct said something, looking at the pile of dough underneath Ignis’ hands. As Ignis responded, the words of the conversation lost to you through the barrier of the door, Prompto prodded at the buttons on a large blender. When it came on, whirring loud enough that even you could hear it, Ignis stepped toward him and shut it off. You didn’t know what he told Prompto, but the unamused purse of his lips made you smile.

Noct said something that had Ignis taking a baking sheet of little pastries from a refrigerator. That must’ve been what Noct wanted to eat so badly because it made him grin.

Iris peered around, then looked back toward you in the window. When she waved for you to come in, you shook your head. You’d rather be in the dark, empty corridor than in the same room with a level ten warlock who was after your blood and maidenhood.

Noctis bit into one of the pastries, saying something that made Ignis start. He frowned before shaking his head. Whatever their conversation was, Ignis appeared stern and Noctis aloof. So, pretty normal, you thought.

With a pastry each —Noct had several piled in his sombrero in hand— they left the kitchen. You stuck by the wall, certain that Ignis had no idea you were there. When the heavy doors closed, Noctis mumbled something around a mouthful of dessert that made Prompto laugh. They set off down the corridor, Noctis leading. You made to follow, but Iris took hold of your hand.

“I bet you wanna stick back for a bit, huh?” Her voice was a whisper, her smile sweet. “I’ll tell the guys you’re in the restroom or something.”

You didn’t think Noctis or Prompto would notice your absence at his point. Shaking your head as she let go of your hand, you followed her for a few steps. “Don’t leave me here, Iris.”

She giggled. “I’ll be back in five minutes.”

You frowned at her, and she misread it.

“Okay, ten minutes.” She skipped off after the other two, leaving you alone in the dark.

Going back to the doors to get yourself into some light, you peeked through the small window again. Ignis was back at it, rolling the dough onto a circular stone. Ah, yes. Late night pizza. Is that something else Noct had asked for?

You had no intentions of going inside. Rather than the mellow feeling you were used to from this kind of drug, paranoia ate at you, your mind choking with thoughts on what the fortune teller had said.

He will first take away everything you hold dear.
Ignis paused, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a finger. His chest heaved with a sigh, broad shoulders stretching as he took a short break to look at the notebook again. With arms crossed, finger on his chin, he appeared contemplative.

He didn’t seem all that evil. You knew the whole curse reading had been an act, but you still felt *something very odd* when it came to Ignis. Maybe the reading hadn’t been that far off. Your luck had definitely been terrible since you’d decided to help him with his big lie.

A creak from somewhere in the darkness behind you stole your attention from the scene. Fuck. You were going to die. You should’ve known you were going to die in the Citadel. You did *not* like this place. How could things creak here, anyway? The floor was marble! Another creak had you scrambling through the door.

You rushed into the light of the kitchens, turning around as the door swung shut. Safe. You were totally safe now. Holy shit was that close

“Ah, hello. I’d a feeling you were with the others.”

Trying to put on some facsimile of calmness, you looked at Ignis. Indifference, you told yourself. You were *not* afraid of the darkness outside the kitchens, and you sure as hell weren’t afraid of Ignis. Even if he was a secret warlock or whatever. He *was* capable of magic...

You cleared your throat, dispelling your thoughts. “Yeah, I came to get a pastry.”

He nodded as if that made sense. While he went to the same refrigerator as before to get one for you, you walked over to the beginnings of the pizza he was making. The dough was an interesting wheat color that you rarely ever saw outside the artisanal joints that boasted healthy foods. Mom always made pizzas with dough like that; it was one of your favorites. Ignis must’ve been on a lifelong health kick. He always seemed determined to impress the habit on Noctis if at all possible.

When you tried to take a peek at the recipe in the notebook, Ignis closed it with one hand while offering a pastry with the other. You expected a reprimand or a reproachful look for being nosy, but he avoided eye contact for a moment, taking the notebook in hand as you accepted the small dessert.

“Thanks.”

“Of course.” He placed the flour-dirtied notebook into a pocket of the apron and met your eyes. “How have you been faring?”

You held the pastry awkwardly with both hands, lifting it to chest height between you as a barrier. “Busy. You?”

He adjusted the tie of the apron at his waist, a small gesture you didn’t recognize in him. He wasn’t the type to fidget. “Much the same.”

You looked at his dirty hands, at the flour that covered the apron and the dusty spots of it on his face. How could you ever be afraid of him? He was a complete dork. Holding the pastry in one hand, you reached up and gently wiped away the flour at his nose, then his chin. He froze at the gesture, eyes crossing for a second before he looked down at you in mild surprise.

You didn’t say anything, dropping your hand and taking a bite of the pastry to keep from doing anything stupid. Giving him a thumbs up and a soft “Mmm” to show how great it was, you backed away toward the door. A counter got in the way, and you stumbled back. He caught you by the arm, righting you and leaving small smudges of flour on your skin when he let go.
“Careful.”

You looked down at your arm, frozen for a second. The touch of his skin against yours for even that small bit of time reminded you that it wasn’t Ignis that you were afraid of, but how he made you feel. Which was a lot of things. Too many things. Right now, it was predominantly discomfort.

“Um, thanks.” You turned toward the door with the rest of your pastry and stopped just outside, letting it swing closed with a heavy sound that bounced quietly down the corridor. Waiting several beats, you peeked through the little window on the door for what you were telling yourself would be the last time.

Ignis had the notebook out again, writing something into it this time. You’d guessed it was a recipe book of some kind in the works. He did seem to like making them himself. Then, he looked at the uncooked pizza crust and sighed, taking off his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. He must’ve messed up the recipe somewhere.

Again, you thought he didn’t seem like much of an evil warlock. But you couldn’t take your chances! Looks could be deceiving. You’d do a curse just to be safe. A little one. Very small.

“May your, um… may the…” You tried to think of a good one, thinking about the unwanted thrill you were still feeling at his soft touch. How dare he make you feel this way. “May it rain on you when you want to look your best.”

There. That seemed good. You chuckled to yourself, jumping when you felt a hand on your shoulder.

Iris giggled at you, brows furrowed in confusion. “What are you doing? Did you even go inside?”

You lifted the bitten pastry as proof. “Yes.”

She gave you a wary look, but it wasn’t severe. “All of you are acting so weird tonight. Whatever you guys are on, I wish you woulda shared with me.” She was joking, laughing as you both set off down the corridor.

You laughed along, not wanting to admit that you truly did need something to numb yourself most days, and you’d never share with her because you hoped she never needed it.

—

The second day of the film contest was spent entirely on post production. In a large study room at the library, you helped your team sift through what needed to be edited—all of it—and avoided him as much as possible. The project was coming together, and for something that was completely randomized before creation, you were a little proud of it. Even if he was part of it, too.

“You use keyframes to falsify a zoom on his face,” you murmured to the Designated Editor, pointing at the footage on their computer screen. Your phone began to ring, but you were too focused on the task at hand to answer at first.

“That’ll be intense,” they said, following your advice.

“That’s the goal.” You stood up to answer your phone away from everyone. Closing the door to the study room, you walked between rows of bookshelves and kept your voice a whisper for anyone trying to study. “What’s up?”

Ignis’ voice was modulated, a pleasant change from the din of the study room. “Good afternoon.
How are you?”

“Good.” Oh, formalities, how you hated them. Slight embarrassment bit at you over your behavior the night before, but really, Ignis hadn’t seen anything that strange out of you. It was the paranoia and silly curse that made you regret the edible more than anything. Ignis wasn’t a gods damn warlock, and you couldn’t believe you’d let that nutcase at the festival freak you out like that. “What about you?”

“Wonderful, thank you,” he said, sounding surprisingly chipper. “I have something to share with you.”

“Oh yeah?” You found yourself smiling, fingers trailing down bindings of old books on the shelves around you. “What’s that?”

“The reason I’ve been working tirelessly, and the secret we’ve been keeping from you.”

Your smile grew. “Finally.”

A light breath of a chuckle came through the line, then he said, “Noct is getting married.”

With a light gasp, you stared blankly at a book title. “Seriously?”

“Yes,” he said, chuckling again. “It’s to be in just over a month. The entire affair has been a struggle to plan and finalize due to Noct’s wish to have it held privately rather than holding a large royal wedding.”

It took a few beats for you to catch up to what he was saying. Noct was getting married. That nerd? He was so awkward, though. And so young. Then again, nobles were beyond backwards when it came to this stuff. He was still one of them, even if you kind of forgot about that sometimes. “Who’s he marrying?”

“The Oracle’s daughter, Lady Lunafreya of Tenebrae.”

You gasped louder. “Oh my gods!” Someone hushed you, and you quickly made your way toward the spiral staircase in the center of the building to go to a different floor where you could freely freak out. “Is this some kind of arranged thing for an alliance or something? This is nuts, Iggy!”

On his end of the line, you could hear background noise, other voices and the shuffling of files. “In a way, yes. Noct is meant to marry her due to an agreement between our nations, but they’re also close childhood friends. He took surprising initiative and proposed to her last year.”

“Duuuude,” you said, taking the steps down two at a time. “I can’t believe this. He’s getting married in only a month? I can’t believe this!”

Ignis hummed. “I would agree if I hadn’t spent the better part year organizing its success.”

You stopped on the third floor, digging into your bag for your student card to use on the Ebony machine. “I have to know everything. When exactly is it and where—” Pressing buttons on the machine, you paused for a moment. “Wait, I’m invited, right?”

He waited for too long to answer. You took the Ebony and sat in a nearby chair, sipping it with a frown.

“We’ll have to discuss it more in depth later, darling.” Ignis’ voice suddenly sounded taut. Along with the pet name, the change in his tone made your frown deepen. You let the Ebony warm your
hand as you listened to the increasing background noise from his end of the call. He hummed again, as if you’d said something. “Have I mentioned how much I adore you today?”

You coughed a little on the coffee. “You’re being creepy. Is your uncle there or something?”

He ignored your question. “Gladio mentioned something yesterday that gave me concern. I’d meant to say something last evening, but your gentle touch had inspired a bit of bashfulness within me.”

Narrowing your eyes, you sent a confused glare into blank space as you tried to figure out what exactly Ignis was doing. It was difficult when the weird things he said were uncomfortable statements of endearment.

“Darling, I want you to know,” he said, voice in an undertone. “Though incorrigible that you are at times, I find a dear friend in you. Perish the thought that you are anything less than brilliant.”

You flushed, your glare melting. Obviously, Gladio had opened his big mouth to Ignis about your needy questions the day before. You’d already determined you didn’t need those affirmations, but when they came so nicely worded from Ignis, you felt a deep warmth in your chest.

The background noise on his side of the call grew even louder. Then, you could hear a distinct voice. It was elegant, higher in pitch. Suddenly, his words meant nothing.

“Is that Mirum?” you asked, looking down at your Ebony with a flat stare meant for Ignis. “You’re just saying nice things and calling me darling because Mirum is there, aren’t you?”

“I’m certain I have no idea what you’re talking about, darling,” he said, sounding amused.

You huffed, smiling despite yourself. For such a well-bred man, he could be as big of an idiot as the others. “Whatever. I’m busy, so was the wedding news the only thing you needed to tell me?”

“I have one more.” He paused, then said in perfect Altissian, “You’re beautiful.”

You blinked, then sighed. “For fuck’s sake, Iggy, stop laying it on so thick or Mirum will hunt me down and throw a glove in my face.”

“Such an old fashioned thing to expect,” he said, sounding thoughtful. “Though, I suppose a duel would be quite the spectacle.”

You scoffed. “I’d forfeit and let her have you.”

You hung up and began the trek back to the study room. If Ignis wasn’t going to give you any details about the wedding or let you know if you were even allowed to attend, you had more important things to be doing. Certainly more important than being a diversion from Mirum’s apparently unwanted attention.

You’d been gone for longer than you would’ve liked, anyway. Who knew what the hell that scumbag ex of yours was doing to ruin the film while you were away.

—

“One of the actors in your movie, he had a pretty interesting accent.”

Your eyes snapped up to his irritating face, one that you’d once thought was handsome. Designated Editor looked between you before going back to work. You debated whether or not to reply to his sudden and specific comment. If you did, you would actually have to endure a conversation with
him. If you didn’t, he’d keep finding other things to bother you about, and you’d get nothing done.

So you sighed. “What are you talking about?”

He smiled. Because you’d taken the bait. “The side actor who played the lover. I didn’t recognize him, and he had an accent. Is he in the acting program?”

Oh, he meant Ignis. He was digging, hoping to find something he could use to hurt you. Of course he’d latch onto the sudden appearance of an unknown but attractive person in your life. You already had to blackout your mail and keep your contact information close to the vest. You weren’t going to tell him a damn thing about Ignis, lest he find a way to bother the advisor, too, just for being your friend.

“No, he was a guy who just needed experience,” you lied, shrugging.

“Really?” He hummed. “Weren’t you with him in Galdin Quay?”

You tensed. He noticed. The smile on his face grew.

“I think you’re confusing him with someone else,” you said, maintaining a dead stare with him.

He shook his head. “I’m pretty sure it’s the same guy. Does Prompto know?”

Your face scrunched into one of distaste. “Know what? That I have more than one friend?”

He pointed at you as if he’d just solved some big secret. “So you admit that he’s not just some guy.”

He was going to keep hassling until he thought he had something on you. The joke was on him. His opinions and assumptions meant less than nothing to you.

It was tempting to just let him assume Ignis was your boyfriend. That was the direction he was already heading in. Really, it would work in your favor because Ignis could easily kick his ass. But just because Ignis could doesn’t mean he would. In fact, you’d bet if you ever asked Ignis to defend your honor or whatever against this guy, he’d be all “A gentleman would never do something so base” and he’d politely tell the guy to leave you alone, which wouldn’t work.

No, you couldn’t depend on him for this kind of thing. Even if that’s essentially what you were doing for Ignis against Mirum.

Glaring at his ever smug face, you said, “It’s none of your fucking business.”

Designated Editor looked between you again. “What’s… going on, guys?”

His smile deteriorating, your ex boyfriend shoved his chair back and got up from the table. “She’s just being a bitch. Like always.” He left the study room, a couple of the other team members following him out.

You took a long, deep breath. Two, then three. Then, you looked at Designated Editor. “How’s it coming along?”

They looked at you for a couple of beats before nodding. “Good. We should be done soon.” A few minutes later, as they kept working, focused on the computer screen, they said, “What was his deal, anyway?”

You shrugged, not wanting to think about it. You’d never known what his deal was, and it had taken you years to realize it wasn’t your job to figure him out.
Sliding a token into the machine, the screen in front of you lit up and music began to play. You chose a level to begin as Noctis smashed buttons on the game next to you. Every so often, you sent a glance his way, and he seemed to get slightly more uncomfortable each time.

“What?” he finally asked, not looking away from the screen.

“I just—” Your character died and you slapped the console. “How did you know that you wanted to get married?”

He sighed, and you could see his face beginning to grow red. With a quick look at you, he shrugged. You’d known he wasn’t going to talk with you about this, but Prompto wasn’t saying anything either, which was irritating. They wanted to wait until Gladio and Ignis got to the arcade at some indeterminate time. Imagining Ignis in a place like this was hard enough. It was probably his fault they were running behind.

Trying your hand at the game again, you asked, “Did you get in trouble for the cookie I shared with you?”

“Nah. Nobody found out.”

“Good. I’ve been worried some Crownguard would show up, and I’d be detained for being a bad influence.”

Noctis chuckled, and you couldn’t tell if it was because of what you’d said or the awful noise your game made when you lost your last life. “Prompto would’ve been locked away a long time ago.”

Crossing the arcade, you passed Prompto as he shot at pixelated daemons with exaggerated finesse. Something caught your eye. Inside a glass case behind a counter was an enormous flowering cactuar plush. It looked really soft and really cute. The flower on its head was bright pink. You suddenly wanted it more than anything.

You went to one of the attendants, pointing at the plush. “How do I win that?”

They spoke in a monotone, tilting their head toward a brightly lit console with a dance pad. “You have to get a perfect score on every song in Dance Party Blast.”

That sounded too easy. You loaded your pockets with tokens, and prepared to dance until you dropped.

A third through the track list, sweaty, and exhilarated, you were startled to see Gladio standing next to the console. He watched you with amusement, leaning on another machine with his arms crossed.

“Hey, you finally made it!” you called over the blaring music.

“We got here two songs ago,” he yelled back, smile broad.

A countdown began, and you scrambled to choose the next song. Gladio stopped you with a gentle hand on your arm. “Take a break. Let’s eat.”

You shook your head. “I’m on a journey right now. I have to get a perfect score on every song.”

Then, you pointed at the flowering cactuar plush. “To win that beautiful thing.”
He looked at it and laughed. “Why bother?”

You put two hands on the railing at the back of the console. “Because I want it so bad.” The countdown ended, and the Dance Party Blast mascot announced your scores. You sighed, climbing down and pouting at Gladio. “Thanks a lot.”

He patted your back, but his expression was anything but sorry. “You’ll have other chances.”

You stopped by the same arcade attendant and pointed at the cactuar plush again. “How much to just buy that thing?”

They sighed, as if talking to you were the most laborious task, and said, “It’s not for sale. No perfect dance scores, no cactuar.”

You scowled. There was only one, and what if someone else won it first? No minimum wage arcade employee cared about a prize that much. “I’ll give you fifty gil for it.”

“It’s not for sale,” they repeated, crossing their arms.

Sighing, you joined the others at a table. “You guys better tell me everything that I wanna know. Or I’ll be pissed.”

Ignis adjusted his glasses, the bright flashing lights of the arcade reflecting off the lenses. “Is something the matter?”

“She’s in love with a cactuar,” Gladio answered for you, pointing at the large plush.

You rolled your eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Wedding talk now. Am I invited or not?”

Next to you, Prompto nudged your side. “Actually, I wanted you to come as my date. That’s kinda why…” He scratched his head. “Why I introduced you to these guys in the first place. So they’d know they can trust you.”

“Oh,” you said intelligently.

“Yeah.” He looked uncertain. “So… is that cool?”

You blinked. No direct invitation felt a little rude given that Noct was definitely someone you considered a friend by now. Then again, being Prompto’s date meant you wouldn’t have to find one of your own. Smiling at him, you nodded. “Sounds great.”

—

The wedding was being held at some private resort on an island in Accordo. Ignis tried explaining the importance of having it on neither Tenebraen nor Lucian soil so that blah blah can do blah, but you began to tune it out with the thought that you were actually going to Accordo. You could use your Altissian while you were there.

Knocking Ignis’ leg with your foot under the table, you asked, “Do you think they speak Altissian on the island?”

His mouth parted slightly as he looked down at the table, then back up to your face. “Possibly. It may vary in dialect.”

“I hate when they do that,” Prompto told Noctis. “Do you know what they’re saying?”
Noctis shook his head. “Never learned Altissian.”

Ignis shot him a glance, then intoned to you, “I learned so he wouldn’t have to.”

You snickered. “Could you imagine? I bet he knows the swears at least.”

Ignis smiled just slightly. “I’ve no doubt. Noctis often wasted his energy on useless things.”

“He said your name.” Prompto nudged Noct. “They’re talking about you.”

Noct rolled his eyes and shoved him lightly before getting up. “I’m ready to head out. Gladio?”

“On it.” Gladio slammed a hand on the table as he got up. It made Prompto startle and slightly shook all the food wrappers left after your especially unhealthy dinner on arcade food. “Come with us, shortcake.”

Prompto’s brows furrowed. “Uh, why?”

“You’re the best man. Gods only know why.” Gladio rolled a shoulder. “We’ve got a few things to go over now that everything’s official.”

“Okay.” Prompto got up, looking at you with a near pout. You’d both planned to stay longer so you could play something together before walking to work. You sent him an encouraging smile. There would be other days and arcades and walks together to work.

What there wouldn’t be another of, you were sure of it, was the cactuar plush. Shooting it a longing glance, you sighed.

“I guess this is where you tell me to behave while I’m at the wedding and all that?” You rose an eyebrow. “Have a big speech for me?”

Ignis looked at you almost blankly for a moment, then smiled. Genuinely, and bigger than he had when the others had just been around. “While I do hope you behave during the processions next month, I’m remaining behind because I have an hour or so to waste.”

Your face lit up, chest becoming lighter at the news. He had time to waste, and he wanted to do it with you.

With a quick peek at the cactuar, you asked, “Can you dance?”

—

Ignis claimed he could dance, but you saw no proof because he refused to aid you in beating Dance Party Blast. Another visit to that same attendant, and they told you that the flowering cactuar was for beating that specific game because the machine itself spat out a certificate of perfection once you won. You needed the certificate to get the manager to open the glass case that held the cactuar. And no, they still wouldn’t take your bribe.

So you spent most of the hour trying to find a game Ignis would actually play. It didn’t matter what you chose because he was exceptionally bad at everything, apparently.

An embarrassed little blush stained his cheeks when he’d failed to beat you at a fighting game for a third time in a row.

“It’s a miracle. I think I’ve found something you’re actually bad at,” you teased, jabbing him with an elbow.
He adjusted his glasses, hiding a smile. “Would you like a dessert?”

You grinned, walking with him to the concession area. “To soften the blow of humiliation?”

“To keep your mouth busy so I no longer have to hear you gloat.”

Oh, wow, he was just handing it to you by saying that. You’d been itching to flirt with him again to get rid of the lingering strangeness that seemed to sit between you. “I could think of other ways to keep my mouth busy. How much time do you have left?”

He froze for a moment, shoulders tense. When an attendant took your order for a milkshake, he seemed to relax and pulled out his wallet to pay for it. That was nice. You made a mental note to pay him back later. They gave you two straws, and when you both took a seat at one of the smaller tables, his soft blush had returned.

“Prom would say we have double the sucking power,” you said, pointing at the straws. You were choosing your words carefully, yet without tact. Maybe he’d let you get away with more than one flirt today since you hadn’t flirted in so long. “I wish they’d given us a spoon, though. It looks pretty thick.” You took a sip of it. “Wow, it is kinda hard to drink.” Looking up at Ignis, you snorted softly at his disapproving expression. “What’s got you so stiff?”

“Are you quite finished?”

“I’m referring to blowj—”

“I’m aware.”

Enjoying the milkshake, you maintained a stare with him. His blush had gone, and he seemed more admonishing than flirty, and you kind of liked that about him.

Your phone chimed from your pocket, so muted that you’d almost missed it. You pushed the shake toward him while you dug it out to check. Probably Prompto complaining about Gladio picking on him. If you didn’t know any better, you’d think he had a crush on the guy sometimes.

**Unknown: see you at the viewing tomorrow ;)**

You stared at the message. You knew the number. It had been burned into your mind. You thought you’d blocked it, but that had been a different phone. Before you changed numbers. Before you got a new phone entirely because he had found you last August. He’d ripped it from your hand, demanding to know who you had left him for —it was Prompto, wasn’t it?! that little douchebag!— and you had run away when he threw the phone into the street. Right into traffic. He’d yelled, and you’d just kept running.

You’d run so far, but it never seemed to be far enough.

He must’ve gotten your number from someone on the team. A sting of betrayal bit at you over whoever could’ve done that. But that didn’t matter now. It was too late. He had your number, which meant he could harass you anytime he wanted now.

“Is something wrong?”

Your head snapped up to Ignis who gave you a questioning glance. The flirty, light feeling you’d had before drained from you, replaced with tension.

“No, I’m fine.” You couldn’t tell him. He’d be the opposite of helpful. He’d want to tell the
authorities, which you’d tried already. They wouldn't take abuse or stalker cases without ample proof first.

The corners of Ignis’ mouth drew down, his eyes narrowing. “Why are you lying?”

You locked your phone, gripping it tightly in a hand. “It’s none of your business.”

“If something so terrible has happened that it causes you to stop making sexual jokes at my expense, I’d like to make it my business.” His eyes searched your face. “Please, tell me.”

Your phone beeped again, and he glanced down at it. With a small bit of hesitation, you silently read the new message.

**Unknown: Im so sorry for what I said last week, I promise Ive changed**

Gods, his opinion of you must’ve been so low if he thought you would ever buy this. With an irritated expression masking the underlying fear you felt, you looked at Ignis.

“He found my number.”

Ignis’ brows arched over his glasses. “Who?”

You shrugged, not wanting to say his name. “My ex boyfriend. I’ll have to get a new number now.” Another beep from your phone, then another. You didn’t touch it, covering your face with your hands.

“May I?”

You peeked between your fingers, seeing Ignis hovering a hand over your phone. What good could come out of him reading the messages, you’d really like to know. Ignis wouldn’t be helpful here, but you knew he’d at least be supportive. Like he’d been in Galdin.

“Knock yourself out,” you mumbled, chewing on the inside of your cheek.

He picked up your phone, unlocking it without even asking for the passcode —wow, you’d have to be careful with passwords around him from now on— and scrolled through the messages. His expression grew more grim by the second.

You sighed. “Is he calling me a bitch or a cunt this time?”

Ignis didn’t respond, pressing buttons on your phone before lifting it to his ear. You dropped your hands, confused.

“What are you doing?”

He lifted a finger, then spoke in a common Lucian accent that gave you pause. “Hello, why are you sending my daughter filthy messages? She is crying, and I demand to know why.”

You watched him in wide eyed confusion as he began to drum his fingers on the tabletop, listening to someone speak loudly on the other end of the call.

“When the hell is this, and how did you get her number?” He paused, then, “She’s only twelve years old, you disgusting— I’m reporting this to the police.”

Yelling could be heard from the phone, and he held it away from his ear for a moment. He met your eyes with a small smile, and you had absolutely no idea what was going on. Then, bringing the
“If you contact my daughter again, I’ll hunt you down. I have a friend who works in the Citadel— He knows people.”

Hanging up, he handed you the phone and cleared his throat. “That should buy you a small window of time to change numbers before he attempts to trouble you again.”

You looked from the phone to his face. “What just happened?”

“I pretended to be an angry father whose young daughter was being harassed. It always works when Noct’s personal number somehow gets into the wrong hands.” He rolled a shrug over his shoulders. “It’s the last bit that truly sells it. A false threat either scares them away or makes them believe they’ve truly gotten the wrong number.”

His common accent had been impeccable, if a bit disturbing without warning. You stared at him for a moment. “Thanks for that.” Even though it had been bizarre, and you hadn’t asked for help.

He touched the milkshake glass but made no move to drink it. “I should come with you to whatever viewing he spoke of.”

You were already shaking your head. “I’m not even going now. Not if he’ll be there.” You’d known he would be there. He’d been on your team, of course he’d go to the damn thing. Coexisting with such a scumbag was something you had really wanted to try, but he made it impossible.

This film had been the first one you’d poured yourself into in any serious capacity since the one that had been rejected by the Altissian Academy. You’d really hoped to see the finished outcome, if only to regain a little bit of confidence in your abilities. The committee holding the contest might send you a copy, if you asked.

Thoughts of all the things you had to do began to reel in your mind. Get a new number, let Prompto and Mom know about said change, talk to the committee about the thing, do the other thing, and—

All thoughts, the incessant buzzing in your mind, came to a halting silence when Ignis reached across the table to touch your hand. He’d been holding the milkshake glass so his hand was cold over yours.

“I’ll escort you, should you wish to go.” His expression was gentle. “What is the viewing of, may I ask?”

You slid your hand out from under his and put it in your lap. “It’s nothing. I don’t need an escort. Don’t be weird.”

He frowned, leaning back in his chair and retracting his hand. “What would be so weird about seeing a film with me?”

“That’s not the weird part,” you said, suppressing a sigh. “It’s the part where you think I need to be escorted. Like I need protection.”

He didn’t suppress his sigh. “That man is unstable. It would do him good to see you with someone else. Might give him reason to leave you alone for good.”

“Fuck that.” You scoffed, anger building up within you. “I don’t want him to leave me alone just because some other guy has staked claim over me. I feel gross enough already.”

His expression eased slightly into worried confusion. “Gross?”
“Yes!” Taking a deep breath, you looked at him for several seconds. Calmer, you continued, “You’d feel gross, too, if you had someone like that lurking in your life.”

He seemed perplexed by this. “Why won’t you let me help you? You had no problem pretending I was your lover in your hometown market. How is this different?”

You drew in a quick breath, at the reminder of that time, at the comparison he wanted to make. “That was just me being dumb. I was having fun. There’s nothing fun about dealing with this guy.”

His fingertips rapped against the milkshake glass. He stared you down. “I don’t understand you.”

“You wouldn’t,” you bit at him. “Unlike you, I don’t try to hide my real feelings behind a fake relationship.”

He let out a light huff. “I suppose I should take a page from your book and tell Prompto my true feelings so he can unwittingly reveal it to everyone in a group message.”

There it was. He was, all at once, acknowledging your crush and confirming that he’d been ignoring it. He looked at you with a frown, a gloved hand leaving the milkshake to curl on the tabletop.

“You fucking wish,” you breathed, your stomach dropping painfully into a pit. “Prompto was only saying that to bother me.”

“Yes.” His tone was droll. It hurt. “I do so wish for the affections of a person who openly invites anyone to bed for any reason.”

You glared at him, your own hands on the table curling into fists. “You didn’t have a problem with it when I was sharing a bed with you.”

He tilted his head just slightly, eyes searching yours. “Precisely my point. I’m merely a single name in a long list of lovers you don’t give a damn about.”

You grit your teeth. “You’re such an asshole.”

He glared back. “And you have no self respect.”

Your gaze slowly went to your hands, fingernails digging into your palms. You loosened the fists and looked at the flecks of indentions in your skin. Then, with a hard glance at Ignis, you stood up and left the arcade.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Unequivocally, you all are the best. (°_ʖ─º) ~ ☆
I can’t carry it for you, but I can carry you.

Chapter Summary

Whether or not you are alone is a choice you wish you could make for yourself.

Chapter Notes

Warning for stalking, abusive behavior, and an assault scene (not graphic or sexual, but still).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Changing your number was easy. Your network had a self service option on their website that you used on your walk to work, and your new digits displayed before you even made it to the theater. All of your voicemails, messages, and calls were gone, but you still had your contacts so it was a matter of letting people know.

Livid with Ignis, you left him out of the mass text letting the guys know of your new number.

Letting Mom know about it was hard. This was the third time you’d had to change your number in the past year. She questioned you about it every time, and this was only going to cause more suspicion. You didn’t want to explain any of it to her. Ever. To your mom, you were still just the bratty kid that had left for university three years ago, not the total fucking mess that everyone else knew you were.

You wanted to let her live that fantasy for as long as possible.

—

Prompto: y the new nmbr wats goin on

You: It happened again.

Prompto: aw man im sry

Gladio: whys iggy not in this chat huh

You waited at a crosswalk for the signal to turn green, looking at Gladio’s message with no small amount of annoyance. Of course he’d notice. Gladio meddled, and Iggy was his boy. You weren’t going to spare him any details if he pushed. There wasn’t a grain of patience left in you for this bullshit anymore.

You: I hate him that’s why. Don’t give him my number.

Gladio: what happened
You: He pretty much called me a slut.

Prompto: wow :( 

Gladio: he wouldnt say that 

You: He said I have no self respect. 

You: Which is hilarious coming from HIM 

Prompto: im sry that happened 

Gladio: why's he being such an idiot 

You: Prom are you at work already? 

Prompto: ya 

You: Prepare yourself. I’m about to tell you everything you could possibly ever want to know about that new Boy. 

Noctis: I knew it 

Prompto: omg yay finally 

Prompto: tell me about the thing w/ iggy 2 

Noctis: I guess this is happening huh 

Prompto: wat? 

Noctis: nothing 

—

Coming through the back entrance to the theater, you put away your bag and changed into your uniform. Prompto was standing on a stool when you came into the lobby, fixing some component in the drink machine. The new employee stood near him, shuffling on his feet and ignoring the customer standing at the counter.

With a sigh, you attended to the customer, then began to boss around the New Guy. It was his first day, and he seemed totally useless so far. Letting off your anger on him wasn’t fair, but you didn’t care. You were fuming inside. When Prompto was done with the machine, he sent the New Guy to clean the bathrooms.

“So?” He sidled up next to you, elbows on the counter.

You organized the straws roughly. “It’s so complicated, Prom. I don’t even know where to start.”

“From the beginning?” he supplied helpfully. “Tell me about the Boy. Then you can rant about Iggy and tell me what your asshole ex did this time.”

You sucked in a deep breath, peering around the empty lobby. Then, you looked at Prompto, took in his expectant expression and those big blue eyes.
You couldn’t do it. Telling him would be the worst thing. The last time you’d gotten involved with someone in your friend group, it had been with that psycho, and as soon as it had ended, you had no friends because they had all chosen his side.

You couldn’t pretend you weren’t involved with Ignis is some way at this point. And Prompto may have been your best friend, but he’d known Ignis longer. This small group of friends that had adopted you would ditch you as soon as they realized Ignis wanted nothing to do with you. That he was only led by some ridiculous sense of chivalry that irritated you beyond belief.

“Hey,” Prompto said softly. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

He touched your hand, and you realized it had been shaking on the countertop, gripping straws tightly.

“It’s Ignis.”

Prompto took the straws from your hand, putting them in the dispenser. “I’m sorry he said those things. It really seemed like you guys were getting along. I’m sure Gladio will—”

“No, Prom.” You covered your face with your hands. Your voice came out muffled. “The Boy is Ignis.”

He nudged you with his shoulder. “Huh? I don’t think I heard you right.”

“Yeah, you did,” you mumbled, nudging him back. “Iggy’s the Boy, and I like him.” The words were lighter coming out of your mouth than you’d expected. It startled you a little, testing them out in your mind before saying it again. “I like Ignis, and he thinks I’m trash.”

You heard him let out a deep breath. He crossed his arms on the popcorn littered counter. “Dude. How did this happen?”

You shrugged, sweeping a hand over the counter to get rid of the mess. “He answered my ad: local bad girl seeking good boy to utterly ruin.”

“How did it really happen?”

You sighed and slumped on the counter next to him. “He told a dumb lie, and I thought it’d be fun to play along.”

It sounded so stupid when you said it out loud.

—

As crowds came and went, you cleaned the viewing rooms and sent the new guy everywhere to do more menial tasks. As the final film of the night began, you slowly began to turn off the machines and clean up.

“Hey, wanna come over after we close up?”

Your hand running a cloth over the counter slowed, and you looked up at him. “Sleepover?”

He nodded. “Yeah, dude. I wanna know everything.” He tilted his head back and forth cutely, going over the contents of the register, probably adding up the gil in his mind. “If you wanna vent.”

You smiled slightly. You really did.
Prompto insisted on picking up a meat pie on the way home—you were, as always, suspicious of his love for the things—and gave you ample time to deal with Mom. She’d sent you a ton of messages while you’d been working, all of which made you anxious.

Why did you have to change your number again? You told her you were indecisive.

What were you doing right that moment? Just getting off of work and sharing a meat pie with Prompto.

Was meat pie a euphemism for a sex/drug thing, and when would you just introduce her to Prompto, he seemed like such a nice young man? You sent her a picture of Prompto mid-bite on the meat pie.

She called him cute. Prompto blushed. You were feeling a bit better by all of this nonsense.

Then you got to Prompto’s apartment, dipped into his liquor cabinet, and told him everything. Not just about the fake courtship, but also the kiss in Galdin. Not just about the time Ignis ate the pot brownie, but also the awkward way he’d held that baby as it tried to drool on him in the market. All of it.

Prompto was a supportive shoulder, listening in fascination and occasionally gasping or offering a silly comment. You couldn’t believe it had taken you so long to tell him. Each revelation felt like a weight being lifted from your tightly wound conscience.

“Y’know he even dated Gladio for a while?” You went to pour yourself another drink, but the bottle was empty.

Prompto’s eyes bulged. “Gladio likes guys?”

You peered down into the neck of the bottle, wishing for more whiskey. “What? Yeah, apparently they fooled around a lot or something when they were in high school.”

“Oh, fuuuck,” Prompto whined, rolling over on his couch to shove his face into a cushion. He spoke but none of it made sense or carried through.

You stumbled over to him, giggling. “Dude, I dunno what you’re saying.”

He rolled over again and looked up at you, eyes a little watery. “I got them both wrong. I totally thought Iggy was ace. And Gladio only ever talks about women so I never thought…” He sniffed. “Are they even my friends?”

You patted his flattened hair. “Now, now, Prom, this is my pity party.”

In all of it you’d forgotten to tell him about your ex and the viewing. It was for the best, anyway, since you’d decided you weren’t going.

—

Except you changed your mind just an hour before the viewing began. A killer hangover wasn’t going to stop you. You left your apartment, armed with pepper spray in your bag and a fair amount of spite in your heart. Because how dare he try to manipulate your decisions in the slightest. You had every right to watch the film you made without the fear of being harassed.

You stood outside the university theater, gathering the courage to go inside. People were
everywhere, handing out program fliers and chattering excitedly. You blended into the crowds well, suppressing your anxiety over the masses and the fear of being found by him.

When you were able to find a seat in the back as the lights dimmed, you felt relief. Wherever he was, he hadn’t found you yet. Maybe the thing Ignis had done had thrown him off, and he hadn’t shown up at all. You could only hope.

Your team’s film got second place, and when people clapped for it as your name scrolled upward across the screen, you felt, for the first time in so long, that life was good.

—

You stopped by a cafe on the way home and sensed something off. Between sips of coffee on the rest of the walk home, you kept gazing around yourself for suspicious signs. He had followed you before, but never with subtly. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary despite the creeping feeling you had of being watched, you brushed it off as paranoia.

It made sense that you’d be a little apprehensive. You’d expected some kind of confrontation at the viewing. You didn’t care why he hadn’t shown up; you were just glad you hadn’t found cause to use your pepper spray or the defensive maneuvers Iris had taught you.

Ignis had been wrong. You hadn’t needed an escort or to show yourself off with another person to carry the point across. You didn’t need protection, and you didn’t need Ignis.

—

“I’m getting those messages again,” Prompto said, shooing the New Guy away from the popcorn maker. “From you-know-who. Asking about you.”

“I’m sorry, Prom.” You hated that he had to put up with harassment because of you. “Why won’t you change your number or just have him blocked?”

Prompto’s scoffed lightly. “And let him win? I like my number. It ends in 1025, that’s—”

“You birthday,” you intoned. “I know, I know, easy to remember.”

He handed popcorn over to a customer. “Yeah, exactly! It’s not like I can’t handle it anyway, dude.”

“What is he saying?” You weren’t sure you wanted to know, but if it were really bad, you didn’t think Prompto would tell you anyway.

He shrugged. “The usual. Asking where you work now, and how I’m a bad boyfriend for you.”

The tension in you eased a little. That was nothing compared to the kinds of things he’d sent Prompto in the past. Messages asking how Prompto felt to get his sloppy seconds along with really old, trashy nudes of you that you’d been dumb enough to take when you had dated him. Those had scarred Prompto for a while…

“Do you ever reply?” you asked, hoping he didn’t.

“No way.” He snickered, tapping his hands on the counter idly. “It only gets worse if I do that. I give it like… three days max, and he’ll get bored.”

You sent the blond an apologetic smile. “He always does.” It was a cycle. He found you, you blew him off, he harassed Prompto for a while, and then he disappeared. You felt like such a shitty friend
for putting Prompto through that.

The theater lobby was quiet for a moment, the New Guy bumbling around with a broom rather than actually sweeping. Prompto messed with his uniform—it was the only time you ever saw him in sleeves outside of winter—with a small frown, fingers adjusting the bowtie at his collar.

“Have you… talked to Iggy?”

When he looked up, hands dropping from the tie, you looked away. Talking to Ignis was pointless. You had nothing to say to him. Nope, wait. You had nothing nice to say to him. “I’m gonna take five.”

As you rounded the counter, he reached across and caught you by the sleeve. “Dude, hold on, just listen.”

Stopping, you looked at him blankly. You weren’t going to talk about Ignis. Prompto might have known everything, but you weren’t doing this. You gave him wide, searching eyes, but his were better, bearing down on you in a bright blue as he leaned on the counter. You gently tugged your sleeve from his grip, relenting. “What?”

“I dunno…” He scratched his head, arm resting on the counter between you. “I think you should hear each other out. I know it’s kinda complicated, but— but you’re friends.”

He was trying to say you were both his friends. Prompto wasn’t so selfish to want you both to get along just for his sake, but a bit of annoyance surfaced at the notion. Sure, it was childish, but you didn’t care.

“Has he, um,” you began, uncomfortable voicing the thought, but you were curious. “Has he said anything about me?”

Prompto slowly shook his head. “No, but I dunno if he would anyway. You know what he’s like, dude. Maybe even better than, uh… yeah.” He stopped when you gave him an annoyed look. Then, he snapped his fingers. “I bet Gladio knows what’s going on with Iggy, though.”

You shook your head, not wanting to be that friend who sought out information about the person you were angry with. You didn’t want Gladio to know you even cared, because if Gladio knew, Ignis would know, and that would make what he’d said hurt even more. You were still trying to mend your pride at his dismissal of your crush, and you didn’t want him to think you were pining.

You didn’t pine for anyone, least of all for someone who thought so little of you.

“I don’t care, Prom.” You rubbed a hand down your face, regretting it as the butter from the popcorn greased your skin. You scowled at your hand with a sigh. “There’s nothing for us to talk about.”

“What do you mean?” He braced both hands on the counter, mouth going slightly agape. “You’re— you’re his fake girlfriend, and you like him, and he—”

“And he doesn’t like me,” you supplied, the frown on your face growing. Ignis had made it abundantly clear how he felt about you in the arcade, and, though you’d wanted to believe he’d gotten over his prejudices about you, apparently, he was disgusted at the thought that someone so beneath him could have a silly crush.

You’d thought he was a friend, maybe even a dear one with everything you’d done together. You sighed again, your annoyance dissipating into something muted, sadder. “Even if he did, it would never work out.”
Prompto didn’t say anything to that, watching you walk toward the break room with a compassionate look you ignored.

—

You opened and closed the compact, the mirrors inside reflecting the light from your bedside lamp. A fingertip traced the Scientia crest on its outside. It had a few scratches and a nick near the clasp that held it together. You wondered if you pressed hard enough, since it was solid gold, would it bend?

You wanted to smudge the crest but didn’t think it would be so easy as simply squeezing it really hard in your hands. It was taunting you, reminding you of him just like that little note from him that was still on the fridge. Please take care of yourself.

Hah!

You tossed the token across the room, hearing it bounce off your dresser and land on the carpet somewhere. Then you drew the blanket up to stare into space, thoughts distraught and chest aching.

—

The discount theater was only a block from an Altissia-themed restaurant that you’d never been to but salivated over on more than one occasion. So when a guy you’d matched with on a dating app asked if you wanted to have dinner with him the following evening, you were more than down.

“Make sure he doesn’t mess up too bad,” you told Prompto as you straightened out the dress you’d brought to change into. You were leaving work early for the date, and the New Guy was going to cover for you since his training was over.

Prompto hummed, eyes flitting to you for a moment while he nodded. He’d been quiet for most of the shift, which was odd, but not unheard of. You hoped he wasn’t upset about your conversation about Ignis the day before. Even more, you hoped the harassing messages from your ex boyfriend had stopped.

“You okay?”

He rolled a lazy shrug over his shoulders. “Just be careful tonight.”

That was a familiar request. You nodded as you readied your bag. The fact that he cared so much about you still left you surprised at times. “If the date goes bad, I’ll come back and help you close.”

“I don’t wanna wish bad on your date but…” He looked pointedly at the New Guy who was having difficulty slotting a straw into the lid of a cup. “I hope I see you soon.”

With a small laugh, you left the theater and walked the entire block at a leisurely pace. You posted a picture of yourself holding the golden compact cutely, captioning it Date Night :) just to show Ignis that you were doing fine. The petty move left you feeling slightly empty, but you brushed it off in favor of the excitement about your date.

The evening sun was low, and the cracked sidewalk gave a gritty crunch beneath your heels. As a breeze blew past, you felt an uncomfortable and sudden sense of being exposed and watched. You slowed, looking behind you, but seeing no one.

Alright… Calm down, you told yourself. Why were you so uneasy? It had been a long time since you’d been on a date. That had to be what was unsettling your nerves. You smoothed down your
already smooth dress and walked just a bit faster toward the restaurant.

You didn’t turn around to the faint, shuttered clicking sound behind you. It wasn’t real. You just had pre-date jitters. That was all.

—

The man was waiting at the table, and when the hostess led you to him, he stood up to kiss your hand. The way his lips lingered on your skin as he looked up at you made you smile. Oh, gods, you could already tell he had every intention of taking you home, and you were wilting.

He accepted your usual first date lies with finesse, coming up with a few of his own. You mentally deducted points from his favor as each thing spilled from his mouth. He worked at the Citadel. Oof, no good. He was often in court with high-ranking staff members. Yikes. He was a noble looking for love outside the constraints put upon him by high society. Hoooooly shit.

Part of you loved the lies—an obvious tell was his lack of a royal accent—and wanted to play along, but that was only a very small part. The rest of you hated the direction he’d taken things. It was too eerily close to home.

Halfway through the meal, he excused himself, and you used that as an opportunity to text Prompto.

You: Hey I’m coming back. This guy is good but I’m kinda weirded out.

Minutes later, to your surprise, the man returned with a completely different air about him. Tense and clearly confused, he didn’t return to his seat. Instead, he removed a large amount of gil from a pocket and put it on the table.

“You should’ve told me that you already had a boyfriend.”

You stared up at him, bewildered by the sudden change in him. “What are you talking about?”

He looked over his shoulder, and you leaned in your seat to see past him. He was looking into the little alcove of a hallway that led to the restrooms. You didn’t see anything there and returned your gaze to him, still confused.

Not sparing you another look, he said, “You’re hot, but it’s not worth dealing with this.” Then, he walked away, shoulder-checking a server who nearly dropped a tray of dishes.

You stared in the direction he’d left, shocked at the abrupt departure. You’d had bad dates, but this was ridiculous. Things had been going pretty well, you thought. Sure, you were going to ditch him, but it hadn’t been out of any bad experience you’d had with the man. And what had he meant by saying you had a boyfriend?

Gathering yourself, you left the table and went outside. The sun had gone down, the street lamps casting shadows on anything they couldn’t reach. Unsettled, you made your way back to the theater, intent on walking home with Prompto.

—

“Hey, wanna sleep over again?”

You shot Prompto a questioning glance. “Feeling lonely or something?”

He laughed, but you could tell it was forced. Something was wrong. “I guess I wanna hang out and
not talk about our problems for a night.” He counted off on his fingers, grin wide but not reaching his eyes. “I’m talking video games. I’m talking movies. I’m talking junk food. Everything! It’ll be fun.”

Biting on the inside of your cheek, you shrugged. “Okay, sounds awesome. Let me grab an overnight bag on the way.”

He nodded, expression coloring into relief in the low lamplight. You kept sending him glances, wondering what was up with him. Instead of questioning—he specifically said he didn’t want to talk about your problems—you let it go for now.

At your apartment, he waited by the door instead of flopping onto your couch at first chance. Unusually vigilant, he tapped a foot on the floor and peered around the hallway.

Walking from your bedroom to your bathroom, picking up things and tossing them into your bag as you went, you noticed that the contents of your medicine cabinet were in a state of disarray. You didn’t remember leaving it that way, but maybe Aranea had needed something and was feeling too sick at the time to dig through it carefully.

Small things stood out to you as well. Your undergarment drawer was halfway open and spilling onto the floor. Not unusual, but definitely not how it had been when you’d left for work earlier. Pictures of you and Prompto that had been taped to the edges of your mirror were ripped into small pieces and tossed onto your bed like confetti.

A nearly overwhelming feeling of sickness welled within you. These weren’t things Aranea would do, but maybe… maybe she had been feeling really sick and decided to trash the place while she was at it. That had to be it.

You left your apartment, trying not to think about the fact that Aranea wasn’t even in town.

—

Sharing a plate of nachos, you played a game with Prompto that lacked the customary amount of excitement from either of you.

“Any news on the wedding?” you asked, wanting him to say anything. You wanted to know what was wrong so you could, at the very least, distract yourself from the small bit of fear that pricked at your mind.

“It’s still on, if that’s what you mean.”

“Cool.”

His phone lit up, and he tensed, pausing the game to look at it hesitantly. He sighed at seeing what was on the screen. You leaned toward him, and he made no move to cover it.

It was a picture of you. Walking down a street, dress blowing in the breeze, right before your date earlier today. Below it, a message read does it hurt you to see her fuck other guys prompto? guess your not good enough for the bitch either

Several things raced through your mind at this. He had been following you. He knew where you worked. He knew where you lived. He’d finally found you. That’s why you hadn’t seen him at the film viewing; he’d used that as a chance to follow you home.

“Oh my gods,” you breathed, breaths coming hard as you reached for his phone. “Holy shit, Prompto, what the fuck!”
He held the phone out of reach, shaking his head. “It’s okay, I’ve been with you all day!”

“You weren’t with me then!” you pointed out, still trying to grab the phone from his hand.

Prompto’s features contorted into a raw worry, his blond hair limp and framing his face. “This is the first time he’s sent something like this. I thought he probably found out where you live because of something else he sent before, but I didn’t know he was following you to work! I’m sorry!”

You grabbed his arm, pulling it down to take the phone from him. “Don’t be sorry, it’s not your—”

He stopped you again, switching the phone to his other hand. “No, you’re gonna reply, and he doesn’t deserve the satisfaction, dude.”

You stared at him for a few seconds, measuring the beats that passed with each breath. “I won’t reply. I promise. But I wanna know what else he’s sent. Please.”

Hesitation made him wait before he slowly lowered his hand, letting you snatch the phone from him. You scrolled through the messages — filthy comments about Prompto being a bad boyfriend because you were such a whore — and felt a staggering awareness of what Prompto had been going through the past few days. He’d been playing it off so much, probably because you’d been completely absorbed by your own problems with Ignis.

You looked up, tears welling in your eyes. “I’m so sorry, Prompto.”

He shook his head. “No, dude. Just stop.” He gripped your shoulders gently. “This isn’t nearly as bad as the nudes.”

That straightforward bit of honesty startled a small laugh out of you, and he smiled gently. Of course it wasn’t as bad; the nudes had really tested your friendship. Mostly because he questioned the angles you’d chosen when taking them.

“Look, I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” he said, and you knew he meant to give you a moment of space to unpack your thoughts. He looked down at his phone in your hands. “I know you won’t respond to him, but if you think it’ll help, you can look at everything he sent.”

You nodded, watching him let go and stand up. He went to his room, hands pulling at his shirt. If he came back with any sort of marks on himself, you were going to have words. He’d tried scrubbing that barcode tattoo off his wrist before, resulting in a teary conversation about how much he shouldn’t give a damn about some lifelong mystery tattoo when he knew who he really was. You weren’t going to let him take this out on himself.

Rubbing at your eyes before any tears could fall, you went through the messages from most recent, to the later stuff. Apparently, your ex had bothered Prompto after spring break, too. There were a lot of messages that centered around a “tall guy with an accent” that aimed to make Prompto feel insecure. You were so angry that he was attacking Prompto like this.

Sending a reply was tempting. You typed something out, then erased it. You’d promised Prompto you wouldn’t play his games. Still. The douche deserved some comeuppance.

Ultimately, the decision not to do it was made for you because a new message chimed from the phone, lighting up the screen. You pressed it automatically, your ever present curiosity propelling you forward without any thought about how invasive you were being.

Gladio: so what's the news on our girl shortcake
Ignis: I asked that you not include me in these chats.

Gladio: too bad iggy i keep forgettin that you hate her now

Ignis: I don’t hate her.

You stared at the little dots that followed as Ignis typed. He didn’t hate you? You hadn’t thought about it that way, of him hating you, but it was nice to know that he didn’t.

Ignis: I simply find her mulish and callow, and above all else, a waste of my time.

Gladio: right

Noctis: still can’t believe you asked her to cover for you with the courtship thing

Ignis: It was ill-conceived and foolish of me.

Gladio: yeah almost like you mighta had a different motive, huh? ;)

None of them seemed to question why Prompto wasn’t adding anything to the conversation.

Ignis: Spare me, Gladio. She’s a means to an end and nothing more.

Noctis: damn

Gladio: just admit there’s something there

Ignis: There isn’t. I have far better uses of my time and energy.

Gladio: so youre just letting her go

Ignis: I tire of this.

Gladio: ok fine, wanna tell us where you were today? saw you leavin the citadel around dinnertime and you never came back

Ignis: It’s none of your concern.

Gladio: nah but Cor’s gonna have a fun time putting you through your paces tomorrow

You inhaled deeply, closing the messages before you could see anything else. You wished you hadn’t seen that much. You were beginning to lose the plot, anyway, not knowing who Cor was.

As if he knew you needed his company again, Prompto returned to the living room and accepted his phone from you. He restarted the game, and you both played into the night.

—

The nerves of your mind pinching at the worried, restless sleep you got at Prompto’s, you returned home with the hopes that Aranea had come back. By the pieces of mail hanging out of the slot of her postbox in the stairwell, you didn’t think that was the case.

Focusing on cleaning up, you reorganized your medicine cabinet. You tossed pills that had spilled everywhere. Everything was going to be fine. Ignis thought you were a waste of his time, you were causing Prompto personal hardship, and your psychotic ex boyfriend had found you. All of these
things were pressed to the back of your mind as you picked up the clothes that had been strewn across your room.

The bits of ripped pictures that you gathered from your bed tested the measure of your apathy. It made you sad because they had been gifts from Prompto, and he likely didn’t have the undeveloped film anymore to make new copies. It made you angry for the same reason.

When you dumped the ruined pieces of photograph into the bin in your kitchen, you froze at the sudden feeling of not being alone. Nearly imperceptible footsteps creaked against the wooden floor behind you, and before you could react, a hand trailed up your arm, gripping your shoulder. Not rough, but vice-like. You froze at the voice against your neck.

“Hey, beautiful.”

It was like slime covering your skin. You were repulsed, drawing inward at the proximity of the person you hated most. Fear spiking, you tried to get away, but he held your shoulder in place.

“I’m so happy I found you,” he said, remaining behind you. “Things can be normal again.”

You scowled, trying to will your body to not shake so nervously. “You’re delusional.”

“Or am I in love?” Another hand came up to touch your neck. “I missed you.”

Jerking at the disgusting feeling, you shoved your elbow into his stomach and escaped his grip. The self defense lessons were coming in handy. He held his stomach and glared at you.

You knew he would grab your hair next because he’d done it before, but it still hurt as he ripped at it, pulling you back to him. What you didn’t expect was him using that to hold you in place as he brought a fist to your face.

“Stop fighting this!”

Pain sprouted at your eye, your brow, along your entire face. You dropped, on instinct, hearing Iris tell you mentally that you should lay him out, and swept a foot underneath him. He fell to the floor, flat on his back. That was about as much as you could do, anyway. There was no way you could actually fight him.

As you tried to scramble up, he grabbed your ankle, tripping you to the floor. Your arms took most of the fall, but your head slammed roughly against a low cabinet. Sitting up, he rolled on top of you. His hands gripped your neck, fingers squeezing and digging into your throat.

His breathing was heavy, spit hanging from his open mouth as he glared down at you wildly. “You’re mine.”

You choked, lungs tightening as you thrashed beneath him, hands trying and failing to pry his away from your throat. Gladio had shown you something you could do here. You tried to remember, but your thoughts were overrun by fear.

Letting instinct and a vague memory lead your movements, you crossed your arms, gripped his wrists, and brought your arms down on his in a sharp jerk. His elbows buckled, and he lost balance, breaking his hold on you. That was enough for you to kick at him, knocking him off.

Free of him, you crawled away and used a counter to steady yourself into a stand. Running to the front door, you wrenched it open and stumbled down the stairs and felt along Aranea’s doorframe for her spare key. Aranea had weapons. She had fucking polearms and shit in her apartment, and if he
tried to follow you inside, you — you wouldn’t hesitate, bitch.

Slamming Aranea’s door closed, you locked it and held your back against it as if the deadbolt weren’t enough. You could hear him trashing your place upstairs and waited. Adrenaline fueled your shaky legs, keeping you up and pressed against the door. Minutes passed by at a torturously slow pace, until you heard him stomping down the stairwell.

You peered through the peephole, hoping that he didn’t know where you’d gone to. But he stopped in front of the door and leaned close to look into the other side of the hole.

“You’re never alone.” He said it quietly as if it were supposed to be something sweet that would draw you out. It made your skin crawl.

You watched him walk out the main entrance and disappear down the stoop as the door closed behind him. Too afraid to leave Aranea’s just yet, you backed away and crumbled to the floor. Sitting like that, head in your hands, you tried to calm down. You knew what you needed to do now, but you were hesitant.

Calling the police from the landline Aranea never used, you waited in her apartment and, for the first time ever, returned the favor of digging through her kitchen for snacks. When two officers arrived, you met them on the stoop and told them everything as you nervously munched on granola from a bag that had been labeled Biggs. They wanted to know if you were going to press charges, and told you that it would be reason enough to get a restraining order. That was unexpected. The police had been so unhelpful in the past, the reason for your hesitance.

You went with them to the precinct, slouching in the backseat of their car as the the pain that radiated from your head finally set it, the adrenaline completely drained out of you. Once you were at the station, they sent you to an officer at a desk who asked you the same exact questions, writing everything down.

“Can I go home?” You looked at the officer for some kind of guidance, and she shook her head. “I don’t wanna be here. I just…” The pain at your eye and along your nose bit at your nerve endings. Your eyes watered whenever you inhaled too deeply.

“I know you want an end to this, ma’am,” she said. “But he’ll continue to escalate the situation unless you address it appropriately. I’ll help you get what you need to request a restraining order.”

She suggested you see a therapist. You rolled your eyes. What was the point in talking to someone about it now when there was finally a chance of your abuser getting what he deserved?

Then, she gave you forms to fill out for a restraining order and a copy of the police report. It was dreamlike, putting all of the information together as one officer after the other kept giving you pointers and support. Someone even gave you hot cocoa and painkillers. The only moment of true discomfort was when someone took a photo of the bruising on your face. You’d need this proof in court, she told you.

It was only noon, and so much had happened. None of it felt real.

—

You told them on your way out of the station that you had somewhere safe to go, that you wouldn’t go back home alone. But you couldn’t bother Prompto further, and you had no one else to turn to. You could think of one person you wanted to run to more than anyone, but that would require you to swallow a large amount of pride.
Such a large amount that you might choke, and you thought you’d done enough choking for the day.

Walking into your apartment, you stepped over your upturned bin and the broken glass from smashed cups. The fridge door was bare, and you looked around for the white slip of paper that your eyes lingered on at least once a day. It was on the floor, wadded up and dirty from being stepped on. You picked it up and unfolded the mess of creases.

*Please take care of yourself.*

You smoothed out the crumpled paper, and for a moment, let yourself go, holding it to your chest as a quiet cry escaped. You didn’t *care* that Ignis only saw you as a means to an end. Your entire relationship was built on a lie, and he had been using you from day one. You’d known all of that from the beginning.

That didn’t mean you didn’t miss him. It had only been a few days, but his absence spoke so loudly in your life, especially now. The argument you’d had in the arcade seemed trivial. Even so, you still wanted to know why he vacillated so much between being your friend and thinking you were beneath him, and you still thought you deserved an apology.

So you didn’t reach out to him even though you longed to. Because you didn’t know which side of Ignis you were going to be met with. Would he be the sweet person who’d held your hand at Mom’s or the jerk who couldn’t wait to be rid of you like he had at his uncle’s?

You resolved to deal with one thing at a time. You’d clean up your apartment, apply for the restraining order, and then try to salvage whatever you could of your friendship with Ignis.

You picked a magnet off the floor and placed the note back on the fridge, wiping a wayward tear from your cheek. Ignis gave a shit about you. He had at some point, in some capacity, at least. This was proof of that, and it gave you the courage to get on with your day.

—

The Civil Department had to be the quietest part of the Citadel. Spoken words were muttered, gestures were slight. When it was your turn, a huge monitor displayed your number, pointing you toward a desk with a properly dressed man behind it. He gave your black eye a lingering look, but said nothing as he took the forms you’d filled out on the train over.

“How does this work?” you asked in nearly a whisper. It was distressing enough with all the looks you kept getting because of the bruises forming on your face. You didn’t want to also be the loudest person in the entire department.

He stamped the forms and shuffled them into a stack with other papers. His expression was sympathetic and his voice was low. “We’ll send one of our pages to serve the court order to him. You’ll have to come back for the hearing in about a week.”

You nodded, taking out your compact mirror to check your eye again. Was it really that bad? It still hurt, but you hadn’t thought it was that bad when you’d checked on it at home. It was a little more swollen and had darkened from a reddish color to a light purple. Just great.

Closing the compact, you caught the man behind the desk staring at it. Suddenly, he was collecting your forms from the stack and telling someone to take them to another department. You watched the person leave with your papers, startled when the man suddenly spoke again, his tone changing entirely.

“The hearing will be expedited. The wait will be five days at most.”
That was a sudden change. “What?”

“I didn’t realize you were a Lady,” he said, giving you a small frown. “It’s hard to tell with how casual you young nobles dress these days.”

The compact was still clutched in your hand. You looked at it before sliding it into a pocket. He thought you were a noblewoman, which would’ve been funny if you had any idea just what in the hell was happening.

“There’ll be no need for an initial hearing,” he said, as if that was supposed to mean something to you.

Voice quiet, you padded your fingers across the smooth desktop and asked, “So I get an expedited hearing because I’m a, uh, a noble?”

The man nodded. “You’re entitled to it, yes.”

That was kind of unfair. Did that mean you had less rights being a commoner? What the fuck.

A loud clicking resounded from the corridor, shoes against the marble floor. Ominous, almost. The door swung open, and Mirum stopped in the threshold.

“When I saw your name, I could hardly believe it,” she said, crossing the room and dropping papers on the man’s desk. “Are you alright?”

You stared at her for a moment before picking up the papers, still warm from being recently pressed. A signature from some higher up was scrawled along the bottom in elegant loops. A legitimate restraining order. Only temporary, but still.

“I’m okay,” you said, looking at all of the fine print and the royal crest stamped in the corner. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m your Marchioness. It’s my duty,” she said, waving a hand dismissively. “I was curious to see if it was you or someone with the same name.”

“Oh.” You kept forgetting that she was the one in charge of your home district. Of course she’d take the chance to nose into your business on the basis of being your political representative.

“Your hearing is in two days. Someone will contact you tomorrow with the details.” She picked imaginary lint from her blouse, clearing her throat. “Now that my curiosity is satiated and my job is done, I must be going. I suspect Ignis is on his way, and I have no desire to be in a room with him.”

You turned to her fully, jaw slacking. “What? How would he know?”

Mirum seemed confused. “He doesn’t know that you’re hurt?”

Putting the papers into your bag, you sighed again. She was the last person you’d ever talk about Ignis with. Too many things were going on as it was. You just wanted to go back home.

—

The gods were laughing at you.

As you left the Civil Department, you crossed paths with Ignis’ uncle. It was like dealing with an unavoidable enemy in a video game. You saw him before he noticed you. You tried to hide your face with your bag and run past, and just as you were about to escape via elevator, an exclamation
mark appeared above his head. He quietly called your name.

Slowly turning around on your heel, you lowered your bag and gave him a wide eyed look. “Hello, sir.”

He gave the most minute gasp. “My dear girl, what has happened?”

You blinked, thoughts only going to how soon you’d be able to make a getaway. “You mean this?” You covered your bruised eye and the bandage at the arch of your nose. “This is nothing.”

His brows knitted together. “I see. You had mentioned you were DTF, but I never imagined seeing the outcome myself.”

You laughed slightly, confused by the statement coming from Ignis’ uncle of all people. Then, you remembered how uncomfortable the dinner had been, and the misunderstanding you had never corrected. Gods, you just wanted to get the hell out of there. “Y’know, sir, the Citadel is huge, but we always seem to run into each other when I’m here.”

A smile came to his face, reaching the wrinkles at his eyes. “I’m glad for it. These small allowances give me the opportunity to get to know you a bit more.” He crossed an arm over his chest, bringing a hand to his chin. It was very Ignis of him, or maybe when Ignis did this, it was very Uncle Scientia of him. “Perhaps after a dozen or so chance meetings, we’ll discover something we have in common.”

That made you snort. It hurt your nose, and you tried hiding it by clearing your throat. What a weird thing for him to say. As if he cared about you as a person. As if you weren’t just a means to an end for him to get Ignis married as soon as possible. How odd.

“Well, uh, what information are you gleaning from this chance meeting?” You hoped your black eye wasn’t soiling his probably already tenuous opinion of you.

His good humor remained. “I’m afraid I don’t enjoy… roughhousing as you seem to.”

“Oh, that’s a relief.” This situation was awkward, and you just kept letting words come out of your mouth unfiltered. “I thought I was gonna have to fight you anyway. For, like, Ignis’ hand or something.”

The hand on his chin rose to cover his mouth as he chuckled. “I’m sure it would’ve been quite the battle. These old bones creak when I walk. An altercation would have me rattling.”

You’d made him laugh. Uncle Scientia liked you. Even though everything you said was dumb because your anxiety only seemed to increase every minute you spent in the Citadel.

“I’m pretty sure you could take me,” you said, shifting your weight from foot to foot. “We could take a trip down to the training room to see.”

He shook his head. “My nephew has been down there all day from what I’ve heard about the palace since morning. I very much doubt he’d appreciate me fighting his sweetheart. Especially amidst a punishment.”

You weren’t exactly sure how to react to all of what he said. Being called Ignis’ sweetheart made you blush, but hearing that he was being punished for something made you frown. It was an uncomfortable clashing, par for the course on this particular day. “He’s being punished?”

Uncle Scientia’s expression grew a little more serious. “Seems he crossed Marshal Leonis.”
You had no idea what that meant. “Ignis actually got into trouble for something? I bet this never happens.”

“It’s a rare occurrence.” He sighed slightly, looking at your eye again. “Getting into trouble and being DTF are certainly for the young. I hope your eye heals quickly, and you find no cause to rough it up again.”

Seeing this as an out, you nodded and began to back away toward the elevator. Someday somebody needed to tell him what DTF actually meant, but it wasn’t going to be you, and it wasn’t going to be today. “I’ll try my best. It’s been cool, sir.”

“Indeed,” he agreed, his smile returning. “Good afternoon, miss.”

There was an awkward moment where you were in the elevator waiting for the doors to close, and he stood there in the corridor. You pressed the close door button rapidly, sighing in relief once you were finally alone.

—

You: Hey is Iggy in trouble or something?

Gladio: yeah how’d you find out

You: You know me. I get around.

You: What happened?

Gladio: he missed an emergency thing last night

You: Emergency?

Gladio: don’t worry about it juicy just a training thing

You: So that means he’s seriously been training all day?

Gladio: yeah usually i get to have all that fun

Gladio: are you done being mad at him

You: Not really.

Gladio: just talk to him and stop being mad

You: Weren’t you mad at him for over a week because he missed one breakfast with you?

Gladio: that’s different.. he cancelled on me last second

Gladio: you’re just mad because he doesn’t know how to express himself around you

You: He can express himself by apologizing.

Gladio: he can’t do that if you don’t give him your new number

You: I honestly thought one of you idiots would’ve given it to him by now.
Gladio: ye of little faith

You: Oh yeah right like you guys don’t operate on some bros before hoes bullshit.

Gladio: you don’t have a clue what’s going on

You: No duh. I’m always in the dark.

Gladio: i mean you’re always up in arms

Gladio: you don’t get how hard iggy tries to understand you

You: I never asked him to.

Gladio: so you confuse him on purpose

You: No. What are you even talking about?

Gladio: I shoulda known this would happen

You: Seriously, what?

Gladio: just call him tonight. i’ll make sure he gets out of the citadel by nine

You: I don’t get off work until eleven.

Gladio: i dont care when you call as long as you do it

—

Prompto didn’t say anything when he saw your black eye upon arrival to work that night. You were grateful he wasn’t making a big deal out of it, but you could see him fidget more and send you worried glances that he didn’t think you noticed.

Customers were giving you looks that ranged from concerned to cavalier. You ignored them all. Prompto’s upbeat attitude helped you along, as it always did, and closing time neared far too soon. Coming downstairs from turning off all the projectors, you found Prompto typing furiously on his phone. The second he realized you were there, he shoved it into a pocket and got back to cleaning up.

It was suspicious. Then, you thought about what Gladio had said before. That you were too defensive. So you promised yourself that you wouldn’t become defensive without an actual reason, and you wouldn’t say anything about it. If Prompto was having a conversation —likely about you if his shifty eyes were anything to go by— with someone, it was none of your business.

“You’re acting shockingly indifferent about my messed up face,” you said, immediately breaking the promise.

He rolled a shrug over his shoulders, his attempt to hide how rigid he was. “I’m really fucking pissed, dude,” he admitted. “I shoulda been there. I wish I’d been there. But you said you’re getting a court order thing so I guess there’s no point in thinking about it.”

Suppressing a smile, you wadded up a straw wrapper and flicked it at him. “What would you have done, anyway— beat him up?”
He picked it out of his hair and threw it back at you. “Uh, yeah?” His cheerful demeanor had tensed into one of huffy insistence. “I won’t hesitate if he tries to come near you again. I’ll do one of these and open a can of this.” He fisted and kicked at the air. “He’s lucky I can’t carry a gun otherwise I’d pistolwhip his—”

You snickered a little, letting the smile come to your face. “Shut up, Prom.” He looked ready to say more nonsense, but you stopped him with a hug. He returned it wholeheartedly, wrapping you in his arms. The smell of buttered popcorn on his uniform was overwhelming. The feeling of sincere fondness even moreso.

The New Guy tried to join, but you kicked out your foot to ward him off. Prompto snickered into your hair. “I love you.”

Far from being the first time he’d said this to you, you weren’t surprised by the statement. He was waiting for you to say it back some day, but the L word scared you. He knew that. So you squeezed him a little and barked an order at the new guy to get back to work closing the joint instead of watching you and Prompto having a moment.

—

His contact information sat open on your phone as you showered. Ignis Scientia. You peered down at your phone sitting on the sink, steam fogging up the screen. Ignis. You could still make out his vague profile photo through the fog, but his name was obscured.

His information continued to sit on display as you got dressed for the night. Shamelessly —you were at home, no one had to know!— you put on his Crownsguard sweats. They didn’t smell like him anymore after being run through the wash, but the soft fabric surrounded you so comfortingly. You liked how they were too big for you.

You had to get your thoughts straight before calling him. Okay. What you knew: He thought you were confusing. He wanted to understand you. He didn’t have the best opinion of you or your habits. He was an A+ see me after class kisser. He, incorrectly, thought you needed to be protected. He wasn’t, and never would be, your boss.

There was a lot more, but everything kept going back to how good it felt to have his mouth on you. You let out a sigh, exasperated by your own thoughts. It was like you couldn’t function today. Which was reasonable considering everything that had happened.

You held off the call even further as you brushed your teeth. You didn’t want him to know how bad your breath was over the phone. Because that made sense.

When you finally called, he didn’t answer.

You threw your phone onto your bed and went to the kitchen for a late snack. So much for your clean teeth. Fifteen minutes later, you crawled into bed, maybe just a little sullen at all the buildup to nothing. He was probably asleep. Or wouldn’t answer because he didn’t recognize your new number.

Gladio had said he’d make sure Ignis wasn’t working late, but there was no guarantee that Ignis would even want to talk.

Checking your phone, you saw a missed call. From him. Just two minutes after you’d called.

Oh. Never mind.
So you worried your lower lip, took a deep breath, and called him back. He answered after two
rings.

“Hello.” His voice was quiet, tired.

You released your lip, fingers on your free hand splaying out on your blanket. “Hey, is Ignis there?”
It was dumb, but you didn’t want to lead right off with I forgive you, let’s be friends again or things
would be even more uncomfortable than they already were.

There was a pause. Then, “Hm. He’s away, I’m afraid. Punishing himself for being a complete ass. I
could take a message for him, if you wish.”

Oh. He was going to play along. This was a side of Ignis you liked, and you couldn’t believe your
luck at catching him like this tonight. Your fingers curled in the blanket. “Who am I speaking to?”

“My apologies. I am his…” You could hear the smile in his voice. “Brother, Glacies.”

Glacies, as in ice? As opposed to Ignis’ fire? You held the phone away from you for a second to
snort out a little laugh that sent a small ripple of pain across your face. “Well, Glacies. You sound
very sophisticated. And handsome.”

“I assure you, I’m quite dashing,” he said, sounding a bit less sleepy. “What message have you for
my foolish brother?”

You gripped the blanket in your hand, then let go, smoothing it out again. “Let him know I’m not
mad at him anymore.” Stretching your legs out, you couldn’t keep still. “I heard he had a rough day
in the training room.”

“It wasn’t anything he couldn’t handle.” There was a soft background noise, shuffling and then a
gentle sigh. “I must drop the pretense to tell you I’m sorry. I’d been brash that day in thinking I knew
what was best for you, and for that, I truly apologize.”

“That—that’s okay.” Your hand clutched at the blanket again, the apology sending a wave of
warmth over you. “I get that you were just trying to look out for me in your own pushy, Ignis kinda
way.”

“It’s not only that,” he said, voice slightly louder, more firm. “I’d allowed my frustration to color my
words foul. I can’t seem to grasp the depths of you, and that is entirely my own fault. The last time
I’d said something so insensitive, you’d merely brushed it off. I’ll admit, I hadn’t expected you to
react in such a way.”

You twisted the blanket between your fingers and drew your legs up, resting your chin on your
knees. He meant that time you’d overheard him insulting you at his birthday party. “I didn’t give a
damn what you thought back then. But now…” You sighed. “I don’t—you give off this vibe that
makes me wanna impress you. It doesn’t seem like it because I’ve actively fought it ever since I met
you, but it’s there.”

You weren’t sure where you were going with this. “Maybe it’s because you’re nobility or because
you’re really smart and put together. I don’t know, and I don’t really care. My point is, you’re not
easy to understand, either.” You swallowed, pushing forward because you needed to finish the rant.
“But that doesn’t stop me from accepting you as you are. So why is it so hard to accept me?”

His end of the line was quiet. You began to feel embarrassment, flopping back in your bed and
staring dolefully at the ceiling.
“Allow me to say something that may be rather bold,” Ignis suddenly spoke. “Would you meet with me?”

Confused at the sudden suggestion, you blurted, “Now?”

“Yes.”

You considered the thought for only a second. “No. I don’t— I’m sorry, but no.” He couldn’t see your bruised face. If he did, then he’d know that he’d been right about everything. You wanted to come out of this with both your pride and your friendship intact.

Quiet again, you heard movement on the other side of the line. The shuffling of feet, maybe?

“I don’t think, for the present, that I should say this,” Ignis said, the timbre of his voice resonating in low tones. “I’d wanted to tell you in person, if the time could ever be right, and if my words could come out as I intend.”

Your mind lulled, breath catching as you wondered what he meant. You weren’t in any mood to hear him explain exactly what he didn’t approve of about you. You knew they were probably too numerous to count.

“Truly, I shouldn’t.” The shuffling seemed to intensify, feet on hardwood and the clinking of glass. You imagined him picking up and putting down a mug of coffee. “There are far better ways to do this, and you deserve that.”

You chewed on your lip, listening to more shuffling. Just what in the hell was he getting so worked up over? If he was going to insult you with his real thoughts on you, you’d rather he just get it over with.

“What is it? Just tell me, dude.”

The shuffling stopped.

“I must profess,” he chuckled, breathy and hesitant. “I fancy you. The extent of which could be comparable to a god. Titan, perhaps.”

You blinked at an odd stain on your ceiling. “What?”

Another chuckle from him, and you were pulling the blanket over your head. As though doing that meant you could hide yourself from this situation. But he was there, on the phone at your ear. So, really, you were hiding with him, if anything.

“I don’t know what to say,” you murmured, heart suddenly hammering. It felt thick, in your throat. “What do you mean fancy? You mean like… that you, uh…”

“That I do wish what Prompto had said were true.” His voice was equally as soft. “I like you very much.”

“Why didn’t you just say it like that in the first place?” The words left your mouth before you could help it. Your face felt hot, and it wasn’t because of the blanket surrounding you. “You’re always so eloquent— th-that’s what I meant by feeling the need to impress you.”

He was silent on the other end, and you were growing flustered, not sure how to take this new information.
“Now I feel like, if I wanna say I like you back,” you continued, unable to let the silence sit. “I’d have to say something really cool. Like ‘expressly, I do share your, uh, affections as the fair Prompto had so foolishly declared. Though usually quite candid, I find myself bashful due to the frankness with which you have—”

His smile had returned, you could hear it in his voice. “There’s no need to impress. I simply wanted it to be known that I do accept you as you are, even at times that it may seem antithetical to my actions.”

You felt a tingle that began in your chest and spread down to your toes. Words were failing you, and you let the silence stretch for several moments.

There was a muted chuff through the phone —you imagined Ignis getting into bed— and he sighed quietly. “Dare a man hope that your mess of vocabulary means you do share my feelings?”

You hesitated, then shoved the blanket off of yourself. Heart still in your throat, you sat up. When had you ever felt like this? It was uncomfortable to an unbelievable degree. You were happy and confused and excited and distressed all at once. And he wanted a direct answer? You weren’t going to say how you felt again. Either he got it by now, or he never would.

Voice soft as ever, fingers clutching at the sweatshirt over your aching chest, you said, “I think you already know.”

Another silence. You startled when your phone beeped. An incoming call from Prompto.

“I gotta go,” you said, both reluctant and ready to get out of this conversation at the same time. It was overwhelming. Ignis was overwhelming. “Prom’s calling. Probably did something dumb and needs help out of it.”

He hummed. “I’m knackered myself. Goodnight.”

“Night.” You ended the call quickly, answering just in time to hear Prompto sigh loudly and a pounding knock at your front door.

“Dude, I’m here. Open up.”

You climbed out of bed and scuttled to the door. “Why are you here?”

He hung up when you opened the door. “I couldn’t sleep, and with everything happening…” He scratched at his neck, shifting his weight from one foot to another. “I thought you might need company.”

You let him in, and he looked at the Crownguard sweats you wore. “Unless…” He looked around the room. “I’m interrupting something?”

Blushing, you shut and locked the door. “Shut up. I’ve had these forever.”

He hung up when you opened the door. “I couldn’t sleep, and with everything happening…” He scratched at his neck, shifting his weight from one foot to another. “I thought you might need company.”

You let him in, and he looked at the Crownguard sweats you wore. “Unless…” He looked around the room. “I’m interrupting something?”

“Blushing, you shut and locked the door. “Shut up. I’ve had these forever.”

“And they’re Iggy’s?” He opened the fridge, acting like he owned the place, per usual.

“Yes, gods, just drop it,” you sighed, joining him in the kitchen.

Prompto always had good intuition on things like this, you’d figured out in your time knowing him. He knew when he was needed, even if he wasn’t wanted. Good thing you always wanted him around.
“You’ve got nothing to eat?” he whined, closing the fridge.

With a flat look, you said, “I have cup noodles.”

You almost always wanted him around.

—

He brought out his camera while you waited for the noodles to finish. “I wanna show you something.”

You watched the display as he flicked through photos. He went as far back as Galdin, the bright blues of the ocean blaring from the screen. Then, he had to backtrack slightly.

“There,” he said, stopping on a photo of you sitting on Kenny Crow’s lap. Next to you, Ignis sat with an easy smile in your direction. It was candid, your smiles shared between each other, unaware of the camera.

You remembered that. You’d just told Ignis you were in his stupid lie together. He hadn’t been sure you meant what you said. But you’d solidified your friendship that day, above all else.

“I remembered everything you said and looked through every picture I took while we were hanging out this year.”

You imagined him in his apartment with a wall of photos of you, Ignis, and Kenny Crow, strings connecting each random photo in some intense and convoluted conspiracy.

“So you found a few where Ignis and I look like we actually enjoy being around each other?”

He chuckled. “Kinda. I’m totally confused about, I dunno, everything that’s going on.”

You chewed on the inside of your cheek as you checked the cup noodles. “We made up. Just before you got here.”

“Dude, that’s great.” He took his noodles and tried to take a photo of himself eating.

It wasn’t great. There was a sense of underlying excitement, but things were already chaotic. Ignis’ confession—which you could hardly believe as it was—made things vastly more complicated.

You watched Prompto snap photos, none of them seeming to be what he wanted. Different angles of him eating. It was weird, even for him.

You held out a hand. “Here. Let me help.”

He posed several different ways but wouldn’t keep still for long enough to get a good shot. “Are you chomping Gladio’s flavor?”

His eyes widened, chopsticks holding noodles above his tilted head. “W-what?”

You took a picture of him. “Gladio’s the king of posting cup noodle photos. He’s gonna call you out.”

With a small laugh, he dropped the noodles into the cup, swirling the broth with his chopsticks. “Maybe.”

You looked at the picture of him, the slight blush, the surprise in his expression, the noodles dangling
above his open mouth. “This one’s great. Like someone had walked in on you doing something dirty, but you’re just eating ramen. Gladio might not get mad about this one since it’s pretty sexual.”

He took the camera back from you, grumbling and blushing.

—

Someone from the Civil Department called you early the next morning. You listened closely, looking at Prompto who was wiping sleep from his eyes. They began a long explanation of the time and location of your hearing, what was important when arguing your case, and the kind of evidence that was important.

Because you had lost all of your messages when changing phone numbers, Prompto sent you copies of all the threatening and disturbing messages the guy had sent him in attempt to find out where you lived or worked. You compiled it onto a huge email with your police report and the photo of your injured face.

You sent it once the phone call was over, left with a lot to think about and prepare for.

—

Prompto styled his hair in your bathroom while you tried to figure out how to use makeup to conceal the bruises on your face. You sat on the edge of the tub, using the compact mirror to scrutinize the purple marks. Every few seconds, Prompto sent you a glance, his foot tapping against the tiled floor.

“So Iggy gave you that?”

Hissing a little at the small stabs of pain around your eye, you didn’t look up when you responded. “Yes. Prom, you need to stop saying stuff like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like so Iggy did blank for you? Wow I can’t believe you and Iggy did blank.” You gave him a deadpan look.

He threw his hands up. “I can’t!”

“You knew I was attracted to him. I made it really obvious.”

“I thought you found him hot in the same way everybody kind of finds him hot.”

Peeking up at him for a second, you snorted. “What?”

He shook his head. “I can’t believe you and Iggy slept together!”

You snapped the compact closed. The black eye was going to be impossible to cover up. “Don’t even worry about it, Prompto. It was casual, and it happened forever ago. Let’s just drop it.”

“I can’t believe I wasted my time being worried that you and Gladio would hook up when you were getting it on with Iggy the whole time.”

“We weren’t getting it on. It was one ti—wait.” You tilted your head. “Worried?”

He froze, fumbling over his words. “N-no. I mean. Uh. It was the most likely thing to happen. You’re both noncommittal and like, super into sex. I dunno.”
You watched him focus carefully on one part of his hair, dropping the entire conversation. Then, he smiled at his reflection. “I almost forgot. That tequila bar you like is holding a trivia contest this weekend. We should enter.”

Looking at him doubtfully, you almost laughed. “Seriously?” You hadn’t been to that bar in a while. It always got you the most trashed. Maybe you could really use a night out like that; it had been a pretty terrible week so far. “We’d be awful at trivia, Prom.”

“We could totally win,” he said, checking himself out and tossing a few finger guns at his reflection. You loved that about him. “The prize is ballroom dancing lessons. I figured, since we’re going to a royal wedding in a month, we could use them.”

Now there was an idea. You brightened a little. At best, you won the dance lessons. At worst, you lost the contest and got really wasted in the process. It was practically win-win.

“Let’s do it,” you said, grinning up at him. “That’s exactly what I need after this shitty week.”

He snickered, fingers splaying on the sink and tapping idly. You could tell he was trying his best to support you, and you appreciated it immensely.

—

You sat on your balcony, smoking and watching as the day progressed, overcast and gloomy. The plants that surrounded you were a minor comfort, the herbs and flowers sending rushes of spicy scents around you with each breeze.

The door slid open, but you made no move to look at your unexpected guest. You knew who it was because you’d seen her go inside just earlier.

“You’re back.”

Aranea chuckled. “Yeah, and I’m going right back out on another trip soon. Might need you to pay rent early.”

Casting a glance over your shoulder, you grunted. “Okay. I’ll transfer the gil to you tomorrow. Anything else?” You wanted to be alone.

Aranea’s eyes widened just slightly. “What the hell happened to you?”

Facing forward again, you stamped out the remains of your joint. You were broody, and in no mood to talk. Prompto leaving for one of his other jobs had drained all the sunshine out of you.

Aranea rounded your chair, a hand coming to your shoulder. “Tell me what happened, kid.”

“I got into a bar fight,” you lied, shrugging her off.

She gave you a long look, then sighed. “Alright, drama queen. Just make sure you transfer everything tomorrow.”

You grunted again, curling into yourself as she left. Why did it feel so empty with Prompto gone? You kept checking for any more contact from Civil Department case worker just to be sure you had everything in order. You couldn’t even gather the energy to look for a hookup from one of the few numbers you had gotten from flirty people recently.

With a sigh, you watched the day continue on in a quiet, cloudy drift.
235 notifications on a photo you’ve…

You only glanced at the preview before clearing it from your phone. Prompto probably tagged you in his cup noodle eating picture since you’d taken it. Wouldn’t be the first time he’d given you credit. It was almost annoying how popular he was. You had like thirty followers, tops, since you were so private. You liked it that way. He had thousands, and you would likely get notifications for days now.

It wasn’t until you were debating over making cup noodles or ordering takeout when you decided to look at what he’d tagged you in.

It was the picture of you and Ignis outside of the Crow’s Nest. Smiling at each other. Happy. The caption read All the small things.

You stared at it for several minutes, a few more notifications popping up. What the everloving fuck made him think it was okay to post this?

Gladio had commented with something other than juicy, which surprised you. He continued the lyrics Prompto had begun with the caption by saying true care, truth brings. It was annoying that Prompto and Gladio had apparently felt the need to recite the entire song, line for line, in the comment section. It was especially exasperating when it devolved to the point of them each just saying nananana over and over.

Honestly, you could barely keep up with all the thoughts this gave you. So you clung to the annoyance. It was the most familiar feeling you felt, and you weren’t in a good mood to begin with.

You: You’re dead.

Prompto: T_T wut y??

You: Because you posted that photo you fucker.

Prompto: u said u made up w iggy tho

You: Yeah but I never said it was okay to show the world.

Prompto: since wen r u shy about boys

You: Since I don’t know exactly where I stand with them.

You: I’m mad and embarrassed about this.

Prompto: but u guys r cute

You: No.

Prompto: i can c the luv btwn u 2

You: Do you want to die?

Prompto: im sry!!! i thought it wud cheer u up

Prompto: evrything is shitty & u looked rly down 2day
Your mood hadn’t really soured until he’d left. It was like he had a sixth sense for these things. You wanted to threaten him some more, but he didn’t deserve it. He was just trying to be sweet.

Looking at the picture again, you sighed. It was really nice. It made taking Ignis’ confession easier. He liked you. Very much, apparently.

Worrying your lower lip, you smiled minutely. That stick in the mud, mom friend, fancy pants noble, Ignis liked you.

Wow.

—

He hadn’t said so much as a word to you all day. You’d thought that with a confession of feelings, something would change. Like, you dunno, maybe he’d send you more messages or at least call or something.

But you liked it this way. You liked that his dedication to work meant you had plenty of space for yourself. You’d been just a bit worried he’d want to meet you somewhere earlier in the day. You had even prepared a few excuses, just in case. Turned out you didn’t need to worry.

It was nothing but radio silence.

That is, until pretty late. You checked your phone intermittently, looking at the picture Prompto had posted. Waiting for the hearing was a little nerve wracking. You weren’t sure you’d be able to sleep at all.

Bundled up in bed like a burrito —a trick you’d learned from Noct— you looked at the picture again. Your eyes were drooping, and you almost missed it. The comment from Ignis.

*I endeavor to make her smile at me in such a way as often as possible.*

Six, you were tired, but you must’ve been seeing things. He couldn’t really be saying something like this, right? In front of everyone. Were all of your friends just losing their minds?

For just a moment, you closed your eyes. Then your phone chimed, and you realized you’d fallen asleep for ten minutes. Noctis had responded to Ignis’ comment with *Barf*.

Good to see the others were taking this in stride. You shared Noct’s sentiment.

—

The hearing was held in a small courtroom. Prompto ditched his shift at the cafe to be there to support you. He sat directly behind you in the gallery. When your stalker came in, Prompto leaned over the bar to murmur, “You didn’t tell me you beat him up.”

You realized what he meant when you looked at him. His face looked even worse than yours. The bruises around your eye were yellowing. His were dark purple and accentuated by small cuts. You hadn’t been the cause of his injuries, but you only shrugged at Prompto’s statement. You didn’t feel bad for him at all.

The courtroom was pretty empty. Your appointed representative sat next to you, another sitting with your opponent. The gallery had a few people in attendance; everyone but Prompto sat on your opponent’s side.
When the time came, your rep presented everything to the judge. They encouraged you to speak up in affirmation as they handed the judge the evidence. It all seemed pretty cut and dry, especially when your stalker didn’t try very hard to defend himself. He’d barely looked at you the entire hearing.

During his defense, you sat back and Prompto reached a reassuring hand over the bar to squeeze your shoulder. It was nice to have the support. Maybe you should’ve told the rest of the guys about it. To have more than just Prompto there. It had been a little humiliating to admit in front of all these strangers the weird and awful things your ex boyfriend had done to terrorize you.

You looked over your shoulder to smile thankfully at Prompto and froze. Further back in the gallery, other spectators sat quietly. Noctis, Gladio, and Ignis. Noctis had a hat on, but it was so obviously him. Gladio had his arms crossed over his broad chest, face grim.

Ignis appeared as serious as usual, but when he caught you looking at him, he rose a hand in a small wave.

Taking back what you’d just thought, you quickly turned around and took a deep breath. Ignis was the last person you wanted to be here. This was some heavy shit for people who were barely grasping at simple feelings for each other. It’d be a miracle from Bahamut if he didn’t get totally freaked out by all of it. The girl he liked had an ex that was obsessed with her? Definitely didn’t look good for a noble to court someone like that, fake or not.

The judge approved the permanent restraining order, though it was only effective for a year. While Prompto congratulated you, your opponent walked past your table on the way out. His expression lacked the usual acid. Not defeated, but something entirely unusual for him. Fear.

He only spared you a quick look, then an even more brief one to Prompto. He left without saying anything, and you could hardly believe it.

Standing up, you relented and gave Prompto a grin that he was quick to share. It was over. He was finally gone, and you could completely move on. When your silent moment of celebration was joined by the other guys, Gladio not even hesitating to hug both of you in one go, you were feeling smothered.

Noctis stuck back, smiling encouragingly if a bit awkward. You escaped the hug, leaving Gladio with an arm slung over Prompto, and looked past them at Ignis who kept a slight distance himself, hand adjusting a glove.

—

Smoothing down your shirt uncomfortably, shifting your weight, you weren’t sure how you felt about this. Separated from the others, you approached him to talk. You didn’t know what you needed to talk about, but you just knew you should. In the middle of a slowly emptying courtroom with a yellowing black eye on your face wasn’t exactly the way you wanted to see him after you’d both shared how you felt.

He looked amazing. As always. From the cuffs at his wrists to the perfectly in place tie, he was the picture of professionalism. You thought it was kind of funny that he wore driving gloves even when he worked in the Citadel all day. Because he never knew when Noctis would need him to drive someplace?

“Did Prompto tell you?” You looked past him at said friend with a frown before turning your apprehensive gaze to the handkerchief neatly tucked into the pocket at Ignis’ chest.
“He was the only one who didn't inform me, in fact,” he said, adjusting his glasses and peering down at you far too kindly. “Rather, it was Mirum and my uncle who imparted the knowledge to me sometime yesterday, just before Commodore Highwind called my office because she’d thought I’d been the one to hurt you.”

You blinked once, twice. “No.”

He nodded, the slightest of smiles tugging at his mouth. “Yes, I received a wonderful message from her detailing how she could dispose of me without repercussion due to her diplomatic immunity. You hadn’t covered your bases all that well, I’m afraid.”

Apparently not. Things had all happened so fast. Too many things. You could barely keep up.

“Well, shit.”

“Indeed.”

Your eyes trailed the lapel of his suit. “Go ahead and say it,” you said, not quite bringing your gaze up to his. “I’m not too big to admit that I should’ve listened to you.”

A gentle hand touched your jaw, cupping your face and making you look up at him. His eyes were soft and such a strong green. “I wouldn’t have admitted my feelings if I had known you were under such stress. I’m sorry.”

You’d expected him to say I told you so. Not this. Of course he’d say something like this. It was sickening how perfect you found him. “Damn it, Ignis.”

His brows arched over his glasses, mouth parting slightly as you knocked his hand away. Uncaring of his nicely pressed clothes, you wrapped your arms around his waist and hugged him. “Stop apologizing.” Several beats passed before he returned the gesture. You couldn’t believe how good it felt. The hours of sulking the day before felt faraway. Now you knew why he’d been so distant, to give you the space he thought you needed. “Thanks for being here. It means… so much.”

He hummed into your hair. “I wasn’t certain it was the wisest decision, given that you’d hidden the entire incident from me, but I couldn’t help myself. I was terribly worried.”

Withdrawing from him, you watched with mild amusement as he absently straightened his jacket and smoothed down his appearance as he looked down at you. His gaze was soft, and his hands, when they came up to your face, were gentle. He trailed a thumb tenderly over the sore spots under your eye.

“I’d never presume to think something so selfish as being correct about this. What’s important is you were hurt, and you’re safe now.” His frown sharpened for a moment, then the bow of his lips returned to a pleasant neutral. “I’m impressed you fought him off. You didn’t need me, after all.”

His eyes searched yours. You could faintly see your reflection in his glasses. His thumb continued the kind caress along your cheek.

“Ignis,” you said, mustering up the courage to say the words you needed him to know. “Even though I could live without you, that doesn’t mean I want to.”

A small smile played at his lips, and he pressed a gentle, lingering kiss to your forehead before resuming his professional air, dropping his hands from your face. The kiss—in front of the others, oh gods, oh gods—made you blush, and you touched your forehead as he smiled at you.
Things had changed between you again, in a much scarier way this time. You had a feeling it wasn’t going to be easy, but you were no longer alone. You were *in it.*

Together.

**Chapter End Notes**

Please don’t take reader’s actions/reactions to the stalking (ignoring red flags and refusing help) as the best or right way to deal with it. She doesn’t know a fuckin’ thing, my dude.

This is the heaviest it gets until toward the end of the fic. Back to regularly scheduled awkward flirting/misunderstandings/angst next chapter.

Thank you for reading this hot garbage.

(■_■)♡
I know for a fact you don't party.

Chapter Notes

If it rhymes, it's a riddle. Apparently.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Turning off the lights, you locked up the theater and joined Prompto underneath a nearby streetlamp. He was engrossed in his phone, nothing unusual aside from the way that each rush of his thumbs made your phone chime. You brought it out, sending him a flat glance that went unseen.

**Prompto:** guys cum 2 a trivia contest tmrw we need 4 ppl

**Gladio:** Not sure trivia’s your strong suit shortcake

**Prompto:** hey :(  

**Noctis:** no thanks

**Prompto:** aw cum on i need u

You elbowed him lightly. “Dude, you need to change the way you spell ‘come’ or I’m gonna keep thinking you’re saying something else.”

He snickered. “We need four people. There’s a minimum for the teams.”

With a shrug, you watched as the conversation continued —mostly between Prompto and Gladio—and said, “I’m sure we could find some people at the bar to join us.”

He didn’t look up as he asked, “You’d rather do that than have Iggy come?”

You hadn’t talked about Ignis with Prompto since the hearing. There wasn’t anything to talk about. After you’d spoken in the courtroom, Ignis had to get back to his office for work, and Prompto gave you a slight ragging before you left the Citadel together for your own job.

That was it.

**Prompto:** itll b fun !!!

**You:** Yeah, tequila bars are rad as hell. Hot food, hotter babes.

**Prompto:** hear that gladio hot babes

**You:** Yeah juicy. All kinds. Big brunette women. Small blond men. Whatever your type.

Prompto gave you a side glance, frowning at you in the yellow streetlights. You pretended not to notice.

**Prompto:** iggy she wants u 2 cum so bad shes just 2 shy to beg
You shoved him. “Astrals, you’re a dickwad.”

_Ignis_: She’d never beg. It’s not in her nature.

_You_: Glad someone gets me.

Though… if the circumstances were right… Ignis might find himself surprised, you thought.

_Prompto_: will u cum tho?

_You_: Stop asking everyone to cum.

_Gladio_: nah I’m always down to cum

Prompto paused in his walk, and you had to stop, looking back at him with a snort. It took a little effort to pull him along. You were only a couple blocks from home and growing impatient.

_Ignis_: Sparing the nonsense, I would like to participate.

_Gladio_: yeah count me in

_Prompto_: noct??

_Noctis_: No

_Prompto_: but y ?

_Noctis_: Going to a bar with you four sounds like the worst time

_You_: Ouch. I thought we were friends your highness.

_Noctis_: We are but this is weird

_Ignis_: How so?

_Prompto_: ya!! y is it weird 2 u?

_Noctis_: Just leave me out

_Prompto_: fine ur loss well have fun w/o u

He sighed just outside of your building. “I don’t get why he doesn’t wanna come. Usually he’s up for anything.”

You shrugged. “So you found the one thing he’s not into. That’s a good thing. It’s not like you can do everything together forever. He’s getting married soon.”

A smile brightened his face. “Yeah, true.”

You waved goodbye and smiled at the stupid conversation all over again. Ignis was going to come—not _cum_, unless things went well—and if you understood things well enough, this could almost, kinda be considered a date?

—
Covering the yellowed bruises with makeup and wearing something directly between sexy and modest, you waited with Prompto outside the bar. People were going in slowly off the street. Music emanated from the doorway, saucy and exciting. You checked your reflection in the compact for the third time since arriving. What were Gladio and Ignis even doing? You’d expected Ignis to be there before anyone.

The compact was suddenly taken from your hand, and you froze momentarily, watching as it traded between large hands. Gladio stood in front of you, eyeing it with interest.

“Whoa, Iggy, genuine gold?” He chuckled. “Leave it to you to not even half ass something that’s fake.”

Ignis took the token, offering it back to you. He wasn’t smiling, but you noticed the slightest tint of pink on his face in the early evening sunlight. You took the compact and smiled, placing it into your bag and giving him a onceover.

He was, as always, overdressed. A suit jacket over a buttoned top. What was this, a business meeting? Without thinking about it, you reached up and unbuttoned the topmost button of his shirt. Then another and another until his collar bones were revealed.

“There,” you said. “You still look like you’re going to a meeting, but maybe a sexy one where you’re trying to seduce your boss.”

Prompto snickered, leading the way inside with Gladio not far behind. Ignis cleared his throat, but didn’t make a move to change what you’d done. “After you.”

You did an exaggerated curtsy that made him smile.

Red alert: this was, in fact, a date. That fact almost immediately made you feel anxious, but the way his hand touched the small of your back made excitement overtake your worries.

It would be fine, and if not, it wasn’t like you’d promised each other the world. Bad dates happened and crushes fizzled out all the time.

—

It was a little awkward. You couldn’t pinpoint why, only that it was. All of you decided to forgo the drinks until after the contest, to keep yourselves clear headed. So you sipped on water and waited for it to begin. You were already regretting the lack of alcohol.

The lively music energized you, a welcome background noise to your buzzing thoughts. Ignis was close, sitting next to you at the table. Your knee touched his every so often.

“How are you?” he asked, lowering his voice and looking specifically at you. Gladio rolled his eyes next to him as if he’d just been waiting for Ignis to start ignoring him for you any moment.

“Relieved, mostly.” It was the first time you had an honest answer to a generic question that usually annoyed you. “I feel like… I can do anything, now. Maybe I’ll book a trip to Accordo if I get drunk enough tonight.” His knee bumped against yours. You smiled down into your water. How stupid. Since when did something that simple get to you? “Um, what about you?”

“My entire body aches from training earlier in the week, and I’m behind on my work.” He smiled slightly. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

You snorted. “I think you need this night out as much as I do.”
Gladio slapped a hand on Ignis’ back, winking at Prompto. “Trust me, we all need it.”

“Y-Y’know, we should have a drink for good luck,” Prompto said, raising a hand to get the attention of a server. He seemed tense, more so than you were, which was a feat because you were nervous about all of this.

Ignis adjusted his glasses. “Terrible idea.”

“Great!” you said at the same moment.

Gladio looked between you while Prompto ordered a round. You met Ignis’ eyes and chewed lightly on your lower lip. It was just a small, momentary lapse in agreement. Okay, so maybe you and Ignis didn’t exactly agree on many things. He seemed unbothered by your slight opposition so you decided not to waste time overthinking it.

The server placed small glasses and slices of lime on the table, and you looked away from Ignis to find the salt. One flick of your tongue on the back of your hand, just between your thumb and forefinger, you shook a little of it on that spot before passing it to Prompto. Then, you both did the salt-and-lime routine. It was sour against your tongue, which curled as you tasted the salt, took the shot, then bit the slice of lime.

You turned to Ignis, finding him watching you with a careful eye. Smiling —the lime in your mouth surely looked ridiculous— you nodded at the shot in front of him. Even Gladio had followed you and Prompto in the admittedly trashy way of enjoying the drink; Ignis couldn’t be that big of a square to not play along.

Spitting the spent lime into your hand and tossing it onto the plate with Prompto and Gladio’s, you asked, “Don’t like tequila?” Maybe he couldn’t handle it. A lot of people couldn’t.

He surprised you by shrugging off his jacket, placing it on the back of his chair and calmly lifting his glass. “There is a protocol for drinking tequila properly.” He rose the glass to eye level, swirling the liquid smoothly. Meeting your eyes, he took a drink and let it rest in his mouth for a moment before swallowing, as if tasting it were important. He swiped his tongue along his lip in a quick movement. “It’s to be enjoyed slowly.”

It was your turn to eye him carefully. The bar suddenly felt incredibly hot. “D-don’t be so smarmy.”

A smile teased at his lips. “I’m not.”

You nudged his knee with your own. “You totally are.”

When you looked at Prompto, it seemed like he was having his own private conversation with Gladio. You narrowed your eyes at him. “Hey, what’s up?”

Prompto started, eyes wide. “Nothing.”

Gladio chuffed out a small laugh. “Nice save, shortcake.”

Your eyes went to Ignis. He shared a confused look with you. “What’s going on?”

He shrugged, his shirt shifting just a little. You openly looked at what you could see of his chest and collar bones once you let the alcohol settle in your tummy. You wanted to hug him. Or kiss him. Or maybe just lean into him because he was such a good friend. You sighed softly, the alcohol calming your nerves a bit.
“They’re a mystery to me as well,” he said, looking at the others. “It may be best that we ignore them.”

You grinned. Maybe. It was only one drink, but you were already feeling the familiar warmth that began in your chest. Yeah, best to ignore them and focus on Ignis. The holier than thou way he was drinking the tequila was kind of cute anyway.

—

You slammed the bell with a hand. “Garulessa!”

The contest runner was all smiles as he gave you yet another point. “Correct!”

Your team was crushing the competition. It was almost unfair. What you didn’t know, Ignis knew, and vice versa. Gladio and Prompto answered less questions, but were usually right when they did. Okay, maybe there had been a brief period where you’d ring the bell and just giggle drunkenly instead of giving an answer. But the others had put a stop to that, keeping you from the bell until you calmed down.

“How’d you know that?” Gladio asked.

You shrugged. “My dad’s a hunter.”

It was true, but it held no bearing over your animal knowledge. You’d wanted to be a wildlife vet very briefly before college. You also knew a few things about anthropology, law, and psychology. Before film, you had no idea what you’d wanted to do. You just knew it had to be big. So you’d looked into and studied your every interest before deciding.

You’d had a lot of time on your hands and nowhere to go as a teenager who lived in the countryside.

Ignis rose a brow. “That’s interesting.”

The host was beginning another question. You waved Ignis off. “We’ll talk about it another time. It’s boring. Pay attention to the question.”

He nodded, but kept watching you with interest for the rest of the evening. Not like that was anything knew. You were beginning to realize what it felt like for someone like him to have a crush on you.

Slightly intimidating, extremely flattering.

—

“It’s Crepera,” you said, glaring at Ignis.

He frowned at you. “No. I’m certain it’s Optimus.”

You shared a sharp look with him, your hand tangled with his over the bell at your table. “It’s the Rogue. She was the only queen of Lucis; it’s easy to remember. I can’t believe you’re against me.”

To anyone else, it looked like he was holding your hand because he was sweet. His gloved hand almost covered yours entirely. He was keeping you from ringing the bell, but you knew your answer was right.

The contest runner looked around the bar expectantly. “Does no one have an answer?”
You reached for the bell with your free hand, but Ignis beat you to it. The chime caught the host’s attention. Ignis hesitated for a moment, gaze lingering on you briefly. “Crepera Lucis Caelum.”

“That’s correct!” The contest runner gave your team another point on the board and began to announce the next round of questions.

Looking at Ignis, you wondered why he’d changed his mind at the last moment. Instead of asking, you gave him a small smirk. “Told you I was right.”

He took a final drink of another shot —you’d lost count of how many rounds after a while— and gave you a soft glance. “I took a chance, and I’m impressed.”

Gladio snorted, and you felt a small wave of embarrassment. Tugging your hand from Ignis’, you lifted it to wave down a server.

“We need another round,” you said, trying to will away the blush that was growing along your cheeks. “Extra strong and, uh, neat.”

“I don’t think that’s the wisest decision,” Ignis said once the server walked away.

“We’ll be fine.” You waved off his concern with a flippant hand. “You should try drinking it the fun way this time.”

“Yeah, Iggy,” Gladio prodded. “Do it the fun way.”

He crossed his arms. “I’ll not degrade myself to imbibe in such a crude manner.”

You rolled your eyes, already licking your hand and applying salt as the server placed the drinks on the table. With a dead stare at Ignis, you repeated the salt-and-lime routine. He sipped from his glass, holding it delicately between his long fingers. It was ridiculous how he made even drinking elegant.

You smiled, the lime wedge covering your teeth, and attempted to speak. Trying to ask if he thought your new lime teeth were sexy, you only said nonsense around the sour fruit.

A small laugh escaped him, and he covered his mouth with a hand, clearing his throat. Who cared if he was nearly your opposite when he looked at you like that?

Like you were the only reason he was even there.

—

Ignis’ shoulder was the perfect perch for your chin. Your team had won the contest, and Prompto had went with Gladio to find out why the bar wasn’t serving food.

He let you lean into him. Your breath hit his neck, and you were too drunk to be embarrassed about how strong it probably smelled of alcohol. He didn’t seem to mind.

“I’m gonna get you to loosen up.”

He turned his head, nose skimming yours. “I believe you’ve done enough for the both of us.”

“I’m just getting started,” you said. This fool had no idea what he’d gotten himself into with you. Bringing a hand to his chest, you trailed fingers up the soft fabric to the creamy skin exposed at his collar. His eyes flitted between yours before falling on something over your shoulder.

“Astrals, I can’t believe this.” He jumped a little, sitting up straighter. The motion pushed you away, and you jerked your hand back in response. Were you being too forward?
“Uh, I—I’m sorry,” you stuttered. Ignis didn’t seem the type to like public displays of affection. Were you more sober, you’d have stopped yourself.

“No,” he said, peering past you. “Look.”

You looked over your shoulder, startling at the sight that had surprised Ignis. Just beyond the bar, in a small hallway that led to the restrooms, Gladio had Prompto pressed against the wall. Their lips were locked, bodies close. One of Gladio’s hands had gotten under Prompto’s shirt, tugging it up enough that you could see the light stretch marks along the side of his stomach.

“We gotta stop this.” You got up, but wavered a little.

Ignis stood and gripped your shoulder to steady you. “We shouldn’t bother them.”

“But Gladio’s eating Prompto’s face.”

“They’re consenting adults,” Ignis reasoned. He let go of your shoulder to grip your hand instead. “Let’s see about finding food elsewhere. We’ll return shortly, and they’ll have it out of their system.”

You gave him a sour look, but followed him to the exit anyway. “Consent? They’re both wasted.”

“Hardly. Gladio is going easy tonight, and Prompto’s been ordering virgin drinks made almost entirely of fruit juice.” He stopped on the sidewalk just outside the entrance, looking down both ends of the street. “You and I have drank the most by far.”

That was true. Although he went about it slower, you’d noticed that Ignis had subtly made it a point to match each of your drinks. Prompto and Gladio had stopped taking straight shots after the second round.

The bright images on the side of a food truck on the corner caught your eye. “Hey, that looks promising.” You pulled him along the sidewalk toward it, weaving past people waiting to get inside the bar.

You both ordered gyros, and you sat on the curb with yours. Ignis hesitated before joining you. A small victory song played in your head. You were so getting him to loosen up. He was sitting on the dirty street corner with you, for Shiva’s sake.

“Thanks for coming tonight.” You wiped at the sauce dripping down your chin. “We wouldn’t have won without you.”

He seemed confused about how to eat the food without it being messy. The little line that formed between his brows as he furrowed them was cute. “Don’t be silly. I’m quite surprised at how knowledgeable you are.”

You snorted, not even offering to help him. “You thought I was dumb before?”

“Not at all.” He took a bite of the gyro and the insides fell out of the bottom, splattering onto the ground. The sauce ran down his hands. Wide eyed, he looked down at the mess, then at you.

Holding back a laugh, you wiped the food off his cheek with a napkin. He stilled, eyes roaming your face. It was hard to keep the amusement reined in. You giggled at his expression. He put the remains of his food down, his gloves soaked in sauce.

“You’re the one who needs the compact this time.” You smiled at him, but he didn’t smile back. “What?”
He remained quiet, green eyes dancing in the lamplight. It glinted off his glasses in a dim yellow. Your smile waned, and you looked away. He had to know how piercing his eyes were. Busying yourself, you unbuttoned his gloves and slid them off, one at a time. He let you without argument, taking the napkins you handed him to wipe his hands.

“These are ruined,” you mumbled as you inspected his gloves. Had you done something wrong? His silence was beginning to bother you. “Something on your mind, Ignis?”

He took a deep breath, letting it go quietly. “I wish very much to kiss you.”

That was unexpected, but not unwelcome. Gaze flicking up to him, your smile returned. Smaller this time. “Why don’t you?”

His eyes kept you pinned. Too serious. “A fair number of reasons.”

“Because we’re in public and you’re shy?” You poked him in the chest.

Finally, a smile threatened his lips. “Not so much shy as situationally conscious.”

You giggled again, the lightheaded and dizzying effects of the alcohol urging you forward. You wanted to kiss him, too. His smile was so nice, and everything he said was perfect. In fact, you didn’t think you could get your lips on his fast enough.

He stopped you centimeters from his face, hands coming to your cheeks. “We shouldn’t.”

Pouting at the familiarity of the situation, you leaned forward, but he stopped you again. “Why not?”

“We’ve both had too much to drink.” His voice was gentle. “I’d rather wait until I’m sober.”

You gripped his wrists, pulling away his hands by the shirt cuffs. “It’s just a kiss. I’m not asking for sex. Don’t be—” You looked down at his hands. One was bruised at the knuckles. It derailed your train of thought. “Is this from the, uh, punishment training?”

His fingers curled slightly in your hand, but he made no move to pull away. “No.” Voice still gentle, it made you gaze up at him. He was looking away, something close to shame on his face. Such an open book, you thought. Drunk Ignis was a bit serious, but he’d never been so easy to read.

“What happened?” You ran fingers delicately over the bruised knuckles. “Why only your right one?”

He flexed his hand again. “I’d rather not say.”

You were super curious, but didn’t want to press. “Okay.”

His gaze snapped to you, eyes not entirely focused. “What?”

With a shrug, you pressed a soft kiss to his knuckles. “If you don’t wanna tell me, then don’t. I hadn’t planned to tell you about my bruises. Just—” You hiccuped, and wow, you hadn’t done that since you’d first began drinking years ago. “Just be careful. You can tell me stuff when you’re ready. Or whatever. I just, I care about you, and I don’t want you to be hurt. I guess.”

Words just kept falling out of your mouth. Somewhere in the back of your mind, you knew you’d be much more uncomfortable if you were sober. But you were both just above completely trashed. His serious face had returned. Ignis was so drunk and so serious.

Now, that was a movie title. So Drunk, So Serious. You could base it off of him. Kinda. An uptight noble who drinks and becomes super serious and maybe fights people like some kind of secret hero.
Or wait. He could race cars? He was always wearing those driving gloves. Yes. Yes. But then that’d be promoting drinking and driving. You could put a disclaimer up when the film started to keep the critics at bay. The potential was endless. You really needed to write this down.

Your thoughts halted when he dropped his forehead to your shoulder. His back rocked slightly with quiet laughter. You froze, enjoying the feel of his breath against your collar. It was weird. How could you enjoy that?

“Do you always come up with absurd film ideas while intoxicated?” Oh. You’d been thinking out loud. You felt him snake an arm around you in a loose hold. Drunk Ignis was serious and touchy? A strange combination, but you liked it. Though, he didn’t seem too serious now, his soft laughter against your skin dying into quiet breaths.

“My hand—the bruises—they’re from, ah,” he sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“Yes. It had been gratifying at the time, but I’ve regretted it ever since.”

“Wow.” You tried to process the information, but it didn’t sit well. Indignation rose up, and you wished you could look at his face if only to carry your point across as sternly as possible. “You’re better than that, Ignis. I never asked you to defend me.”

He made no move to look at you, speaking into your collar. “I’d no intentions of interfering with your court hearing. When Mirum told me what had happened, she’d shown me the report. The photograph of your injured face…” His jaw tightened for a moment. “She gave me the choice to serve the court order to the man myself. I knew better than to accept, but I was furious. When I found him, he antagonized me by insulting you.”

Realization struck you. “So you punched him.”

“Why?” You leaned into his hold, another hiccup making you feel silly. “You apologize too much.”

Accepting that, you laughed quietly. “Thank you, though, for doing that. You’re getting more and more out of control. I’m a bad influence.”

He hummed in agreement. “You make me want to misbehave at times.”

That made you grin. Ignis somehow held the full scope of attractiveness within one person. You found him sexy most days, sweet others, and right now, with his quiet, genuine statements, he was adorable. You wondered if maybe he was too drunk. Because he’d been leaning into you for a while, and he seemed to be making himself comfortable.

You patted his back encouragingly. “Let’s go inside. I bet those idiots are done being gross now.”

He inhaled deeply and righted himself, letting you go. Seeming much more like himself than he had just seconds before, he nodded. Not too drunk, then. That was a relief. No way had you wanted to drag him all the way home.

You stood up, pocketing his dirty gloves and tossing the remainder of your food. Then, in as fluid a motion your drunk ass could handle, you leaned down and kissed him once before taking off back toward the bar.
“Prompto, I fucked up.”

“No. I fucked up.” He shook his head slowly, words coming out in a grumble. “You kissed a guy you were on a date with because you were drunk. I made out with a guy I wasn’t on a date with, totally sober.”

You nursed the Bloody Mary in your hands. “I was trying to be cute. It was quick, and I scampered off. I looked back right before going inside, and what did I see?”

“It’s not your fault he threw up.” Prompto took the celery stick from your glass, taking a bite of it with a solid crunch. He was dripping tomato juice all over your damn couch cushions. You were too hungover to care. “There was so much of it, too. He chose to drink a ton. It’s not your fault.”

“Yeah, it is.” Your tolerance for alcohol was dangerously high. Ignis shouldn’t have tried to match you. Gladio had taken him home once you were able to get him out of the bar. “Wait.” You furrowed your brows at him, but his eyes were closed. “You regret sucking face with Gladio?”

He shrugged and choked down another bite of celery. “Maybe. Kinda.”

“Was it bad?”

He chewed, opened his eyes and looked at you thoughtfully. “Nah. It was great. Solid A plus.”

You didn’t see the problem, then. You’d suspected only recently that Prompto liked him, and Gladio seemed to at least enjoy shoving his tongue down Prompto’s throat. “Looks like it got really heated last night. He was practically trying to undress you.” A smile small grew on your face. “It was pretty trashy, though. Who makes out in the middle of a bar?”

He groaned. “Dude, let’s not— no more talking about it.” A finger pointed at you, he added, “And don’t tell Noct.”

“Why not?”

Closing his eyes again, he sighed. “I’m gonna pretend it never happened.”

You thought that was really stupid, but who were you to stop him from making his own dumb choices? It wasn’t like you didn’t literally do the same thing to him for months. Drinking your hair of the dog liberally, you tried to multitask writing a good apology text to Ignis and organizing a schedule for the dance classes that worked for both you and Prompto.

“You know what I wanna do?”

You looked up from your phone, the apology not forthcoming. “What?”

“Waste one of my paychecks at the arcade today.”

Leaning your head on his shoulder, you sighed. “Hell yeah.” You hadn’t forgotten about that flowering cactuar, and it was as good as yours.

—

The glass case was empty when you got there, and you beelined for the prize booth for an explanation. The attendant behind the counter shrugged. “Somebody won it the other day.”

You gave them a severely disappointed look. “When will you get another one?”
They shrugged again. “Probably never. It was a limited edition.”

Prompto nudged your side. “You could probably find one online, dude.”

You pouted, leaving the counter to stare at the empty case. “It’s not the same. Me and this cactuar… we had a connection. I danced for her, but she was won over by another.”

He laughed a little, nudging you again. “C’mon, dude, I challenge you to a round of Street Fighter.”

You stepped away from the case. “Why not Mortal Kombat?”

He grinned. “Why not both? I’m gonna win either way.”

With a laugh, you pushed him. “Cocky. We’ll see about that.”

There was an underlying sense of dread that bit at you, but hanging out with this human embodiment of sunshine was the best way to fight the sadness you worried would return.

—

On the way home, you stopped at a pharmacy because Prompto needed something for his contacts. He blamed them for why he lost to you so many times.

“They’re dry, and my eyes are blurry!” he said as you walked down an aisle. “We need a fair rematch later.”

“Sure, Prom.” It was short and sing-song, said as you walked past him toward the vitamin section. You were really bad at keeping up with daily doses of vitamins, but since your medicine cabinet had been raided, you decided you’d try to take up the habit again with the extra space you had now.

You’d also read about several that might help your little depression problem. Hell, maybe they would help with the anxiety, too, but you weren’t asking for any miracles.

Every single one had colorful packaging that was encouraging, as if hinting at how much brighter life would be if you took them. You picked up one of each, thinking that, at the worst, they might be good placebos if you didn't think on it too hard.

—

Getting ready for work that evening, you hoped it wasn’t too late to say something to Ignis. You hadn’t heard from him all day, but it wasn’t as if you'd been in a rush to talk about it yourself.

You: Hey. I’m sorry about what happened last night.

He didn’t respond. You waited, working an entire shift with one hand in your pocket, checking your phone intermittently.

You waited, lying awake in bed, unable to sleep.

You waited, growing more and more anxious.

—

As much as you disliked the Citadel, you found yourself there a lot these days. You’d shown up under the pretense of tutoring Talcott because his regular instructor was ill. But Gladio, who’d been the one to ask you over, had made it apparent upon arrival that Talcott had been asking about you,
and maybe you could just keep the kid occupied until lunch because everyone else was really busy.

Gladio met you on the first floor of the Citadel, handing you some kind of badge that would get you access to places like the grand library —hnnnngggfhhh yes — and anywhere else you may need to go while escorting the kid around.

“Who is Talcott to you, anyway?” You put on the badge, wondering why it had taken so long for someone to give you one of them. You’d been here so many times already.

“Butler’s grandson,” he answered, checking and rechecking his phone, for whatever reason. He’d said he was busy so he was probably counting the seconds he was wasting here with you.

You stared for a moment. “You have a butler.” Because of course he did. Times like this reminded you of how remarkably removed your lives were from one another.

“You have a butler.” Because of course he did. Times like this reminded you of how remarkably removed your lives were from one another.

“Yep.” He shrugged, not invested in the conversation. Slapping you on the shoulder, he set off to a different set of elevators. “Try to stay outta trouble.”

You walked past the guards and stepped into an elevator that would take you up to the residential area. “No promises!”

“First things first,” you said, excited because this was your first ever attempt at babysitting. You’d looked at a list online of important things to know when trying to keep a child happy and alive. “Are you allergic to anything?”

Talcott, who stood outside the Amicitia residence with a very polite smile, shook his head. “No.”

“Good.” You ticked that off your mental list, going over the rest quickly as a reminder. Keep him safe, keep him entertained, and probably the biggest challenge, don’t swear. “What do you usually do around this time? Like what’s your routine?”

He shrugged. “My tutor would be going over arithmetic, I guess.”

You frowned a little. “That sounds gross. We’re not doing that. You know it’s summer, right?”

With a smile, he nodded and followed you down the corridor as you set off. “What are we doing?”

“We’re going to the grand library. Does that sound okay?”

He nodded, seeming as excited as you were. You looked down at him for a moment before offering your hand. You were a Hand Holder and a Hugger, and you wondered if he was at the age that he would think himself Too Cool to hold someone’s hand.

He wasn’t. You were a little surprised that his hand wasn’t sticky when he clasped it around yours, talking about paintings you passed and answering whatever questions you threw his way. You’d always thought all kids had sticky hands and dirty faces, but Talcott had neither.

He knew a lot about geography and history, and you thought it was cute how he would only refer to Noct as Prince Noctis even if it meant he said “Prince Noctis” three times in the same sentence.

You felt like he could be the one tutoring you.
Dreamily gazing about the massive library, you walked with Talcott through rows upon rows of books, touching every single one of them you could reach as you passed. Old books. New books. You didn’t know where to start.

“What do you like to read?” you asked, watching Talcott cut across aisles toward someplace specific. You assumed he liked reading because he was so well spoken for such a little kid.

“Anything.”

That wasn’t helpful.

He stopped at the end of a bookshelf, looking back at you. “Gladio said you like obscure stuff.”

What? That was a big word for such a small person. “I guess. Got anything obscure to show me?”

He grinned. “You bet.”

—

With a dusty book between you, you and Talcott read an old fairytale about a chocobo maiden. The pages were delicate and the drawings were meticulous, and you wondered how ancient it was. The story was interesting and uncommon, and you were already mentally mapping out a screenplay based on the concept.

A chocobo maiden was a creature caught between being human and chocobo, able to switch between the forms anytime. The maiden could live forever if they never fall in love. In the tale, it meets a kind human, and the story abruptly ends, asking the reader what choice they think maiden will take.

“What do you think?”

You nodded. “I’m impressed, kid. It’s pretty obscure.”

He snickered, touching the sketch of the human and maiden facing each other on the page. “No, I mean the story. Do they fall in love?”

You shrugged. “Tell me your ending.” He didn’t need to know what you thought. You weren’t going to ruin whatever magic he believed in with your negativity. Falling in love was bullshit, and if you were the maiden, you would spend eons as a chocobo alone in utter happiness.

As Talcott shared his thoughts, you turned the page to the next story in the book. A small slip of paper that had been caught in the binding lifted with a *fwip*, wafting through the air. Talcott caught it, going silent in the middle of a sentence to look at it.

You leaned, reading it over his shoulder.

*Take a drink, have a rest. Surrounded in flora, you’ll begin this quest.*

The paper wasn’t a part of the book, but the pages it was currently opened to seemed telling, related somehow. The left page held an image of a carbuncle, small, furry, and maybe a little sinister due to the aged lines of the sketch. The right simply said *Find me.*

You turned the page and noticed that a completely new fairytale began. So the carbuncle image and accompanying message were some strange standalone intermission between stories. You looked down at Talcott and met him with a grin. “I think we just started a mystery. What do you think it
means?"

He looked at the paper a bit more. You thought the place mentioned in the riddle had to be somewhere in the Citadel, but you didn’t know the castle all that well. It was unbelievable in its massiveness, and you kept learning new things about it each time you visited.

“Flora means plants so maybe the gardens?” He looked at you uncertainly.

You rose a brow, your point proven. You’d no idea there were gardens until now. “That’s awesome, Talcott. We could look for clues there.”

He brightened at the praise, closing the book carefully before standing up. “I know where that is. Let’s go.”

—

Surrounded by rose and camellia bushes, you walked through the gardens with Talcott who kept referring to the riddle as you looked about for some sort of clue. There were hedges everywhere amongst the flowers and plants, and you felt with a certainty that it was a maze of some kind. Or at least you hoped.

Spilling through the high windowed ceilings, sunlight lit up different hues of green everywhere. Vines sprawling and hanging from different columns caught your eye, and you were becoming just a little distracted. This place was beautiful.

“Have a drink,” Talcott read. “Maybe the fountain?”

You looked down at him, stopping for a second and coming back to the present. He was doing all the work; he didn’t even need your help. “Lead the way.”

The fountain wasn’t deep into the gardens. Just past the entrance and through a few tall hedges, the space opened up into marbled floor and a fountain large enough that you could swim in it. The edge of the basin was perfect for sitting, and you noticed creepy faces carved into the center tower that went far above your head. Open mouthed as if screaming, each one seemed either horrified or angry.

You walked around it clockwise while Talcott took the other direction, meeting on the other side. The basin wasn’t too deep, and the water was clear so you could see the coins shining from the bottom but not much else.

“Maybe we have to sit, and the clue could become obvious.” You sat down, looking around for anything out of the ordinary. Nope. “See anything?”

Talcott, who’d sat further down the bend, shook his head. “No.” He turned slightly and looked into the water. “Maybe we should drink it like the riddle said?”

“No,” you said quickly, standing up and approaching him. This reminded you that, no matter how clever he was, Talcott was still just a kid. “Bad idea, bud. Let’s not do that. Yuck.”

He gave you a sheepish smile. “Yeah, okay.”

You sat next to him, both of you giving the riddle one more read. You weren’t coming up with anything. Maybe you were supposed to drink the water. Looking down at it, you frowned. No. Adventure be damned, you weren’t doing that.

Something shiny glinted into your eyes for a second, catching your attention. One of the creepy faces
on the base of the fountain had something in its mouth. Interesting…

You nudged Talcott, pointing at it. “Maybe that’s something.”

He nodded. “But how do we get it?”

Chewing on your lip, you considered the ankle-height water that separated you from the face. Then, you shrugged and kicked off your shoes. “Wait here.”

So much colder than it looked, the water bit at your feet as you stepped in. You slid on the coins slightly in your walk over, but pried a small vial out of the face’s mouth and returned to Talcott. Handing the vial to him, you climbed over the edge and sat next to him to let your feet dry.

It was a message in a bottle. He removed the tiny cork and shook out the rolled up paper into his free hand. You took the vial so he could unfurl the paper.

*Bring your arm, tarry no longer. A touch of harm could make you stronger.*

You didn’t like this one. It was so vague, and the word *harm* couldn’t be a good sign. But you were excited that it did end up being the next clue. You guys were doing *amazing* with this treasure hunt thing. You hadn’t actually thought this would get beyond the initial riddle.

Talcott hummed, rereading it. You hummed along, both of you in a facsimile of deep thought. The best you could think of was the training room because *clues*, but you still didn’t think you knew the Citadel well enough. Maybe there was an armory or maybe you were meant to go to the place where Glaives trained instead of Crownsguard.

“The training rooms?” you suggested, looking down at Talcott.

He nodded, then handed the paper to you, standing up and shifting his weight as he looked from you, then away, a hand touching the elbow of his other arm. “That’s a good idea, but first… I have to go.”

You stared at him, at the way he looked from the water flowing out of the fountain with mild distress. “Go where?”

He pointed vaguely in the direction you’d come from. “Um, I mean go.”

Oh. You smiled a little, slow on the uptake that he *would* need bathroom breaks. Because duh. “Oh, fuck, of course you can go. I’ll wait here.” Your smile froze as his eyes widened a little, and you tried to backtrack on the swear. *Don’t tell anyone. It’ll be our secret*— nope, you couldn’t say that to a kid. That would be much worse. You slapped a palm to your forehead. “Sorry for the language, Talcott.”

He left for the bathroom with a giggle. “That’s okay.”

You peered at the riddle again, frowning at the scrawling script. Who could’ve done this, and who was it for? Carbuncles were mythical so what exactly were you even looking to find? As you considered these thoughts, you heard a voice, clear and familiar, coming from somewhere in the gardens.

“Why have you asked me here?”

Ignis. You tensed a little because the voice sounded close, but it originated from someplace beyond a nearby hedge so he must’ve been in the maze.
“I wanted to thank you for dinner last evening.”

Mirum? You stood up, leaving your shoes by the fountain to plod quietly over to the hedge to eavesdrop. Ignis had taken Mirum to dinner last night? A small lump formed in your stomach. That must’ve been why he ignored your message; he was too busy wining and dining someone else.

Damn. Already? You’d known the date had ended messily, but still, Ignis was more fickle than you were if he was already moving on. You’d held on to a small bit of hope that he’d still be interested even after the streets were painted multicolor from his unfortunate sickness. The sickness you’d caused with your unwanted kiss.

“There’s no need,” Ignis said, sounding smooth. You pictured him touching a glove. Maybe even smirking. “That was in appreciation for being an invaluable source of support during the last year of planning.”

Things went quiet for a bit, and you wondered what they were doing. Looking at each other awkwardly? Lovingly? Curiosity overflowed in you, and you stamped it down, backing away from the tall hedge to return to the fountain. You should just let the quiet babbling of the water drown out whatever was going on between them. You didn’t need to hear it, didn’t want to hear it.

As you put on your shoes, you heard Mirum speak again. It was playful, and that made you feel sick. What had they been doing in that moment of silence?

“Do you remember when we would have lunch here together before his highness proposed? We were much more leisurely then.”

It sounded like Ignis was smiling when we responded. You’d heard that tone from him enough to know. “I recall taking lunch while you wasted time admiring the roses.”

Shoes back on, you picked up the vial and papers, shoving them into a pocket. You’d go wait outside the bathroom for Talcott and get the hell out of there as soon as possible.

Mirum’s reply was softer. “Do you remember the time you compared me to one?”

You paused in your walk a couple steps from the fountain, the words catching you off guard. Ignis had never compared you to a flower so she had something on you, there. You couldn’t believe you’d fallen for his confession. It had seemed so genuine, the uncertainty that had been in his voice and the hesitant chuckle that had accompanied his words. Now you wondered if he’d been glad to do it over the phone. That way you wouldn’t have to see it for the lie that it was.

“Mirum…” His voice was equally quiet, a murmur that made the sick feeling grow.

Fumbling into your bag, you walked toward the exit and pulled out the small pill organizer you’d thought to bring. It was the only way to get anything even remotely illegal past the guards who searched your bag every time you entered the Citadel. Not that you were taking anything illegal, really. It was only something to take off the edge of pain and keep you in a good mood for your adventure with Talcott.

Swallowing the pill dry, you smiled when you saw the boy returning. You brought out the second riddle and handed the slip of paper to him. “Lead the way.”

He grinned and, to your dismay, walked past you, right into the maze of hedges.

You followed, asking, “It this really the way to get there?”
He nodded, not looking back. “It’s faster. And more fun.”

Ignis and Mirum’s voices grew even closer, and dread made your stomach drop further. You couldn’t face them. How dare Ignis. Had he only been playing with you because he felt bad for you? None of it made sense.

“If I had my coming out ball earlier, before everything…” Mirum sounded wistful. “Would you have attended?”

When you rounded a corner right after Talcott, you were able to catch Ignis’ reaction for yourself. Discomfort and surprise. He was looking away from her, his arms crossed loosely across his chest. It wasn’t what you’d expected. A frown pulled at his lips.

Talcott stopped, and you nearly bumped into his back. Their conversation interrupted, both of them looked at you. Ignis dropped his arms, straightening himself at the sight of you. His eyes went to Mirum for a second before he cleared his throat.

“I’m happy to see you, darling,” he said, a small smile easing onto his face. It confused you, the emotion made stronger by the effects of the drug you’d just taken finally setting in. Ignis took a step toward you, then looked back at Mirum. “Please excuse me. It must’ve slipped my mind that she was visiting today.”

Talcott looked up at you, apparently as confused by Ignis as you were. “He knew you were coming?” he whispered.

You shrugged, motioning to ignore the two nobles. “Let’s keep going.”

Talcott grabbed your sleeve, stopping you from passing him. Then, he looked at the other two adults and pulled you back a little to whisper more privately.

“We should recruit him.”

You bent down, not sure you were hearing him well. “What, why? You mean to help us?”

He nodded and leaned to the side, peering at Ignis and Mirum again. You looked over your shoulder briefly, eyeing the way they’d gone quiet to watch you and Talcott whisper with each other.

“He has a card. A black card.”

You had no idea what that meant, and he made a swiping motion as if that would help.

Ignis’ voice interrupted your thoughts. “Is something the matter?”

You and Talcott both turned to him, a simultaneous, “No” coming out.

Looking between Ignis and Mirum again, you noticed how different the scene actually was from what you’d imagined. She was further away from him, hands clasped together behind her, face set in a gentle frown.

They hadn’t been stealing away to be alone or to flirt with one another. At least, it didn’t seem as if Ignis had any intention for that if he was trying to excuse himself to be with you and Talcott instead.

Realizing you’d majorly jumped to conclusions, you decided you’d save him. That was kind of your job in this two person team, anyway, right? Ignis’ job was to just stand around and look pretty while you protected him from the wiles of other nobles, particularly this one.
“We were just looking for you, Iggy,” you lied. “Talcott thought we might’ve been interrupting an important conversation so we were gonna wait.”

Ignis’ expression lit up just the slightest in appreciation. “Oh, not at all. I’d be happy to accompany you now.”

Mirum frowned deeper, looking down as he walked away from her. While you followed Talcott, who had returned to navigating the maze, you sent her a small wave before rounding a corner. It was little consolation, you knew, but you weren’t going to let yourself feel bad. Replaying what little you’d overheard of their conversation, you thought she must’ve missed her chance with Ignis already. Or they had a past that you knew nothing about.

Either way, you didn’t care. He was kind of yours, at least for now.

You fought off the negative thoughts already creeping back, the intensity of which were made stronger by the high thrumming through you. You shouldn’t have gotten so worked up over a few words, but you’d never been very good at keeping things like that in check. It wasn’t your first downward spiral over nothing, and it probably wouldn’t be your last.

You touched flowers and hanging vines on the occasional arching trellis as you followed Talcott through the maze of hedges. Ignis was half a step behind you, and when you felt him touch your arm, you slowed to look back.

“Thank you,” he said, drawing his hand away. “I wasn’t certain of how I was to remove myself from that situation.”

You shrugged, facing forward to not lose sight of the kid ahead. “It’s not for free. You gotta help us. Right, Talcott?”

“Yes!” He stopped near what looked like another exit to the gardens. So the hedges weren’t so much a maze as they were just kind of a zigzagging array of convoluted lines if you were able to get out that quickly. Talcott offered another sheepish smile as you caught up to him. “I mean, if you don’t mind, sir.”

Ignis held the door while you and Talcott went inside. “What help are you asking of me?”

“We’re going to the training rooms.”

He frowned, looking from you to Talcott. “Why is that?”

You spoke up because the kid was looking at the riddle again as if Ignis’ confusion was a sign that you were going to the wrong destination.

“We’re looking for a carbuncle,” you said, pulling the first riddle from your pocket. Ignis’ confused gaze met yours, and he took the paper with a small bit of interest. “We found this in a book. It led us to the gardens where we found another clue.”

Ignis read the riddle, then he looked at you, the corners of his mouth curving slightly with a smile. “You’re hunting a carbuncle? This is rather intricate for what I suspect is merely an afternoon of childcare.”

He was suggesting that you made this up to entertain Talcott, which was completely bizarre. Since when would you have the energy or care to do something like this? The fact that someone did this was still blowing your mind.
You shook your head. "We’re seriously looking for a carbuncle, Iggy. Are you in or not? I heard we might need your black card or whatever."

He handed the slip of paper back to you. “Are you referring to my clearance level?”

You shrugged again. “I dunno. Talcott said it was important.”

Ignis leveled his gaze at you. Then he convinced Talcott to hand over the second riddle, which made him raise a brow.

“These are rather simple rhymes.” He gave you a side glance as if he still didn’t buy that you weren’t leading Talcott on some wild goose chase. “But I would say we are going in the right direction. It’s not far, actually.”

Talcott nodded as if appeased by Ignis’ approval and sped up a little in excitement. He took the riddle back from Ignis, crumpling the paper slightly in his hand.

You gave Ignis your own side glance. “We?”

It was his turn to shrug. You liked the look of it, at how it stretched the fabric of his shirt against his chest, pulling taught for just a moment. “I suppose I’m curious as to what you’ll discover, if anything. I also don’t believe children or civilians are permitted in the area without being accompanied so Talcott was correct in that you’ll need my clearance.”

You nodded, eyes trailing to the paintings you passed rather than the man next to you. You felt the familiar bit of uncertainty that came with being near him. It curled in your stomach like a snake making itself comfortable.

Your first date not turning out so well seemed like a sign that you should quit while you were ahead. Now Ignis was acting stiff, and you wished you could take back the kiss you’d given him. He’d told you he hadn’t wanted to do it while drunk. Then again, you’d never been the best at respecting his boundaries.

“Something on your mind?”

Torn from your thoughts, you looked at him. “Always.”

Ignis looked forward, mouth turning down as if in thought. “May I—”

Talcott interrupted him with a whispered, “Sir!”

You were at a familiar bend in a corridor. Talcott peeked around the corner, holding a hand up to halt you. Humoring him, you stopped, grabbing Ignis’ arm to stop him, too. He looked down at your hand touching him, but you were already letting go, standing next to Talcott with your back against the wall.

“Is there trouble ahead?”

Talcott hummed quietly. “Maybe. I can’t tell.”

Taking out the compact, you opened it and used the mirror to peer around the corner. An usher was standing outside the doors to the training rooms. Very strange… probably…

“Ignis,” you whispered. He was looking at you strangely, but you ignored it, pointing toward the training rooms. “There’s a guy there. Go distract him while we go inside.”
He blinked. “Distract him.”

You nodded. “Uh, yeah. That’s what I said.”

“Just how should I—”

“Shhh,” you quieted him when he grew too loud. You stepped away from the wall to hold a hand over his mouth. Not touching, but enough to get the point across. You felt his breath tickle your fingers. “I dunno. Seduce him or something.”

He seemed to like that idea even less than being used as a simple distraction. When you drew your hand away, his lips were pursed. “I’m not seducing him.”


Ignis sighed quietly while you smiled. Talcott was the best, and you really wanted to find that carbuncle for him.

—

Seduction wasn’t needed to get past the usher and into the training rooms, to your disappointment. Ignis just waved the man off like it was nothing, and you were in within moments, searching the place for clues. To your luck, the place was empty. The floors were scuffed everywhere and the air was off so you’d bet it had been recently used. Now it was completely silent and perfectly calm.

“How have you been?”

Bent down to search underneath one of the benches, you looked over to find Ignis in a similar position. It made you smile slightly, until your brain processed his question.

“You’d know if you hadn’t ignored me,” you murmured, standing upright. You could feel him watching you as you walked toward a suit of armor. It was massive, the shiny metal giving a clank when it shifted under your prodding touches.

“I wasn’t ignoring you,” Ignis said, coming your side. The words were quiet, but the room was so silent that it echoed a little.

You looked at him, hand paused in front of the armor. He reached up for it, but you drew away, crossing your arms. You weren’t sure you could touch him right now. With the drug in your system, it would be too intense, you thought. Especially with the way your thoughts were continually going back to the conversation he’d been having when you’d shown up.

Maybe he hadn’t been ignoring you on purpose because he was just too busy taking someone else out to dinner. You wanted to say something, but that would imply you cared. You never considered yourself a jealous person, and that wasn’t going to change. You just didn’t like that he was giving you more work. Of course Mirum would take it the wrong way if he was taking her out to dinner.

He frowned at your avoidance, eyes soft as he looked down at you. It seemed to take effort for him to speak, as if he didn’t want to even say this much. “I’d tried to impress you during our date, but tequila has never sat well within me. I shouldn’t have drank so heavily. I don’t know how you survive carrying on in such a way.”

“You build up a tolerance,” you said, shrugging and walking toward a row of cases along a wall that housed weapons. You suspected it was locked, and you were right, fingers prying at the handles uselessly as your mind flooded with thoughts about Ignis trying to impress you. “If you’re
embarrassed, don’t be. It was all my fault. Besides, that’s what first dates are like, right? Impressing each other and—"

He reached past you, grasping a handle, hand over yours. The door to the case suddenly opened with a high pitched *creak*, and across the large room, Talcott looked your way with curiosity.

You waved at him. “Nothing yet.” Then, you looked at Ignis who still had his hand resting over yours. It sent a chill up your arm. Gods, you needed a little distance here. Pulling your hand away, you peeked into the open case. “How’d you do that?”

“It’ll only open for a Crownguard.” He sounded distracted. You hoped he was actually helping to look for the clue and not just hindering your adventure. Though, you wouldn’t complain about him just sticking around. It wasn’t like you didn’t enjoy the view…

“Oh,” you said, disappointed that there were no hidden notes, inside vials or otherwise, inside the case. “Magical nonsense. Cool.”

You closed the door, grabbing his wrist and putting his hand on the handle of the next case to have him open it. He chuckled a little, pulling it open and letting you peer inside just as you had the first. It didn’t go unnoticed that he was trusting you with something kind of dangerous here. He could probably get into trouble letting you have access to this stuff, however brief it was.

“Our first date was that day we ate burgers together,” he said, apparently not wanting to end the earlier conversation so easily. “When you interrupted my work because your date went badly.”

You closed the door, giving him a raised brow. “You consider that our first date?”

“I was a gentleman, was I not?” He seemed affronted, but you could tell it was in good humor. “I bought our meal and walked you to the station safely.”

With a small laugh, you shook your head. “Y’know, that really weirded me out at the time. I thought you’d be the sweetest friend if I ever grew on you. Like, here’s a guy who’ll watch my back.” It wasn’t like you’d been wrong. You grinned at him, the words coming out easily because the trip had hit a peak. Your earlier anxieties were melting away. “Did you really consider that a date, though? Because I totally would’ve taken you home that night.”

He looked away, opening another case for you. “In retrospect, yes, I think of it that way. It had been a pleasant surprise.”

“Even though I interrupted your work?”

“When are you not?” He looked inside the case when he noticed you weren’t moving. “It’s happening right at this moment.”

You scoffed, the grin on your face only growing. “I’m not making you be here.”

“No,” he said, sharing the smile a little. “But I’m not one to leave a person who so desperately needs me.”

Prepared to tell him you didn’t need him, like *at all*, you were interrupted by a loud, echoing “Ah-ha!” from Talcott. He stood near a suit of armor, pulling at the fingers of its glove. You left Ignis to see what he was doing.

With a little bit of your help, Talcott was able to remove a piece of folded paper from the curled hand of the armor. Excitedly, he unfolded it, and you read the newest riddle over his shoulder.
Stand and revel, release your worry. Make like a devil, sound and slurry.

You felt Ignis next to you, looking up to see him reading it as well. Talcott looked to each of you for suggestions, but you shrugged. You had no idea. It barely made sense. Ignis hummed lightly, a sound that hooked your interest because his own seemed to be piqued. You’d gotten him. He was in, the sucker.

“We could pay a visit to the music hall.”

Talcott frowned. “I don’t know where that is.”

Ignis smiled gently at him, and you melted just a little when he took Talcott’s hand. “Worry not. I’ll lead the way.”

When you were the last to leave the room, you told yourself it was to check out Ignis’ butt and not to calm the warmth that radiated from your chest. Even though it was really a little bit of both.

—

A grand piano rested on a small dais that you almost tripped over on your way to the beautiful instrument. Fingers splaying across keys, you wished you knew how to play. You could do very simple lullabies that only required one hand, but not much else.

“Can you play anything?” you asked. It was an open question, not for anyone in particular, and when you looked up, you caught Talcott nodding. He seemed too focused on the search for a clue to specify just what he could play so you let it go.

Ignis lifted a violin carefully from its rest, peeking into one of the strange little holes on its front. You smiled, making yourself look away. He was into this treasure hunt. You couldn’t believe it.

“Do you happen to play anything?” he asked.

Attention caught, you dropped a hand on the keys, a jarring sound ringing through the room.

Before you could answer, Ignis chuckled. “I suppose not.”

Blowing a raspberry, you looked under the piano bench and moved on to another part of the room. “I suppose not,” you mocked, voice quiet and thick with a fake royal accent.

“Pardon?”

You motioned toward the violin. “Tear it up, Iggy. I know you can play.”

He put it back, shaking his head. “Be that as it may, we’ve a purpose here, and it isn’t to dally with harmonics.”

You’d only guessed he could, and now you wanted to see him play something so badly, the anticipation ate at you. “The carbuncle isn’t going anywhere.”

“It might!” Talcott interjected, poking his head up from looking inside the horn of a large gramophone.

You looked between him and Ignis, letting it go as they both went back to the search. Whatever. You’d get Ignis to play something for you one day. You had all the time in the world. You had—

Flipping through yellowed pages of old sheet music, a small slip of white caught your eye. You
picked it up, reading it over rather than announcing that you’d found it.

*Here before, now come back. It’s where you’ll find your favorite snack.*

This was oddly specific, making you wonder who the hunt had been intended for originally. Because you doubted you’d been there before, wherever this was meant to take you. The high hitting you with a strong mellow feeling, the pill running its course, you couldn’t entirely focus and brought the clue to the attention of the others so they could figure it out.

—

Squished inside a well stocked cupboard in the Citadel kitchens with a small child wasn’t on your list of things to do today. Up until now, you’d thought that you’d done a pretty great job of babysitting. Then you’d been made to hide in what was basically a closet for flour and potatoes because the sous-chef came into the kitchens earlier than Ignis expected.

And the sous-chef didn’t like Ignis very much.

She waved a wooden spoon around as she fussed at him for *using all our ingredients*, and *the executive chef thinks you’re so special but newsflash, you’re not*, and I *didn’t study in culinary school for years to be shown up by a stuffy royal adviser!* The doors to the pantry were cracked open enough that you could see Ignis trying to talk it out with her.

**You:** Seduce her and we can escape.

When he checked his phone, the sous-chef made a swipe at him with the spoon. He deftly avoided it, reading your message with a frown. He put away his phone and shook his head. You pouted, knowing that shake of his head was meant for you.

Several minutes later, as Ignis walked circles around the counters, dodging the chef’s attacks, both verbal and physical, your legs began to ache a little. You’d been walking all morning and standing in place like this with poor Talcott smushed to your side wasn’t helping at all.

**You:** Dude, do something!

Ignis didn’t even look at his phone, but seemed to understand the meaning behind the chiming from his pocket. He stopped fleeing, resting a hand on a bar. Oh, he was finally taking a stand. You watched intently as the chef halted, her glare honing in on him.

“Perhaps we should stop… pretending,” he said, his voice surprisingly smooth.

“Pretending?” The chef’s expression eased into confusion.

“Why, yes.” He was velvety, and even though he wasn’t aiming it your way, it was *working* on you. “If it pleases you, I would be honored to work this out over dinner.”

The sous-chef slackened, her abrasive attitude becoming hesitant. Then, she narrowed her eyes. “Are you suggesting a cooking competition? Because I’m out of your league!” She swung the spoon around again, nearly smacking him in the head.

He back away, apparently giving up on the seduction. “I must say, you are quite persistent.”

“I want you out!” Her glare was back, and her chef’s hat was tilted on her head.

“Are you certain berating me is the best course of action?” He backed into an open shelf, the metal of
it rattling the various contents it held. “Bernard requested I inform you of the shipment arriving downstairs. That’s the only reason I’m here.”

She gasped. “He told you before he told me?” She looked at the spoon sadly for a moment before sending Ignis one last glare. “You better be out of here when I get back, Scientia.”

She stormed out of the kitchens, spoon in hand, and you tumbled out of the pantry, practically gasping for air. Talcott straightened out his plaid shirt, smiling up at you. He’d been particularly quiet during your time cornered in the pantry, and seeing him so cheerful was reassuring that he wouldn’t return to the Amicitias with news that you’d kept him trapped in a closet for fifteen minutes.

You grasped his shoulders. “Talcott, I’ll get you that carbuncle. I promise.”

He laughed, shrugging off your hands. “This is so much fun. I wonder what will happen next.”

Ignis rushed toward you in attempt to usher you out. “Let’s not dawdle. Each second brings me closer to being blungeoned by a spoon.”

Following him, your elbow knocked against a shelf painfully. A bag of flour dusted you softly, and you frowned at Ignis as if it were his fault. He began to pat the flour off you, then stopped to look over your shoulder at the shelf. Reaching past you, his chest pressed against you for a moment before he drew away with something in his hand.

He seemed confused by the slip of paper even though it looked just like all the others you’d found so far. Leaving the kitchens, he led you and Talcott down the corridor and around a corner before unfolding the paper and reading it with you.

Upon this place, honor is seated. Find me there, and I assure you’ll be greeted.

The last place! You were ready to peep that carbuncle. Talcott grasped your hand, and you grinned down at him. Apparently, he was ready to be done, too.

Ignis didn’t seem pleased by the riddle, touching his glasses and reading it again. “I believe this is suggesting we go to the throne room.”

You nodded. “Cool, let’s go.”

Ignis shook his head. “I’m afraid it isn’t so simple. His Majesty is in the throne room all morning.”

The thought of meeting King Regis excited you further. But what would you say? Oh no, you couldn’t meet King Regis while high. Even if it was beginning to wear off at this point. You gave Ignis a serious look. “There’s not a meeting or something soon that’ll draw him out?”

Ignis shook his head. “If there were a meeting, I wouldn’t be roaming the Citadel with you.”

You rose a brow. “You sure about that? I think you’ve turned into a real bad boy lately.”

He gave you a flat look. “I’m only saying it will be difficult to find a good reason to arrive to the throne room, let alone search it in hopes of finding a mythical creature.”

That was a good point, but you wouldn’t be dissuaded. “We’ll figure it out on the way. Maybe we’ll get lucky and his majesty will be on a bathroom break.”

He led the way reluctantly, looking at the paper intermittently as if it would change, and you wouldn’t have to go to the throne room anymore.
Outside the large doors, your mind a revving engine of *he’s in there, just inside, the king, the actual king*, you turned to Ignis nervously. “I have a suggestion.”

He shook his head without looking at you, tucking the slip of paper into a pocket of his jacket. “I’m not seducing King Regis.”

Well, you were fresh out of ideas. You looked at him expectantly because if he was going to shoot down your plan, he’d better have one of his own.

“I wish I had my notes on a particular issue,” he lamented. “I do have cause to appear in his court, but it wouldn’t explain why you and Talcott are present.”

You let go of Talcott’s hand to lift both of yours in a creeping motion. “He won’t even know we’re there if you distract him.”

“He will know. As will his guards.” Ignis sighed a little. “I’d rather not have to fetch you from a holding cell.”

You crossed your arms. “So you’re saying we have to stick back here?”

He nodded.

“But that’s not fun. We came all this way.”

Ignis gave you a long look. “I can’t see a way around it.”

You sighed, looking pointedly away. Talcott had been quiet during the entire exchange, and when you looked around for him, finding the large doors ajar, you realized he’d already gone into the throne room.

“Oh, shit.” You dropped your arms, passing Ignis to go inside. Even though everything in the Citadel was grand, you were halted just beyond the doorway at the sight of the large, curving staircase at the end of the hall that led up to the throne. Talcott was halfway up, standing on a flattened expanse between stairs and speaking very pragmatically to King Regis, who nodded as if all of his carbuncle talk made sense.

You took a step forward, but stopped again when the few guards along the large room took notice of you. You felt Ignis at your side and looked at him for a sign of what to do. This was quickly stamping out the last bit of your high, anxiety building because, like hiding in a cupboard, you hadn’t planned to face the king today.

Luckily, you didn’t have to. Talcott ran down the stairs, just short of stumbling, with a large grin and something in his hand. Ignis bowed and ushered you both out before you got the chance to look at it.

In the corridor, Talcott revealed that it was a small carbuncle totem.

“King Regis gave it to me,” he said, eyes wide and smile breaking his face.

Ignis looked shocked, watching as Talcott moved the doll from hand to hand. “So there was a carbuncle to be found.”

Talcott let you hold it, and the moment its smooth warmth touched your palm, you felt a flutter gently quake through you. Staring at it, you let out a shuttered breath. What the hell? Maybe the high hadn’t gone entirely away.
Noticing the small change, Ignis brought a hand to your arm. “Are you alright?”

You looked up and nodded, not wanting to admit that you’d taken something. He would disapprove, and you’d probably have to hear about how irresponsible you were since you’d done it while babysitting.

“Y-yeah. Just realized I’m kinda hungry.” The kitchens had smelled nice, and it was nearing lunchtime now. You handed the doll back to Talcott. “We did it, dude. Ready to go home?”

He nodded, placing it carefully into a pocket. When you took his hand, you met Ignis’ eyes.

“Thanks for helping us.” You weren’t trying to be robotic, but you hadn’t expected Ignis to stick around for this long so you weren’t sure how to part ways. “We’ll get out of your hair now.”

With a small shake of his head, Ignis said, “If you’ve time, I have something I need speak with you about, as well as something to give you. It’s in my office.”

You looked down at Talcott, but he was too focused on peeking at the carbuncle doll in his pocket. Giving Ignis a small smile, you said, “Sure. I’ll come up after dropping him off.”

He must be trying to give your dress back. His expression was suddenly so serious, and you just knew the important something he needed to tell you was about the bad date. Maybe he’d changed his mind about his feelings for you. If he had, a tiny part of you was relieved because you weren’t sure you were ready to just jump into dating one person.

You liked Ignis, but let’s not get crazy here.

—

The room of assistants was bustling when you came in. Ignis’ own assistant wasn’t at her post so you went straight to the door of his office, ignoring the busyness around you. Immediately upon coming in, you were met with the woman holding a small, potted cactus. Standing behind his desk, his phone in hand, Ignis was looking at her with calm reserve.

“The message auto-corrected to the wrong word, Dulcis,” he said. “It’s my own fault. Don’t fret.”

“But I can go back down and get the right thing,” she insisted.

He shook his head. “That’s quite alright. You may leave it on my desk.”

She put it down but made no move to leave. “Lord Ignis, if you want me to go get it before she gets here, I can be really quick.”

Ignis placed his phone on the desk, looking past her to you. “It’s a tad late for that, I’m afraid.”

Dulcis turned around, wide eyes meeting yours. “Oh, darn.”

When she left the room, closing the door behind her, you stood there awkwardly. Ignis motioned for you to take the seat in front of his desk, but you walked over to the window instead, the midday view of the city catching your attention. The sky was clear, and from here you could make out a park in the distance and a swimming pool on the roof of a building a few blocks away.

You weren’t positive you wanted to hear the important things he wanted to say. Another apology was hiding somewhere within you because you weren’t sure you could do this. The date had been bad, and you doubted he wanted to keep going when you were such different people.
His thoughts seemed in line with your own; he stood next to you, facing the window as he came out with it quietly. “I’d wanted to apologize for the way our evening ended.”

You rolled your eyes. Of course he’d apologize. You were going to ban apologies from now on, along with niceties. Instead of spouting “how are you?” when you saw each other, you were going to do a cool high five that ended with smacking each other’s butts. If either of you ever wanted to say sorry, you were going to thank one another instead for having the patience to put up with each other. You weren’t sure he’d go for the first idea, but the second held a lot of promise.

“How about,” you said, testing it out. “Instead of saying sorry, you just say… ‘thanks for cleaning my face after I got sick’ or something like that.” You found him giving you a contemplative look as you continued, “And instead of apologizing, too, I’ll just say ‘thanks for suffering my drinking habits while trying to impress me’ even though you really didn’t need to.”

His expression softened with a small smile, an encouraging sight. “That’s a fine proposal. In that case, I want to thank you for coming all the way up here to find me barehanded. Dulcis brought the wrong item from my quarters due to an unfortunate erratum in my message.”

How bad was it that it was the mention of “his quarters” that stuck in your mind? You were completely alone with him for the first time since he’d told you he liked you, and that fact wasn’t one pushed to the back of your mind without extreme effort. If it were anyone else, you’d really be questioning why you were wasting time talking when he could be using his mouth for so much more.

You looked over your shoulder at his desk. It was a decent height. He’d only have to bend his knees a little. You’d have to throw everything off his desk first. You’d always wanted to do something like that, but you couldn’t imagine him going for it. Maybe he’d take you to his quarters and— Nope. What were you doing?

Coughing a little, you met Ignis’ gaze. “Cute cactus.”

He nodded, his smile growing. But it was uncertain. “I asked you up here to request another chance. Another date but without our friends and the excessive drinking.”

You blinked up at him, going a little slack. He actually wanted to go on another date. You weren’t sure it was the best idea. Your idea of a date involved heavy partying. It was the only kind of date you’d ever been on. A part of you was afraid to find out that Ignis’ idea of fun would bore you.

He’d probably want to sit in a cafe or something. You loved spending hours in cafes drinking coffee as much as the next intellectual, but the atmosphere predominantly made you feel like you should be studying. Lingering thoughts about essays and assignments weren’t exactly what you’d like to have while on a date. Especially since you were on summer break.

“How about?” you said, backing away toward the door. The uncomfortable air was becoming unbearable. Maybe it was all on your side since Ignis seemed a little confused, but what was new?
In the room of assistants, you stopped just beyond Dulcis’ desk. She looked at you, and it was like she knew that you were running away. Except, no. No, you weren’t. Ignis didn’t have the thing he wanted to give you so you didn’t have a reason to even be there. He’d said what he needed to say, and that was that.

You stopped at the large doors, looking back to see Dulcis still watching you with mild confusion. You weren’t running away.

With a sigh, you turned around and passed her desk again, barging back into Ignis’ office. He was standing next to his desk, a frown on his face as he looked down at the tiny cactus. Without stopping, you walked to him, grabbed a suspender and pulled him down to meet you in a kiss. It wasn’t graceful, and he let out a startled “oh” against your mouth that made you draw back.

You expected him to say something, to push you away as his eyes flicked from your face to your hand that was curled around his suspender. Instead, he kissed you, hands drawing you in at the waist, lips prying at yours. His glasses bumped your nose a little, and you almost laughed into it.

Your free hand went to his shirt, fingers attempting to snap the buttons undone. He stopped you, pulling back suddenly with a shake of his head. He cleared his throat, looking down at you for several seconds before letting you go and backing away. Your hands fell to your sides, a small, yet familiar, spark of disappointment nipping at you.

“Before I met you,” he said, straightening himself out. “I only kissed as a prelude to passion.”

You licked your lips, tasting the vague spice of whatever he’d had for lunch while waiting for you. “Why’s this different?” You could do passion. Passion sounded amazing. You’d have some passion right there on his desk, right now. What was he waiting for?

He offered no answer, just a light flush of his cheeks and a return to his earnest expression. “Do think about that date.”

You took that as your cue to leave, heading to the door once more. “I will.”

You’d already made up your mind, though. Things had felt surreal for days now, and that had given you a bit of courage and confidence in the face of everything that was happening. But you were slowly beginning to remember that someone like Ignis didn’t suit someone like you.

The lust was real, and you could definitely see yourself doing things with Ignis pretty often if he’d let you. Friends, yes. With benefits, if you were very patient and very lucky. Anything beyond that would never work.

Chapter End Notes

I know it’s only fan fiction, but I’ve been using this as a way to practice writing in a safe space. You guys have really given that to me, and I can’t thank you enough.

Thanks for reading! Next chapter, things might get weird. ヾ(￣▽￣)ノ
If you fall in love, you're the loser.

Chapter Summary

Mr. Scientia, you're trying to seduce me. Aren't you?

Chapter Notes

So... things happen in this chapter, and let me tell you, it’s going to feature vivid expressions such as “wet and hot” and “firmly grasp it”. You’ll also get to enjoy sexy words like “pregnancy” and “plop”.

But for real, get ready for the most vanilla smut of all time. Awkward first times are fun. Like before, it's not very descriptive, yet I’m still shy about it.

As you looked through your bare fridge for something edible, Aranea walked into your apartment with her arms loaded. Unfortunately it wasn’t food. Candles, a flashlight, and some kind of lamp were all placed on your counter. She dug a box of matches from her pocket and placed it next to everything. The fridge door slowly closed as you turned to her in mild confusion.

“It’s going to storm soon.” She was wearing something that looked pretty serious. So she was heading out of town for her mysterious job again, you guessed. “I’m not sure when it’ll hit, but I’m leaving tonight so stay safe.”

She left as you peered everything over with a thanks. The weather had reported some rain, not a huge storm. Still, the thought that she cared about you was really nice. You’d never tell her, but Aranea was like the big sister you’d never realized you needed until she’d appeared in your life via an obscure rental ad.

You had been desperate to move off campus and away from your stalker. She’d been desperate for someone to occupy half of her house.

To you, that was as close to being soulmates as two people could get.

—

Knocking on Ignis’ apartment door, you hoped showing up fifteen minutes late wouldn’t bother him. You’d been there on time —early, actually— but waffled about, over analyzing the situation. You couldn’t bring yourself to say no to his date proposal so you came up with a compromise. Instead of something formal, surely to make you even more uncomfortable than you already were with your shared feelings, you’d suggested meeting at your place.

He had no problem saying no to that because what if I ingest something questionable as I did last time? and you weren’t sure you could blame him.
The door opened, and you were immediately greeted with an unbearable sight. It was like Ignis had anticipated you unbuttoning his shirt because he’d already done it for you, his exposed collar being the first thing your eyes honed in on.

“Good evening.”

Tearing your eyes upward, you caught his little smile. Soft music was playing somewhere from inside, and the lighting in his entryway was a soft yellow.

He took the bag of foodstuffs from your hand before turning around. “Please, come inside.” He already had an apron tied at his waist. You’d known he wouldn’t want to wait long before starting dinner.

You didn’t like cooking, but you knew he enjoyed the hobby. If you were going to let him know about your extreme reservations about this thing between you, you’d rather him be as comfortable as possible. That way he’d forgive you for backtracking on your confession. This was all just too much. And with the way he looked at you over his shoulder, a teasing smile on his face at your hesitance in the doorway, you knew this was going to be One Rough Evening in a lot of ways.

“Make yourself at home,” he called, as if you hadn’t been over before.

After a moment, you came in and shut the door, taking your time to remove your shoes and gather your thoughts. You could do this.

“So what are we making?” You stepped into the kitchen, watching the way Ignis eyed everything you’d brought carefully. He’d better not make fun of your choices. He hadn’t given you any clues about what was for dinner so you’d bought whatever you felt like while on your way over.

He lifted a small bag of gummy worms. “I don’t know that this will fare well with dinner tonight.”

You reached to take it from him, but he held it up, his smile growing a little. With a small pause, you realized he was teasing you. He seemed to be in a playful mood, and you wished he could please just stop.

You crossed your arms. “I bought those in case your dinner is bad.”

He lowered the candy, placing it on his counter. “Come now, I think you’ll like the pasta I’ve prepared. All we need to do is cut out the shapes and make a remoulade.”

You looked at the sheets of thin dough he had on the counter, stacked into a delicate pile. He’d made it himself? Releasing your arms, you touched the dough delicately. “Cut them? Like, make our own?”

His smile had returned. “That’s the idea.” —

You cut out a moogle shape and held it up proudly. It made a smile curl his lips. “That’s going to shrivel up in the boil.”

Gaping, you placed it down carefully and flicked flour at him. “Have something better?”

He didn’t say anything, quickly slicing the pastry knife over the dough. You tried to see what he was making, but he blocked you, chuckling when you grabbed his arm to move it out of the way so you could see. He folded the strips of dough and faced you a moment later with something that looked
remarkably like a three dimensional moogle.

“Show off,” you said, admiring the little shape of dough. “No wonder that sous-chef hates you.”

He placed it next to yours on the counter, dusting off his hands as he considered you for a moment. Then, he walked behind you, chin lowering to brush your shoulder as his arms came around to touch the sheet of dough you were playing with. “Anyone could create wonders if given enough practice. It’s all simple motor skills. Try this.”

He took a few of the small pieces you’d cut out and began to fold them over into a ropelike design. “Can you braid?”

You nodded, the warmth of him at your back and his soft breath at your neck making it impossible to find your voice.

He hummed, and you felt it against your shoulder blades. “This should be easy for you, then. It’s called lorighittas. It’s simple, but it presents spectacularly.”

You copied his motions, braiding the dough into a small circle and connecting the ends together with a thumbprint of water from the bowl nearby. Yours was smaller and less neat than the one Ignis made. You put it inside the loop of his, comparing them quietly until he startled you with a quiet “ah” and a kiss to your neck before leaving you to grab something from a drawer.

Disquieted, you stared at his back, bringing a dusty hand to where he’d kissed you. He drew something from the drawer, inspecting it while your heart rocked heavily in your chest. This wasn’t looking very good for your plans to end things with Ignis before they became messy. Fuck.

He turned to you, his smile growing to reveal white teeth. “I think you’ll enjoy this.” The thing he’d gotten was a simple, round cookiecutter. He used it to cut a circle out of the dough, which he pinched and folded for a second until he presented it to you. It looked like a tiny, pointy hat. He was right; you did enjoy it. It was really cute. Double fuck.

“It’s called cappellacci dei briganti.”

“That’s a lot of Altissian,” you said, taking the little pasta hat from him.

He made another and put it on top of his moogle’s head. “Considering your fascination with Altissia, I’d wanted to use their fare in our meal tonight.”

You nodded, looking at the slowly growing mess of shapes you were creating and amassing on the counter. All of his were more refined than yours. Unsurprising. You touched the two-dimensional moogles you’d made. It was still pretty adorable.

Looking at Ignis, you asked, “Do you know how to make, uh, sacchetti?” You’d always liked those. They looked like little gifts.

He nodded. “But we would need a filling.”

You pointed at the gummy worms. “We could always use those.”

Instead of the flat look you expected, he rose a brow. Then he dusted a hand on his apron and reached for the small package. “If that’s your wish.”

You laughed a little, trying to call him on his bluff. “Totally. I’m crazy about gummy filled pasta.”
He ripped open the bag, dumping out the colorful worms. Oh, shit. He wasn’t joking? He gave you a side glance as he began to make a sacchetti, wrapping a thin square of dough around a worm and twisting the top closed like a little sack. “I expect you to eat all of these.”

Laughing a little more, you put your hands on his to stop him from making more. “Nice try.”

His expression remained impish, hands twisting around to grasp yours. Dough squished between your fingers. You tried pulling away at the odd sensation, but he held your hands in place.

“You’ll have your freedom,” he said, tilting his head as he looked at you. “For a price.”

Smiling despite yourself, you leaned up on your tiptoes. Brief and soft, you kissed his cheek before dropping and looking away. “There.”

He let go of your hands, a chuckle filling the room as he walked to the refrigerator to get new ingredients. “What sort of coulis do you believe we should make?”

You mumbled an answer, cutting and twisting out more pasta shapes. How could he be calm like that when he was making you feel so unsettled with every little interaction?

—

Trying to remain reserved for Ignis’ sake, you sipped wine at his dining table, enjoying the strange collection of pasta far more than you thought you would.

“I’m happy you’re here,” he said, hand touching yours. You resisted the instinct to brush it off, the thrill that overcame you feeling nice, even if unwanted. “I’d begun to worry you had second thoughts.”

You blinked, looking down at the food on your plate. “What do you mean?”

He inhaled quietly. “When I confessed how I felt, you’d been under much stress. I’d thought… perhaps you only accepted me because you weren’t of a clear mind.”

You put your fork down, looking up at him with a small frown. “No, I…” This was your chance. You could tell him he was right. He was giving you an opportunity to back out, hopefully without making things weird. Go for it, you told yourself. Get it over with.

But you only looked at him, unable to say anything. Peering down at his hand on yours, your frown deeped. Why was this so difficult? You really liked him as a person, and you wanted his unbelievable body more than you’d ever wanted anything. But admiration and lust weren’t good reasons to commit to someone, not even in a casual dating sense.

“Darling, what’s on your mind?”

The pet name made you look up again. His eyes searched your face, hints of concern in his expression. You didn’t like him calling you that, but you also really super did, and you didn’t like that you liked it. Your undulating thoughts on the subject were going to give you a headache.

You forced them back and shrugged, withdrawing your hand from his to take a drink of wine. It might have been more of a gulp, but you really needed it. “I was invited to work on a film.” Yes, good, you thought. Subject change. “It’s in an old television studio. I’m kind of excited about it, I guess. I keep thinking about working in a real studio.”

His smile returned. “That’s wonderful. What is it about?” He took a bite of food as you explained
how it was going to parody Altissian neorealism. You paused in the middle of a sentence when he licked a bit of sauce from the corner of his mouth.

This night wasn’t going one bit like you’d planned, but maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if you slept with him just once before explaining your doubts about getting even remotely serious with him. You let the thought mull in your mind as dinner continued, small moments like that recurring to the point that you wished you could be licking sauce from his lips. Which was just gross. Get a grip.

You needed to get laid or get out of there, preferably both.

—

Only a little reminiscent of your first visit, he let you straddle him on his sofa, your after dinner coffee going cold as you thoroughly ruined his hair with your fingers and kissed him with enough force to bruise. He matched your eagerness, hands digging into your thighs, your hips, as he met you with wet passion.

Pulling back, you decided you’d test him. You unbuttoned his shirt, fingers delicate and touch purposefully light. He regarded your deliberate slowness with open interest, looking at you without a word.

Five buttons down, you slipped a hand between the fabric and touched his bare stomach. The toned muscle there belied the brilliant face that grew closer to your own. Someone this sweet and intelligent couldn’t be this fit. Even if every bit of it had been trained into him all his life. Everything about him had a purpose, and you couldn’t believe you were the lucky person to reap the benefits.

“You’re unreal,” you murmured, eyes trained on his as you undid the remaining buttons.

He leaned in to kiss you softly. “I’ve thought the same of you.”

Heat coming to your face, you frowned at him. You were being sincere, but there was no way someone as flawless as Ignis thought that highly of you. Deciding that your time would be much better used getting as close as possible to him, you kissed him again, hard and wanting like before. Your hands untucked his shirt, pulling it from his trousers, nails grazing his skin lightly.

He stopped you when your hand went to his belt. His tongue was working wonders in your mouth, but he held your wrists at bay, stopping you from going any further. He broke the kiss, pressing his lips against your jaw, trailing them down to your neck.

Is this what he’d meant in his office? With you, kissing wasn’t a “prelude to passion” for him? If it didn’t indicate future sex, then what was the point? His nose skimmed your neck, kisses becoming soft and breathy. He was cooling down, not revving up.

Your hands on his shirt loosened, and you let out an audible sigh. The problem didn’t lie in his attraction to you. You could feel just how into you he was right now, and with a little movement, you’d probably be rewarded with a noise out of him. But he wouldn’t want that. He was making his stance on sex pretty clear.

He drew back to look at you. “What’s wrong, darling?”

Irritated at him for getting you hot and bothered with no intentions of moving it to the bedroom, you pulled one of your hands out of his grasp and poked him in the chest. “Why can’t kissing be a prelude to passion? What did that even mean?”

Eyes meeting yours, his wet lips parted slightly. “You’re still thinking about that?”
You said nothing, frowning at him.

He let go of your other wrist, running a hand through his tousled hair. “It may not be to your liking, but I want to be sure we’re ready before making such a leap.”

Your frown eased, mind digesting that information. “I am ready, and I think you are, too.”

His breath hitched as you ground against him a little to prove your point. He stopped you, shaky hands coming to your hips to hold you in place. “Darling, please. I’ve never—” He squared his jaw, looking away. Your eyes trailed a line from one beauty mark on his face to another. You wanted to kiss each of them. You considered doing just that, but the idea was scrapped when he returned his gaze to you.

“I’ve never felt quite this way for a person.” His eyes roamed your face.

“In my experience,” you said, not really understanding his point. “Feelings don’t have all that much to do with sex. Why worry?”

His expression dropped slightly, and his hands fell from your hips. “It’s getting rather late. Would you like for me to call a ride for you?”

Getting off of him, you stretched a little and straightened out your clothes. A heavy feeling overtook your stomach, reaching upward to your chest. “Nah, I can take the train.”

“I insist,” he said, standing up after you. He began to button his shirt, and you looked away with barely concealed disappointment.

You’d said the wrong thing, but you weren’t exactly sure what part had been wrong. Ignis seemed so sure of himself and how he felt. Why were you such an amorphous blob when it came to emotions?

—

You ignored the call as your phone rang in your pocket. Craigory raised his eyebrows, looking at you over the clapperboard.

“It’s fine,” you said, waving him off. He’d been the one to ask you to help him with a film. It was the first time he’d ever invited you into one of his projects, and you weren’t going to let yourself get distracted. You were the director of photography so every camera —there were only two— had to be exactly where you needed them to be at any given moment during each scene. It was kind of fun bossing around the camera operators, you had to admit.

The ringing stopped, and you let out an audible sigh. Craigory was still giving you a look. Looking at the camera display, you asked, “How about this angle?”

His attention was caught by your question, and the rest of the day passed smoothly. You didn’t want to talk to anyone, least of all Craigory, about what you were going to do about Ignis. Craigory was a good listener, but he could keep whatever advice he had to himself.

Not like you needed advice or anything.

—

One missed call from Ignis. You hadn’t felt bad ignoring it before, but now that you were walking home in the pouring rain, raincoat keeping you mostly dry, you had a small ball of guilt in your gut.
It had been two days since you’d left his apartment. He’d sent you messages, but the discomfort you felt at how you’d left things was making you more uncertain than ever. How could he be so sure about his feelings for you when you were terrified?

It was disconcerting, the more you thought about it, to go from being in a fake, secret relationship with him to being in a real, not so secret something with him. It was purposefully undefined, and you were afraid to see him again, to talk to him again, lest he wanted to place boundaries or definition on your relationship.

You never asked for anything real. You just wanted to have fun.

The rain pelted you intensely. It had been pouring for days. Work at the theater had come to a halt once the owner realized no one was willing to risk the storm to see a movie. The parking lot was flooded anyway, apparently. Which was all fine for you because that gave you more time to help Craigory with his film. The more projects you could add to your resume, the better. Ignis was just a distraction from your goal. Your aspirations were important; even the smallest projects counted.

_Ignis:_ A pair of hawks have nested outside my office window.

He’d sent you a picture of the bundle of sticks and string that made up the nest. A bird rested in the middle of it, fluffy and fat. It didn’t appear as scary as you’d expected a hawk to look. Why exactly he was telling you about this random thing was a mystery, but it made you smile nonetheless. You appreciated that he’d deviated from the _Have I offended you_? messages to _Here is a random cool thing_ messages.

The day before, he’d sent you a text about a particularly boring meeting. He described, in detail, the ridiculous outfit a noble had worn in order to impress King Regis. There had been many layers and it may or may not have included a walking cane made out of a garula’s junk. The ploy hadn’t worked and the noble was humiliated in front of the entire council. You hadn’t been so entertained in your life.

Waiting for the train, you debated sending him a reply. You were used to ghosting people by now, and Ignis Scientia was overwhelming at best. It had to be the hundredth time you’d looked at his messages over the past few days. Everything screamed for you to _run and hide_. Then again, your heart had never skipped so many beats at once.

Technically, you should’ve been dead.

—

The electricity in your apartment went out in a flicker right as you were changing into what you now considered to be your Crownsguard sweats.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” you groaned, fumbling through the dark for some source of light.

Aranea had really known what she was talking about. Using the flashlight she’d left, you lit the candles and placed them throughout the apartment. Within minutes, your kitchen and living room were washed in a dim yellow glow.

Messing around with your camera, you filmed some b-roll of the rain falling outside a window and of the candlelit atmosphere that permeated your apartment. The footage was too dark, and you were adjusting the settings when a knock at the front door startled you.

A look through the peephole, and your breath hitched. Ignis stood in the hallway, completely soaked. You opened the door to get a better look and ask what he was doing there, and your face was
immediately cupped by wet hands.

He brought his forehead to yours, strands of his wet hair dripping little specks into your shirt. His eyes were a brilliant green behind the raindrop pebbled glasses. His breath caressed your face in soft pants. Coffee and vanilla.

He whispered between your shared breath as he closed his eyes. “Excuse the sudden visit. I began to miss you and grew impatient.”

You let yourself slide a lingering look at his perfect face, then cleared your throat. “You’re getting me wet,” you said with a small smile, trying to lighten the weird mood he’d just sprung on you. “And not in a fun way.”

Cracking his eyes open, he drew back just enough to rake his eyes over every feature of your face. Then, he pressed a firm kiss to your lips. You didn’t have time to kiss back before he pulled away, letting you go. “May I come in?”

You moved over to let him in, and he leaned down to pick up something big from the hallway floor. Closing the door, you watched him carefully as he stood in your kitchen, dripping small puddles onto the hardwood. The object in his arms was the flowering cactuar you’d wanted so badly at the arcade. It was covered in a poncho, in a much drier state than Ignis.

“You’ve had a power outage,” he mused, looking around at the candles.

Nodding, you couldn’t help but ask, “Didn’t think to use an umbrella?”

He gave you a wry smile. “I had one, but it blew away on my walk. Ramuh decided I didn’t need it, I suppose.”

You huffed a small laugh. “The gods are like that.” Unable to not look at the big cactuar plush, you held out your hands to take it. “Want me to get that for you? Drying off might be, uh…”

There was no power so Aranea’s dryer wouldn’t be working. And the only clothes you had in your place that would fit Ignis, you were currently wearing. How to move on from here without trying to jump his bones was going to be tricky.

He took the poncho off the cactuar, and handed it to you with a more reserved smile. “This is yours. I’d wanted to give it to you when I confessed. Then, I’d tried to give it to you in my office.”

He’d been holding onto it for that long? You held it in a hug, hiding a smile behind its head. “Finally bribe that arcade attendant enough to buy it?”

“Oh, no,” he said, running fingers through his wet hair. The motion made you swallow, and you were thankful for the cactuar between you, shielding you from his charms. “I had to dance for it.”

Slight embarrassment had him looking away. You let his words sit there in the air for several moments. “You beat every song in Dance Party Blast?”

He nodded, eyes returning to you. “If you’re inclined to not believe me, I’ll have you know my initials are now at the top of every high score list in that awful game.”

It was really hard to believe, but you’d have to take his word for it. The attendant had told you someone won it; you just hadn’t imagined it was Ignis. “When did you have time to do this?”

Reaching a hand up, he touched the pink flower at the cactuar’s head. “After getting over my initial
anger and confusion of our argument, I decided I would tell you how I felt, hoping to smooth it over with a gift.” He drew his hand back, adjusting his glasses. “Upon seeing a photo of you going on a date with the token I had given you, I left work and returned to the arcade to win this.”

The image of Ignis dancing to any of the ridiculously upbeat songs on that game was really hard to picture. Memories came back to you of that time you’d spent together in the arcade. Now it seemed a little obvious that he liked you even then. He’d been so terrible at every game, but he had stayed for you.

Still, you were sceptical of his authenticity. He couldn’t have really played that game just to win a prize for you. “You left work?”

“At Noct’s insistence.” He sighed, but it was light. “Gladio thought himself persuasive, but Noct gave me a reminder of who is in charge of my time. I missed a meeting and calls from both Gladio and the Marshal.” He seemed embarrassed again. “Which caused my punishment training.”

Oh.

So he hadn’t just danced and made himself uncomfortable for you, but he’d been punished because of it, too. Suddenly, you wanted to ask him to leave. The extent to which he was apparently willing to go just to confess was freaking you out. Even more unbearable was the way it made you feel. All warm and unbelievably lucky.

Without a word, you backed out of the kitchen and walked through the apartment. You put the cactuar on the couch, then went to your bedroom. Gathering your thoughts, you tried to think of something else you owned that Ignis could wear other than the Crownsguard sweats. Because you didn’t want to take them off.

Or maybe you really, really did. But not for him to put on.

—

Grabbing a towel from the bathroom, you returned to find him unmoved in the kitchen. His eyes followed you in the candlelight, searching yours as you stopped in front of him.

“Here,” you said, offering the towel. “I’ll find something dry for you to wear.”

He took it from you with hesitant playfulness. “Is this an invitation to stay for the evening?”

You shifted on your feet, not realizing you’d assumed much by offering him a change of clothes. “If you want.”

His gloved hands tightened a little on the folded towel, a smirk slowly crossing his face. “I do, thank you.”

He loosened the towel in his hands and began to dry off. It seemed fruitless since his clothes were soaked right through.

Thunder rumbled outside, and you took a step toward him. His movements halted when you brought your hands up to his chest. The wet cloth of his shirt stuck to your palms slightly as you slid them under his jacket, up to his shoulders. Understanding your intentions, he shrugged the jacket off and let it fall.

The candlelight flickered as he leaned down to kiss you. It was too gentle, too light for your liking. You tore at his fine shirt, hearing the buttons coming undone with quiet snaps, stopping only when
you realized he was wearing an even nicer shirt than usual. He didn’t seem to care whether you’d broken a button or not, letting the towel drop to the floor next to his jacket.

Letting go of your very few inhibitions, you grasped his wet collar and tugged him down into a hard kiss. He met you readily, wrapping arms around you until he thought better of it. In movements you couldn’t see, too absorbed by the feel of his tongue curling around yours, he took off his shirt.

Breaking off the kiss, you brought your attention to his belt. Your hands worked the clasp open, tugging the leather until he stopped you with a gentle hand. You looked up in question, but he busied himself with removing his shoes. Much less elegant than he probably would’ve liked, he took them off, nearly stumbling from all of the things that had accrued on the floor in only a few moments.

You took that moment to tug off the sweatshirt. Your wrists got caught briefly on the cuffs, and he helped you before finally drawing you into an embrace with firm arms. His mouth was pliable against yours, water dripping from his hair onto your cheeks. You brushed it back, your fingers tangling there.

Pressing closer to him only made him push back with equal fervor. One step became two, then you were backed against the counter. This could be an interesting setting for your first time with him inside you, but the momentary pause he took to glance at the nearby candle with concern told you he didn’t want it to happen in a kitchen.

You didn’t care where, you just wanted him.

Catching your breath, you grabbed his hand and led him to your bedroom. If he wanted a more ideal, normal experience with you, he was going to get it. Well, you weren’t sure about normal, but you were going to do your best. It wasn’t like this was anything remotely new to you.

In the complete darkness of your room, you left him by the bed to get a candle. He wouldn’t let you leave, though, hand growing firm over yours and pulling you back to him. His lips found your jaw, neck, and shoulder. It wasn’t until your bra was already off that you realized he could take it off with one hand, the other still holding your own.

“I-I’m getting a candle,” you whispered.

You felt him shake his head, his nose skimming the skin of your collarbone as he made his way to your breasts. The moment his mouth teased at a nipple, you grasped at his shoulders, moaning despite yourself. It wasn’t going to be like last time, you told yourself. He wasn’t going to do all the work and blow your mind again. It wasn’t fair. He had far too much control.

He stopped immediately when you pushed him away. Before he could begin to have doubts, you touched his stomach, trying to find what you needed in the darkness. Trailing downward, you found his unclasped belt. He pulled at the waistband of your sweatpants as you undid his trousers, and at this point it felt like a race to see who could get the other naked first.

It was an awkward frenzy that made you giggle against his skin. He won, but only because his pants were soaked, sticking to his skin and giving you resistance. He chuckled into your hair as you tried to wrestle them off.

Giving up so he could deal with it himself, you found your dresser in the darkness and opened the box that stored your condoms. Your fingers found empty space, and you froze.

“Oh no.” Your voice was muted against the rain that continued to fall outside. “Ignis.”

“Hm?” His shuffling had stopped, and you wished more than anything that lightning would strike
outside your window or something so you could see him.

“Do you have any, uh, protection?” You closed the box and stepped toward where you thought he was standing. Your hand reached out in front of you to keep you from running into anything. “I’m out of condoms.”

Your hand touched his chest, and you kept it there, stopping in front of him.

“I don’t,” he said, his chest rising and falling as he spoke. It was still playful, and you smiled into the darkness. “I thought you were well versed in this arena.”

“It’s been a while.” You pushed him lightly, feeling his heartbeat rocking solidly in his chest. “You’re the only person I’ve been with since… I don’t even remember.”

You did remember. Not for lack of trying, at least until recently, you hadn’t slept with anyone else since the fake courtship had begun months ago. You weren’t comfortable telling him that, though. Then he’d think it mattered somehow.

His hands—when had he taken off his gloves?—touched yours, resting over his heart for a second before trailing up your arm. When they found your face, he didn’t hesitate to bring you closer. Then, you didn’t need a random chance of lightning striking outside your window to know that there wasn’t a single scrap of clothing separating your bodies.

Everything about him was firm. His hands that held your head an angle while he kissed your neck. His chest that pressed against your breasts. His arms that you’d grasped in surprise when he’d pulled you close so suddenly. The length of him that rested against your stomach.

“I don’t think—” No, you weren’t going to say this was a bad idea. It definitely was a bad idea, but you weren’t going to voice the fact. As a rule, if sex involved someone or something inside you, there was always a condom. Having fun didn’t have to be dangerous. Only Ignis had ever been the exception.

His mouth left your neck, his hot breath hitting your ear. He was waiting.

You swallowed thickly. “Are you okay with... you know, going bare?”

The words were out there, and you couldn’t believe you said them. He knew you were on the pill so it wasn’t like you were asking him to risk something as scary as a pregnancy. It was only unbelievable because you’d never let someone that close before.

His answer was a kiss, pliable and direct. Hands mapping your body, stopping to caress places he remembered you enjoyed, he skillfully worked your mouth with his own. The impassioned attention had you melting into him, and you pushed him until you were both falling into bed.

Sitting up on him, you kept him lying flat with your hands on his chest. His hands went to your thighs, softly rubbing upward to your hips. He was always so gentle. You returned the favor, tracing fingertips over his skin. Your mouth moved languidly over different parts of him. From his neck to his stomach, you wanted to find all of his places. It was only fair.

His responses were quiet gasps and a tightening of his hands at your hips. You wished you could see him, but the darkness was almost a blessing in that it kept him from seeing you. Kept him from seeing just how much you’d wanted this for longer than you cared to admit.

Your hand finally found his length. You’d ignored it for long enough, teasing him by only brushing it lightly with your thighs as you’d kissed and licked his skin. It was taught, so hard it pressed against
his abs. You used one hand to firmly grasp it, the other resting on his stomach for balance. The head was wet, sticky with precum. You played with it, smearing it with your thumb and rubbing him with a firm but mild pace.

He thrust upward slightly, and you stopped all movements. Growing impatient yourself, you leaned over him, lifting yourself enough to rub the head against you. Wet and hot, the slow friction was slippery. He began to pant, a low groan from his chest urging you forward.

Unhurriedly, you began to sink onto him. His hands at your hips pulled down, wanting for quicker entrance. You stopped, grabbing his hands and holding them at the sides of his head. He had to be patient. You were the boss right now. You kissed him before you leaned back again, taking the rest of him in, bit by bit. As he filled you, it took a moment to adjust. It had been a few months, and he wasn’t exactly the smallest partner you’d had.

Letting it settle, counting the seconds with slow movements of your hips, you felt every bit of him inside you. Testing, you moved upward and sat back on him again. Amazing. Hands finding purchase on his chest, you slowly and gradually filled the room with sounds of the damp slapping of your skin as you bounced against him. It was incredible, and probably the closest thing to a religious experience you’d ever had.

He moaned beneath you, hands returning to your hips. His fingers left little indentions as he gripped you and met each movement with a sharp thrust. He tried sitting up, but you kept him held down with your hands on his chest. You leaned down to say something typical of you, something really dirty, but nothing came to mind as he kept reaching the deepest parts of your wet heat. He tilted his head up to kiss you, but you avoided it each time, teasing him.

You sat up on him, making him work for it. He thrust harder, deeper, hands holding you tighter. His moans had become soft grunts. Your toes curled, your head rolling back. This was perfect. He was perfect.

Then, the arch of your foot cramped.

“Oh, fuck,” you whispered, coming to a stop to wince. It wasn’t like it hurt so much as it caught you by surprise.

“What’s wrong?” Out of breath, he sat up, the motion feeling incredible as he moved inside you.

You laughed, light and breathy. “Foot cramp.” His hands roamed a bit before coming to your feet. You squirmed as he rubbed both of them. “Don’t, I’m ticklish. It’s just the left one.”

He stopped touching your right foot, massaging the arch of your left. Your hands found his shoulders, and your lips landed on his jaw. He turned his head to meet your mouth in a searing kiss that had you grinding against him. Gradual movements of your hips, slow and deliberate.

Without warning, he leaned back and rolled both of you over so that he was on top. Not expecting the change but loving it all the same, you panted against his shoulder as he cupped your bottom with a hand and fucked you with renewed passion. A long moan escaped you as he nipped at your neck, sucking with each hard push into you. His hand slid down your thigh, coming to the back of your knee. He lifted your leg, crooking it at his shoulder, and drove himself deeper.

You writhed under the attention. Each precise thrust, each wet kiss, each low moan he uttered while he was on top of you made your body shake. It was building up to something you knew well, but couldn’t believe could be this powerful. You rocked against him, legs tensing as you grew closer to a finish.
“Ignis,” you ground out, voice taut. It hit you with a force. You shuttered, back arching and legs locking around him. He slowed his pace, careful not to overstimulate, and peppered you in soft kisses. Over each breast, your neck, your face. You breathed heavily and unevenly, riding it out while he continued to shower you in affection you weren’t used to from a lover.

Once calmed, still shivering but replete, you could make him out faintly in the darkness. His thrusts had slowed to a languid pace. The sound of the slick movements resounded off the walls as the rain seemed to abate somewhat. Wrapping your arms around his neck, you gave him a lingering kiss. He jerked into you with a little more force. It elicited a moan from you each time your hips met, muted by his mouth over yours. Then he stilled, breaking the kiss to stifle a moan into your shoulder, filling you in two final thrusts.

He slid out of you, laying down at your side. Sharing heavy breaths, you both lay in silence for several minutes. One of your hands patted around, fingers curling around his when you found his hand.

“I haven’t had dinner yet.” Your voice was a little hoarse. You were thirsty and sweaty and couldn’t believe he’d given in so easily this time. You’d actually had him, and your body was on fire. “Are you hungry?”

He sat up a little, nose gently trailing along your cheek before he kissed you there. “It happens that I am. Shall we try to make something?”

You weren’t sure what you had that could be made, but hummed in agreement anyway. Neither of you made a move to get up for a time. Nothing he did was bidding you to move, which was new for you. He didn’t cling or push you away. It was some other third thing he was doing, giving you the right amount of space with minor interludes of tenderness.

You were in so much fucking trouble.

—

In the bathroom, you gave the unfamiliar sticky wetness that trailed down your thighs some much needed attention. Curious, you felt your raw lips, wet with a mix of your juices and Ignis’ cum. It was viscous between your fingers. Pretty gross, but somehow less so from knowing how it had gotten there.

You cleaned up in the darkness, knocking things off the sink as you shuffled around. You heard a telltale *plop* of something falling into the toilet and hoped it wasn’t your toothbrush. You made sure the mess between your thighs was cleaned up and left the mess in your bathroom to deal with later.

In the kitchen, you were mildly surprised to see Ignis still completely nude. His bare ass in the candlelight greeted you, stopping you in the doorway as he checked your cabinets for food. You were naked, too, but this was your home. It was hard to imagine he was this comfortable around you. Then again, you *did* just have sex so how much more comfortable can two people get after that?

“You have very little by way of real food,” he said, turning around. Sweet Shiva, all he had on were his spectacles. In one of his hands was a box of cookies. “While junk food abounds.”

Fighting the urge to check him out, you rolled a shrug over your shoulders. “I like what I like, Iggy.”

He looked down at the box, momentarily silent before saying, “Your habits are worrying.”

You walked past him, heaving yourself into the counter. “You’ve known me for months and now
you’re worried about my habits?”  

He placed the box next to you, eyes raking over your naked form. “Sitting on food preparation surfaces while nude. That’s unsanitary, to say the least.”

Poking him with a toe, you ignored how cold the counter actually was against your behind. “Maybe I’m not trying to be sanitary. Maybe…” you hooked him with a leg, drawing him in with no resistance. “I’m trying to be just the opposite.”

His green eyes flicked from one feature of your face to another. The thrill of his fingers digging into your thighs made you meet those eyes head on. He hovered in that space between your legs. Again? So soon? You could see the confusion on his face, but it was colored by his desire.

You scooted closer to the edge, a hand touching his chest in light movements. Would he even want to do that in here? You’d done the normal on-the-bed thing. For him, and for yourself, if you were being honest. Any setting worked for you, though.

His hands rested at the back of your knees. He was already hard, you noticed when he brushed against you. Another scoot closer to the edge of the counter, you invited him in. Too forward, maybe, but you weren’t going to pretend you didn’t want this.

Either he accepted or he—

He pushed into you with a gentle force, holding your legs at his hips as he adjusted himself. You met his eyes in the dim candlelight, surprised and delighted. You wrapped your arms around his neck, drawing him even closer with your legs closing around him completely.

He fucked you in the kitchen for longer than you expected, slamming into you with more force than someone usually so gentle had any right to.

He said your name onto the hollow of your neck as he came into you again. The sensation was just as amazing, made even more so by the endearing smile he gave you as he stayed in just a bit longer, thumb stimulating you, to have you finish a second time.

Sharing breaths during the comedown, neither of you moved. His nose brushed yours. “You look beautiful when you come undone.”

You blinked heavily, smiling despite yourself. “Don't be so sappy.” You shoved him lightly, but he didn’t budge.

“Feeling shy, darling?” He chuckled, kissing you once, twice, quickly before backing away and pulling out entirely.

Using the paper towel he handed you to clean up the new stickiness on your thighs, you avoided his gaze. You’d need to implement a rule that he couldn’t talk during sex anymore. You needed it like some kind of safeguard so you wouldn’t be at such a risk for falling even more into the pit of hell that was your crush on Ignis Scientia.

—

“I’m moving back home in July,” you said, carrying blankets from the hallway closet to the living room. You wanted to build a blanket fort. Like, a sex fort or something. Ignis thought it was ridiculous, but you knew he’d help you.

The storm outside had quieted for a time, only to return with renewed force. Thunder boomed and
rain poured; it was a song you really enjoyed.

“That’s perfect timing.” Ignis said from the couch. He’d made himself at home, hanging up his clothes to dry in the bathroom and sitting around your living room like some kind of personified nude statue of perfection. “Let’s orchestrate the break up right before you move. That’ll give us a couple of months apart so it won’t seem unreasonable for us to remain friends when you return to the city for fall semester of university.”

You dropped the blankets onto the floor and pointed at him. “Exactly! We can have the breakup after the wedding because it would suck to pretend to hate each other during Noct’s big day.”

He hummed in agreement, checking his phone. You arched your brows, wondering who could’ve been bothering him that late in the night. He sighed, locking his phone and putting it on the coffee table.

“You seem bothered.” Giving him a side glance, you nudged at the blankets with a foot. “What’s up?”

“The only thing bothering me,” he said, meeting your glance with a smirk. “Is how far you are from my reach.”

His sexual drive surprised you. Especially considering how he’d more than once reminded you in the past that there were many things more important than sex.

Yet he had you everywhere. After riding him on the couch, you convinced him to help you a little with the blanket fort. But that was ditched the moment he lifted you up, pressing your back against a wall.

You wondered about this new side of him as your nails dug into his shoulders. Your legs around him for balance, you writhed with each thrust. You’d always considered yourself insatiable. He was something else.

—

The blanket fort wasn’t happening. You were tangled up with Ignis in a pile of them on your living room floor. The storm had finally abated, the rain falling in a gentle patter against the balcony door.

“Rain dripping through leaves,” he said, lips skimming your shoulder. He pulled you closer, arm about your waist, until your back was flush to his chest. “To the flower hidden beneath the canopy of trees.”

There he fucking went with his emotionally charged words. But you gave him leeway because this was poetry. He wasn’t waxing poetic about your tits, but you’d wanted him to share this kind of thing with you. “Am I the rain or the flower?”

His soft laugh hit your neck. “I daresay we’re both trees. The rain is a night such as this.”

“And the flower?” You didn’t get poetry, like at all. It was a difficult language for you to grasp, and learning languages easily was kind of your thing.

Instead of answering, he tugged your ear gently between his teeth, nipping you lightly before trailing kisses down your neck. You leaned back into him, tilting your head to find his lips with your own. This was a language you understood.

—
The power came back on while he was above you. The lights flickered to life, the quiet hum of the air conditioner clicking on filling the room. Brought into stark light, you thought he’d change, be more distant or look less lovely. Sweat lined his brow, his hair messy and eyes shining with perfect clarity. The dim candlelight hadn’t done him justice, and now that you could see —could feel— every bit of him, you once again thought he was unreal.

He stilled, gently brushing hair out of your face. He liked eye contact, you’d noticed. You weren’t a fan, but kept finding yourself staring back at him anyway.

“Don’t stop,” you whispered, tightening your legs around him.

A smile played at his lips. His hips rocked against yours, coaxing a breathy moan from you. Nuzzling into your neck, he chuckled gently. “Wouldn’t dream of it, darling.”

—

You pressed the buttons on Aranea’s dryer, watching as Ignis’ wet clothes began to spin inside. Turning around, you found him looking at a picture of a vista Aranea had up on a wall. You’d asked her about it before so you knew it was a view from a place she liked in Niflheim.

“So the commodore lives right below you,” he said. “Strange that she’d own property here, let alone feel the need to share it with another tenant.”

You’d wondered about that, too, but Aranea was too elusive. It was a lost cause trying to understand why or how she did anything. Pushing those thoughts aside, you eyed him appreciatively. He’d put on his —your— Crownsguard sweats. The shirt rode up, revealing a sliver of his stomach as he adjusted his glasses.

No way, you told yourself. Aranea’s apartment was a no-go for sex. Plus, you were kind of tired and sore.

“Don’t you have work or prince duty in the morning?” You leaned against the machine, ignoring the slight wobble of it against your back. “We should go to bed when these are dry.”

He smiled, looking down, then over at you. “I’m not sure I have the energy for more lovemaking tonight.”

“You know that’s not what I mean,” you groused half heartedly. “And why do you call it that? Sex sounds much less mushy than— than lovemaking.”

His expression became thoughtful, arms crossing over his chest. “There’s an intimacy in the act that I don’t take lightly.”

Fighting a blush and failing, you avoided his eyes. “I guess that makes sense.” To be fair, he was a really affectionate lover. It was bizarre.

“If it truly bothers you—”

“No.” You held up a hand. You weren’t going to look at him, though. Heat burned at your face. “I-I like it. Tonight was— I mean, what we did was different, uh, than what I’m used to so…” You shrugged, not wanting to say anything more. Discomfort prickled at you for saying even this much.

“Perhaps we should be more cautious next time.” He sounded serious, but you thought you could detect mild amusement.
Glancing at him, you found your guess true. You rolled your eyes. Of course he wouldn’t be serious about doing this with you again. “Next time? Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“I must say,” he drew out, unaffected by your words. “I’m unimpressed with your lack of protection.”

“You could’ve brought some, y’know.” You crossed your arms. “You’re the one who came here to get laid.”

“Although it has been…” he looked away. “Incredible, sex wasn’t my intention in coming here.”

The dryer grew warm at your back. “What was your intention?”

He stretched his arms, fingers scraping the wall a little. It was an awkward movement, and you realized you weren’t the only one affected by all of this. As well as he handled things, as collected as he seemed, he was nervous.

His eyes met yours, and now you were both blushing in Aranea’s dim laundry room. “I simply wanted to be close to you.”

—

Sunlight filtered through the gaps in your curtains when you woke up. Ignis was a sold weight next to you, not holding you but pressed close. You turned over to look at him, catching him rubbing a sleepy eye. Your feet brushed down his legs as you stretched, chest touching his.

“Morning,” he murmured softly, his voice deep with remnants of sleep.

You put a hand in front of your mouth, face close to his as you shared a pillow. “G’morning.”

Blinking his green eyes open fully, he looked at you with a gentle smile. “Why are you covering your mouth?”

You smiled sleepily. “Morning breath.”

He chuckled, pressing his forehead against yours. His mouth brushed your fingers as he spoke. “Then what am I meant to kiss?”

You shrugged, your smile growing.

Drawing away slightly, he pressed a kiss to your nose, then your forehead. “That’s wonderful, but not quite what I’m seeking.” He lifted his head, tilting it slightly to kiss your shoulder, then your collar, lips brushing across skin in slow movements as his breath tickled your neck. “If only there were some way to rid yourself of morning breath and therefore your reservations.”

You squirmed a little against the attention he gave your neck. “I dunno for sure, but I think I dropped my toothbrush in the toilet last night.” Your words were muted, hand not leaving its place in front of your mouth.

He chuckled, a deep sound coming from his chest. Resting his head on the pillow again, he met your eyes, the tip of his nose touching yours. “If I didn’t want your morning breath, I wouldn’t have stayed until morning.”

“Oh, I thought you stayed for breakfast,” you joked.

His smile grew slightly, green eyes shining in the early morning light as they flicked between yours.
“I’ll prepare breakfast when I stay over again.”

That gave you pause. Those words, his arm snaking around your waist, the fingertips that trailed gentle shapes into your back, sent pleasant chills down your body that went to your core. He was being serious. He wanted this again. He wanted. Wow. He wanted this. Again. With you.

For the first time in all your life, your mind was absolutely blank. Your eyes widened, and you lowered your hand to stare at him. “Ignis…”

His soft smile remained. “On second thought, your breath is quite atrocious.”

You shoved at him, a laugh tumbling out of you as his arm at your waist tightened. “Gods, you’re so —”

He cut you off, pressing a kiss to your mouth that didn’t taste like anything but warmth. His hand caught yours before you could slide it under his shirt.

“It pains me to say this,” he murmured against your lips. “But I must get going.”

You groaned lightly, letting him go reluctantly. It was for the best, you told yourself. Easier to let him go if you made a clean break. Lingering on your desires would only make things harder.

—

The giant flowering cactuar sitting on your couch made you grin. He’d done something so stupid and unlike him to get that for you. He’d even been punished.

The early sunlight lighting up your apartment was brighter than it had been in days. Seemed like the storm had finally passed. You were still wearing your pajamas, shuffling past the cactuar to rummage around for breakfast.

You’d resisted the urge to join him in the shower. He had to leave soon for the Citadel, and you were still sore. Opening the fridge, you snorted. It wasn’t like he’d been rough at all. He’d just been very… passionate.

Grabbing the one can of Ebony you had left and putting it on the counter, you sighed. Stupidly, you’d bought them on an impulse because of him. They were expensive, and it wasn’t like he ever visited. Except for last night.

A further check into your cabinets reminded you that you needed to buy food. Like today. So you couldn’t give him breakfast, but it wasn’t like you’d known he was going to show up. You had no time to be a good hostess.

“How do you feel about another date?”

His arrival made you jump. You found him standing in the archway, adjusting a cuff. Everything was perfectly in place down to the black handkerchief that sat perfectly folded in the front pocket of his shirt. Even for his normal wear, this was particularly nice. You were wearing pajama pants with cartoon chocobos on them, and your hair resembled a bird’s nest.

“How do you feel about another date?”

He blinked, looking up from his cuff to your face. “I know of a place I think you’ll enjoy, and I’d like to take you there.”
“Uh, I dunno,” you said, wavering. You were going to tell him this time. Keep it casual, you told
yourself, and it might not go that badly. “I don’t think we should, Iggy. Things didn’t exactly go well
last time we went out.”

His expression fell into neutrality, a hardness at his jaw that hadn’t been there before. “I see.”

You handed the Ebony to him, not wanting to see that look on his face, and he took it with slight
surprise. “To get you through the morning commute,” you said. “There’s an old woman who gets on
at Vetulam station every morning. She will hit you with her purse if you’re sitting in her seat.”

His brows arched over his glasses. “Which seat would that be?”

“It changes every time. So you’ll need the caffeine to keep your edge.”

He nodded. “Thank you for keeping my safety in mind.”

You shrugged. “I’ve been hit with her bag too many times. It’s almost fatal.”

He checked his pocket watch. “I must be off. Take care of yourself.”

He was always saying that. As if he thought you couldn’t keep yourself okay. As if he cared.


He made to leave, then stopped, taking a deep breath and facing you with a frown of his own. “I
can’t go like this.”

You blinked up at him, not understanding.

His grip on the Ebony tightened. “Am I a joke to you? Please tell me now if that’s the case.”


That hard edge of his jaw had returned. “Did last evening mean anything to you?”

You drew in a breath, a heaviness growing in your heart and mind at his direct questions. “Yes! It
was fun, and I’m happy you finally felt comfortable sharing yourself with me.”

His eyes searched your face. Hesitance and something else you couldn’t define. “As friends.”

Oh. That’s what he wanted. Clarity. Rolling a small shrug over your shoulders, you said, “Yeah.
Isn’t that what we are?”

His frown became a scowl, a look you’d never seen aimed toward you. “I’d been under the
impression it was a touch more than friendship I was giving you last night.”

“Why?!” You threw your hands up, tired of this. “What’s wrong with you, Ignis, that you like me?”
According to Mirum and that vague statement Prompto had once made, it seemed like Ignis had a
universal appeal, and he had the entire world to choose from. “You—you could have anybody you
want!”

His scowl slackened, brows arching upward. “Yet I stand before you wanting no one else.”

You looked away, your chest a hearth of flames you weren’t sure you could stamp down. It wasn’t
that you didn’t like the feeling at this point, you’d accepted it and even welcomed it, but you were so
far from understanding it. “I think you should leave.”
One beat passed into two, then he turned away, following your request. After the door closed with a soft slam, something like guilt began to well in your gut. Seconds passed, and it only worsened. Things had finally worked out so why did you feel this way? You glanced at the old wrinkled note from him that now had a permanent place on the fridge.

*Please take care of yourself.*

Suddenly, you were running, stumbling over the blankets on the floor attempting to wrap around your feet, and jerked open the balcony door. The morning air was humid, and you could already feel it clinging to you as you leaned on the balcony railing and called down to him.

“Ignis!”

He stopped in his tracks just down the block, looking up at you. Your hands gripped the railing tightly. It was absurd how nervous you felt, your guts feeling as if they were going to spill out of you the moment you opened your mouth. You both already knew the other’s feelings. You’d had each other in several sweaty, exhausting positions just hours before. His cum was still inside you.

This shouldn’t have been so nerve wracking. Sex, you were used to. The genuine adoration you felt was foreign and scary. A breeze blew through, ruffling his hair and the plants on the balcony. You bit the bullet, rolling onto the balls of your feet.

“I-I’ll go anywhere and do anything with you,” you said, ignoring the trailing violets that kept tickling your arm. “Just let me know when and where.”

The pink dianthus, newly bloomed and still wet from the storm, surrounded you in a spicy scent. A smile grew on Ignis’ face, natural and soft. You inhaled the aroma and returned the smile. Despite the heat, you felt goosebumps rise along your arms, up to your shoulders.

“It’s a date,” he said, hair shimmering in the morning sun.

You nodded. “Hell yeah, it is.”

Chapter End Notes

I left off on a positive note for anyone who wants to bail since they finally did the do. I know some of y’all just be horny!

Thank you for sticking around for so long. The story isn’t over yet, but future updates might take longer because I have to work on a few things, both with this fic and in real life. The chapters on this thing have been insanely longer than I planned, which I hope hasn’t been hard to digest or too long-winded. I’m further into the plot than I realized, and Decisions need to be made soon. Yikes!

I hope the smut didn’t disappoint because nothing stresses me more to write tbh. Let me know if it’s considered explicit even though I tried my best to keep it tame to the extreme. lol

Social cues are impossible for me to comprehend, apparently, so I’ve been replying to all of my comments because I love the feedback, but I’ve recently realized... that’s kinda weird?? The last thing I wanna do is annoy people who are thoughtful enough to say
something. I don't know, just know that if I'm not responding, it's because I'm dumb and overthinking everything.

Thanks for reading! <3
I just had sex, and I’m about to eat nachos!

Chapter Notes

Editing this was a headache because it's so much longer than I planned. I just kept thinking... why did I write so much? Why won’t someone stop me? Save me from myself? I hope you guys like it because I’m completely out of it right now. @_@

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Recording room tone was sometimes uncomfortable. Everyone had to be silent, going about things quietly, saying nothing and moving very little. You could hear even the smallest of things so clearly during these moments —odd mouth noises, the creak of a door in another part of the building, someone’s shaky leg shifting in their jeans— which only made it more uncomfortable when your phone chimed in the middle of recording.

You looked around sheepishly as people groaned and things were reset. Excusing yourself to the hallway, you looked at the message you’d received while trying to remind yourself that you really needed to silence your phone while working.

**Ignis:** I count the seconds until I have the pleasure of seeing your disarming smile once again.

You frowned at the words, face warm and chest burning. Disgusting! The terror! How were you meant to respond to this?! Why couldn’t he just ask you to send nudes like a normal person?

Finally accepting Ignis had apparently awakened the complete monster he had hidden beneath his flawless demeanor. He’d been torturing you with messages like this all morning. Despite the inner conflict, you were keeping it chill. This had to be some kind of ultimate retribution for all the times you made him uncomfortable during your friendship.

**You:** Cool.

Take that, you thought. You were totally unphased. When your phone chimed again, you were ready.

**Ignis:** Your succinct manner only breathes life into this ongoing repartee.

**You:** Dope.

**Ignis:** You are remarkably contrary, but I adore that about you.

**You:** Nice.

**Ignis:** Dare I say, I long to once again hear your sweet song, broken only by my lips upon yours.

Your mouth slowly gaped. Is that how it was? He wanted to wax romantic language into a vague sext now? He wasn’t a man vying for your affection. He wasn’t even a warlock after your maidenhood. He was a nightmare.

You looked through the album on your phone for a nude of yourself you’d taken earlier in the week.
when trying to compare your body weight now against what it had been a month ago. It had been Prompto’s suggestion to keep you motivated to not overindulge in eating while dealing with your sad feelings over the Academy’s rejection and the loss of your chocobo. And because you were you, the photo was of you in a cute pose because what was the point in trying to care about your body if you couldn’t have fun with it?

Sending the picture to Ignis with no context, you smiled to yourself. This would be like dropping a bomb compared to his small verbal attacks on your already unsound heart and mind.

He didn’t respond for a while. You were able to get some actual work done before you had to duck out again. You considered that a small victory.

_Ignis:_ Your form is breathtaking.

_You:_ Thanks, you have my permission to display it in your office.

_Ignis:_ It would cut a rather magnificent figure upon my desk.

_You:_ Feel free to frame it.

_Ignis:_ I meant your incredible body, though the photograph will surely inspire my dreams tonight.

You read and reread the message. Then, you called him. As it rang, you glared into space. When he answered on the second ring, you spoke before he could even say hello.

“Are you trying to drive me away?”

Amusement in his voice, he said, “Not at all.”

“Iggy, you gotta stop.”

“I think you’re quite taken with me.”


He chuckled, and it hit you hard. Your grip on the phone weakened a little.

“Protest all you want, darling. I’m fully aware of how you feel for me.”

“Yeah, I feel sick.”

“I feel much the same.” His voice grew softer. “I find myself blushing at the merest thought of you.”

Grip tightening, you hung up and glared at the phone. The audacity of that man! You had half a mind—You mean, really—He was the worst.

Chewing on your lip, you scrolled up the line of messages from him to the first one he’d sent after leaving your apartment.

_Ignis:_ I can’t seem to stop smiling. You’re going to own my every thought today.

Stifling a giggle with a hand, you held the phone against your chest. You felt crazy. About him. For deciding to give this a chance. And just, in general.
Prompto visiting on your lunch break during filming was a surprise. Even better were the nachos he brought, sharing them with you while he seemed to reluctantly break some bad news.

“What do you mean you quit?”

“I mean, I got a new job while the theater was flooded. And I like it more so I’m not going back,” Prompto said, looking apologetic. Which was dumb because you hated the theater job. You didn’t blame him one bit.

Grinning at him, you suddenly decided, “Then I’m quitting, too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, dude, I only stayed because of you.” You got cheese on your face, wiping it off with the back of your hand. Ah, yes, the everlasting battle between yourself and messy food. “You think I wanna work with the new guy alone? He sucks.”

“He’s not that bad.”

“No,” you sighed. “But he’s no Prompto.”

Prompto snickered, and you saw that he noticed the slight bruise on your neck. His eyes lingered, but he didn’t say anything about it. Instead, he asked, “Don’t you need, I dunno, money?”

“I already paid my last month of rent. And Noct said the wedding travel expenses were paid for.” You placed a hand casually on your neck, covering the mark Ignis had left. Even though it was too late; Prompto’s smile grew. “I’ll just buy a fancy dress for the wedding with the internship savings I never got to use.”

“Wow, you’ve thought about this before.”

“Yeah,” you laughed, crunching on the nachos like they were the last food you’d ever be given. Working in a real studio was cool, but craft services was rough. “It’s almost like I’ve wanted to quit for a while.”

Now you had an entire month to do whatever the hell you wanted.

—

Apparently the extent of “whatever the hell you wanted” went as far as helping Craigory with his film and then going home to play video games late into the night.

Ignis called later than you expected, and even then, he said he was still at the Citadel, working alone. So you spent more than a reasonable amount of time on the phone, carrying on a long, pointless conversation with him while he worked and you tried to beat a particularly hard boss.

“I hope you’re not making Dulcis work late, too,” you said, biting back a swear as your character died. Things were still unsettled between you, and you were thankful he’d at least stopped teasing you with unprompted romantic overtures.

Even though you’d kind of liked them. A lot, actually. In a perverse sort of way that you’d never admit.

“Of course she’s been sent home. I believe I’m a fair boss,” he replied after a brief delay. “How is the production going?”
“All I do is point cameras at things and people all day.”

“Isn’t that what you want to do?”

You bit your bottom lip, the boss dealing a great amount of damage to your character in one fell swoop. Damn. Prompto had warned you about this.

“I just wanna make things that people would love to watch. I guess you’re right.” Your character, in all of her sexy, unrealistically armored glory, died yet again. You put the controller down in annoyance and picked up your phone. Turning off the speaker, you sat back on your couch. “What do you want to do?”

The expected delay passed into further silence. You waited, wondering briefly if something had happened to the connection. Before you could ask if he was still there, you heard him take a quiet breath.

“I’ve never wanted anything more than to serve the crown.”

His voice was soft and sounded closer. It made you smile slightly.

“Then you’re living the dream, I guess. Lucky you.”

“Yes,” he said. “Lucky me.”

You played with the thumb pad on the controller idly. “What do you think you would’ve done if you hadn’t become Noct’s advisor? Like, what would you be doing right now?”

He chuckled, and your smile grew. “I suppose I’d be working in the Citadel still, but at a lower level. Like my uncle. As for right now… I’d like to think I would still be talking to you. Perhaps in person since in this hypothetical situation, I’d have much less duties to attend to.”

Hand leaving the controller, you ran it down your face. A blush crossed your cheeks, and you hated that he had that effect on you. “You still think we would’ve met?”

“Oh, certainly,” he said, far quicker than you expected. “I’m a romantic, after all.”

“Right,” you laughed. “How could I forget?”

“You disagree, I assume.”

“No,” you found yourself saying, shaking your head even though he couldn’t see it. “I think there’s a chance, but like, much later. When I’m famous. Maybe you’d show up at one of my film premiers, and we’d see each other from across the red carpet.”

He laughed again, deeper this time. “You overestimate my fame. Political figures don’t often attend such events.”

You huffed at his immediate dismissal of your hypothetical. “Maybe we would’ve met at the grocery store, then. Reaching for the same potato.”

“That seems more likely.”

“It also seems like bullshit,” you said. “Like something from a really bad romantic movie.”

“In any case,” he said, amusement ringing in his voice. “I’m happy to have met you in this iteration of our lives.”
Feeling warmth throughout yourself, you grinned at nothing. “Me, too.”

On the last day of filming, Craigory brought you aside to point out that he’d read that unfinished script you’d been agonizing over that day in the library months ago.

“You really liked it?”

He nodded, and you preened.

“Do you think it’s fine without an ending?”

He shrugged.

You brought your hand to your chin. “You’re right. Even a hard break like the one I wrote is still an ending even if it isn’t all neatly tied up.”

Another nod.

“Thanks,” you said. “For letting me help out and actually reading my stuff.”

With a thumbs up, he left you to help finish the cleanup process. You hadn’t thought about that script in a while so you were relieved that people were at least looking at it.

—

Early summer wind brushed past you as you walked up the stairs out of the train station. Bag strapped over your shoulder, token in your pocket, anxiety in your gut, you headed for the meeting place. It was in a park, and you were already worrying.

The date wouldn’t be boring, you told yourself. It wouldn’t be if you could help it. You weren’t sure why you had such a low opinion of Ignis’ taste in dates. Aside from the fact that he lived to work and asked you to meet in a park, of all places.

You stood by the visitor’s center at the entrance. A nearby sign told you about all of the birds that could be seen within the grounds. If you were birdwatching, he’d better not expect you to know which bird was which. He would have an old man hobby like that. You grabbed a pamphlet just in case.

“Interested in birds, are we?”

Startled, you looked over your shoulder at Ignis. He was wearing something close to a t-shirt. It was a plain grey color but stretched softly over the muscle at his chest just so.

Uh.

Facing him, you bent the pamphlet in your curling hand. “Ignis. Hi.”

He looked at you curiously. “Yes, hello.”

You stared at him.

He stared at you.

Silence.
His brows furrowed, eyes flicking away as he said, “I suppose we should begin.”

Loosening up at little now that you weren’t pinned with his gaze, you snorted. “It sounds like you’re about to give me a presentation.”

He began to walk down the cobbled walkway that led into the park, and you quickened your pace to catch up. “Not everything I do is akin to a business meeting.”

You smiled, looking up at him. “Yeah it is. You probably have everything mapped out in your brain right now. Step one, walk through the park. Step two, go to dinner. Step three, profit.”

The barest of smiles played at his lips. “Of what will I be profiting, exactly?”

“I dunno,” you shrugged, tucking the pamphlet into a pocket of your bag. “Seeing me naked.”

He pushed his glasses up the arch of his nose. “As enticing as that may be, I’d hope it would affect just how much you enjoy my company rather than the purely physical.”

That made you roll your eyes. You already liked him. A lot. And he knew that. The bastard.

His finger hooked around yours and you took the hint, intertwining your hand with his. The weather was sunny, the day warm and humid still. The entire city had yet to get rid of the lingering mugginess after the days of storming. Your hand was going to sweat, but he trill of his touch kept you holding on.

“So what is happening first?” you couldn’t help but ask. This was your first date that wouldn’t involve getting intoxicated or the use of any number of illegal substances. You let him take the lead because you didn’t know what you were doing, and doing that in itself was way out of your comfort zone.

“It’s simple,” he said, giving you a side glance. “We begin with step one.”

—

Step one seemed to mean walking through a park while asking questions that became increasingly personal.

“Is your father really a hunter?”

You nodded, eyes roaming the green around you, sunlight filtering through the trees. You hadn’t seen a single soul since coming into the park. “Yeah, but I don’t know him.” Eyes meeting his, you rose a brow. “You realize I had two moms, right?”

He blinked. “Yes, but I can’t assume anything about your upbringing. Perchance you have a multitude of parents in a polyamorous marriage, and I had only met one of many mothers. How am I to know without first asking?”

“First of all,” you said, pointing at him. “Never say perchance unironically. At least not in front of me. Secondly, touché.”

He rose a brow. “Oh, you know Tenebraean, as well? Je suis très impressionné.”

You had no idea what he was saying. He looked so smarmy about it, too. “Now you’re just showing off. Like usual.”

“Perhaps,” he chuckled. “Are you avoiding my question?”
“I already answered. My dad’s a hunter.” You shrugged, not comfortable with the topic. “But I don’t know him. He was just a sperm donor.”

“I see.” His amusement faded, and his grip on your hand tightened in a light squeeze. “Your turn.”

You crossed a stone bridge, birds flying past overhead. It was alarmingly quiet in this place. You’d never been to this side of the city so maybe this was normal. It bordered a line between giving you the creeps and charming you with the you’re the only person in the world aura it made you feel.

“What about your parents?” You knew this was going to be touchy, but he’d started it first. “What do you remember about them?”

He inhaled deeply, not looking at you as you kept on in your walk. It was almost like he was taking you somewhere specific. Titan, if he took you to some secluded area with a picnic or something, you’d almost feel obligated to do him right there. And you were pretty sure that was a crime.

You made a mental note to look up the lawful repercussions for public indecency later. His return to the serious conversation snapped you out of your dirty thoughts, making you look at him.

“I remember vague things. My mother’s eyes were green like mine. My father smelled like pipe tobacco.” He looked down, catching you staring at him. “I was too young to remember much when they passed.”

You wanted to ask how, but it wasn’t your turn anymore. The way a frown tugged at the corners of his mouth made you decide you wouldn’t ask at all.

—

The first sign of human life in that deserted park was an elderly man that greeted Ignis by name in passing. You looked back at the man as you kept walking.

“You know that guy?”

He shrugged, not offering any sort of explanation. Not that you were looking for one until you made it to what seemed to be the end of the park. It seemed almost sudden how the arches of the exit had appeared.

Ignis didn’t stop beyond the arch, passing under and leading you directly into a neighborhood. Old brownstone buildings stretched for blocks, trees lining the streets. It was charming almost. Many more people were out now, reminding you that you were in a city that bustled, even in this quiet district.

“Where are we?” You looked at the rainbow flag hanging from an upper balcony. Another one wafted from a window two houses down. Those always made you smile.

“A district I’m rather fond of.” Ignis nodded at a few people who waved at him from the other side of the street. Like the old man, they called his name. It was odd. They said his formal title but did it in a way that was very casual.

Quirking a brow, you couldn’t let this slide by without explanation. “Are you some kinda local hero or something?”

He looked down at you for a moment before chuckling. “They’re merely being polite.”

You narrowed your eyes. “They were chanting Lord Ignis like they were at a sports game or
something. What’s going on?”

With a blink, he looked away. The trees that lined the street filtered much of the sunlight, and you walked together through the soft shadows. “I’m a count. This neighborhood… is my county.”

His… oh. You peered around. People kept greeting Ignis as you passed through one block and into another.

You pulled your hand from his, crossing your arms. “Is this some kind of power play?” He had to know that this kind of thing didn’t work to impress you. Noct barely impressed you on his best days, and he was going to be King one day.

“Not at all,” he said lightly. “It just happens the restaurant I want to take you to is in my district.”

“Right.” You weren’t buying it.

As you turned a corner together, he nodded at the face of a business just ahead. A small restaurant set in the bottom floor of a building. “There.”

It didn’t seem that interesting. “So?”

He lifted a hand to your lower back, walking forward. “You’ll see.”

Stepping into the restaurant, you were faced with a bright red, classic diner setting. With rows of booths and a length of bar that stretched the entire spanse of the little space, it was intensely early M.E. 700s, transporting you fifty years into the past. You were sucked into the atmosphere of the place immediately, smiling at the servers who greeted you. When Ignis led you to a booth set against a window, you froze.

“Um, Ignis?”

He stopped in front of you, fingertips skating against the tabletop at the booth. “What’s wrong, darling?”

Breathy and surprised, you looked around the diner in a new light. This was it. You looked at the booth in front of you, the same one in which Ifrit and Shiva had their very first and very last date in your favorite movie. Looking at Ignis, you frowned, not entirely sure how to process your sudden emotions. “Iggy, wow!”

He seemed concerned at your lack of words, brows furrowing. “Yes?”

You slid into one side of the booth —Shiva’s side, you thought— and grinned at him. “Ignis, this is — huh.”

His face lit up, barely noticeable, but you saw it in the way his eyes widened. He sat across from you, regarding you carefully.

Smiling uncontrollably, you reached across the table for his hand. “Dude, this is amazing.”

You were sitting right there, where you’d imagined sitting for years. In the middle of the diner. With a handsome man across from you. He wasn’t Ifrit, but he was Ignis, and you felt like that was almost poetic and infinitely better. Indulging yourself, you squeezed his hand. He was your fire, green eyes shining as he smiled at you. You were warm. Your face, your heart, everything.

“When we watched the film, I knew I had to bring you here.” He adjusted his glasses with the index
finger on his free hand. “I couldn’t believe my luck that your favorite movie scene took place within my county.”

Bringing you here wasn’t so much a power move as it was this dork just trying to impress you by remembering one really small thing that you loved. “Ignis, I don’t even know what to say.”

He chuckled, resting his chin in his hand as he looked at you. “As long as you keep saying my name, I’ll be happy.”

—

Between croque madame and coffee, you realized Ignis had a lot to talk about that had absolutely nothing to do with his work or Noctis. He liked history and science fiction. He considered it his fault that Prompto liked meat pies because they were one of Ignis’ personal favorites and one of the few things Noct would eat without argument. So he’d often fed Prompto his meat pies —you choked on the missed joke there— while he was at Noct’s place.

On busy mornings when he had to cross town in traffic to wake Noctis at his apartment, he always stopped by a convenience store for an Ebony and a mystery meat sushi. It was unhealthy and wrong and just the right amount of pep that kept him going, he said.

Burning wood made him think of camping with Gladio. Apparently, they’d done that often as teenagers, a bonding experience Gladio all but demanded, but never outside the Wall.

You ate it up until you felt the need to share something, anything with him that would seem even half as comparable.

“My dad,” you said between bites. It always seemed easier, more casual, when you talked while eating. Even if it was impolite. And you could tell Ignis didn’t care for it even if he was keeping himself from calling you out on your bad etiquette. “He lives somewhere in Cleinge. When I was sixteen, my— one of my moms died. I was so mad at my other mom, I decided I’d ride Bokeh all the way to my dad to find answers. As if he could solve all my problems.”

Ignis’ lips pursed and his gaze raked over your face. “I take it didn’t go well?”

You shrugged. “I didn’t make it past the Wall. A guard escorted me home, and my mom was pissed. Pretty stupid, huh? I don’t know if I’ll ever figure out what I was looking for back then.”

His eyes followed your movements as you fidgeted. Your hand twirled the straw in your glass, your mind fighting the old memories. It was weird admitting this part of your life to someone. You’d never told anyone about it until now.

He touched your fidgeting hand when he spoke up. “I have doubts at times. About why I was chosen for this position. About my worthiness.” His voice was already soft but it grew gentler. “I met Noctis soon after my parents passed. Funny how life changes so quickly. Did they choose me because my parents were gone? And why bestow such an honor and responsibility upon a child whose lost everything?”

Unable to say anything, you stared at him and listened. It seemed like the only thing you could do.

“I’ll never know the answer,” he continued. “I think that, perhaps for the best, reality has no answers for us no matter how hard we wonder.”

This was getting too heavy. He shouldn’t have been pulling at you this way. If your heart was a ball of twine, he was slowly unwinding it, curling the red string around his finger. You imagined him
doing that, tying the end of the thread to his finger with a neat little bow, and when you parted, it would always lead you back to him.

You put a stop to those thoughts immediately. Opening your bag, you pulled out a short stack of movies and put them on the table. “I-I brought three of my favorites.”

He’d proposed a trade the day before. Your favorite movies for his favorite books. He rose a hand, a server coming by to place a thick book next to the movies. Damn. He really had everything planned out. You’d thought he’d forgotten since you hadn’t seen a book on him.

You eyed it before picking it up and reading the title on the binding. *Don’t Panic.* You’d never read this before, but you knew the gist of it. Eyes flicking to him, you couldn’t help but smile. You expected something historical, maybe a biography or something, but this was comedic science fiction.

“Is this really one of your favorites?”

He nodded, not looking up from the movies you’d brought. He was already frowning at the summary on the back of one case.

“A group of strangers take refuge in a cabin while daemons plague them in a relentless attack?” He looked up at you. “This is dark. Tell me now if anyone has their face horribly removed. I want to prepare myself.”

You shook your head, and he seemed a little relieved. That movie wasn’t actually that dark. It was campy and dumb. You liked that it had been advertised as pure horror, though, because you couldn’t think of anything better to throw Ignis off.

The entire idea of the exchange was brilliant idea on his part. That way, you both could learn a little bit about the other while apart. It also gave you reason to meet again soon. Not that you even needed it at this point. You were done fighting him and the things he made you feel.

For now.

—

“Now that step two is finished,” Ignis said, stepping out of the diner. “How do you suppose step three is faring?”

Gazing up at him, you rocked back on your feet. A few people passed on the sidewalk, greeting Ignis and even waving at you. One person stopped to ask Ignis if he’d gotten the most recent community request.

He looked over the person’s shoulder at you apologetically, and you snickered. It could’ve been awkward, being interrupted while he was trying to flirt, but this was his life. He was a man of responsibilities. You knew you’d have to get used to it if you wanted… if he wanted… if whatever this was between you was going to be long term.

You couldn’t entertain that idea right now. All you wanted to do in that moment was let him know how successful his hypothetical date plan had been.

So the moment the person went on their way, you stepped toward him, lifting on your tiptoes and planting a kiss on his lips. You kept it chaste. He didn’t seem like the type to enjoy PDA, particularly among his countship, and you were going to respect that.
When you fell back to the flats of your feet, he followed, leaning down to bring you back in. Just as chaste, but longer, lingering, he kissed you until someone whistled. He broke it with a chuckle, eyes dancing over every part of your face.

“They’re gonna be gossiping about you, Lord Ignis,” you said, poking his chest.

Someone passed by, smiling at both of you, and he looked down to hide the blush on his face. “I suspect they already do.”

—

Walking back through the park, you noticed more people this time around. A man just a bit older than both of you stopped short at the sight of Ignis. He had a sizable line of elementary aged children following him, and his sudden halt made them bump into each other like little dominos, teetering and giggling together.

“Lord Ignis,” the man said, dipping his head in a polite bow. “I’m so glad you visited today. I wanted to ask if you’d have time in your schedule to do that small lesson you’d mentioned earlier in the year.”

Eyes flicking from Ignis to the man, you smiled. Everyone was so polite here.

“Ah, that’s right,” Ignis said, sending you a brief glance. “I’ve actually no time, unfortunately, but my… friend is fluent in Altissian as well. Perhaps she could be of help.”

You didn’t realize until the man was looking at you that Ignis had just volunteered you for something. You gazed up at him. “Huh?”

The man looked at Ignis’ hand holding your own, a slow smile drawing across his face. “That would be great. I’ll send something written formally about it later. Enjoy your outing, sir.”

“You, as well.”

Feeling like you were in some kind of dystopia where everyone was nice and sadness wasn’t a thing, you watched curiously as the line of kids waved at Ignis as they passed. He waved at every single one of them in return.

“You know all their names, too?” Elbowing him, you snickered.

He gave you an amused look. “Of course not. But I never forget a face.”

One of the last in the line pointed at you. “That’s a different lady!”

Some of the children giggled and agreed. The teacher hushed them as they kept going, and you rose a brow as Ignis’ hand tightened around your own.

“I suppose you may have been wondering why the park was so barren earlier,” he said.

You nodded, sparing one last look at the kids because excuse me…? “Yeah. It was kinda creepy how empty it was.”

He smiled at you. “I didn’t take responsibility of my title until I was eighteen. I found out rather quickly that I govern a district full of late risers. They convinced me early on to pass ordinances that kept businesses closed until noon, including this park.”

You rose a brow. “Wow. Lazy.”
He shrugged, nodding at someone as you passed. “I find a sort of familiar comfort about it, if I’m honest.”

Eyes roaming the greenery, you smiled. The look of appreciation in his expression made you happy. This place was like an extension of himself. Almost ironic that everyone here apparently shared such a defining quality with Noctis.

—

You stood among strangers with Prompto in a dance studio.

A man standing at the head of the room clapped his hands. “Welcome!” He had a thick Altissian accent and muscles for days. “I am Salvatore, and I will show you how to dance.”

Prompto nudged you with an elbow. You stifled a snicker with a hand. Salvatore noticed, looking at you with amusement.

“Bellissimo.” He gave you a once over, and Prompto elbowed you again. “Let us begin.”

—

Prompto wasn’t bad at leading, but you took turns at it because you wanted to learn how to dip someone.

“Youform is outstanding,” Salvatore said, walking between dancing couples toward you. “Are you both experienced?”

Prompto blushed, his blue eyes widening. “Uh.”

Nice, you thought. How eloquent.

“It’s our first time,” you said as Salvatore placed hands on each of you, guiding your motions. Prompto’s tense arms loosened, and you both moved easier. Flirty was your natural state of being, and this instructor radiated the same aura. “Be gentle.”

Salvatore smiled. “Oh, I will be, mia bellezza.”

“I-I’m going on a water break.” Prompto removed himself from the situation, face intensely red.

The music continued on, and Salvatore took Prompto’s place fluidly. His build was larger, his arms thicker. He held you flush against him, turning you in circles.

You had to ask, using Altissian because you so rarely got the opportunity. “How long have you been dancing?”

At your use of his native language, his brows rose and his smile grew. “All my life.” He tilted you back, lowering his voice. “You speak Altissian and you’re beautiful. Are you real?”

Not long ago, you would’ve rocked this guy’s world. Now you weren’t so sure.

—

The air was cold in the meeting room. Prompto’s leg bounced, and you put a hand on his knee to stop the incessant thump thump thump of it hitting the table. Sitting around the space with you were a few people you didn’t know and Dulcis. Ignis stood near a presentation board with a Council Member who had introduced himself, but you’d already forgotten his name.
Ignis circled the table, placing a stack of papers in front of each person. “The first set of pages are confidentiality forms. As guests with knowledge of this event, you’re expected to remain mindful of everything you say or do that may disclose this sensitive information to the public.”

He was complete seriousness. Before you’d all gathered into the room, he’d taken you aside to tell you to please behave because this meeting was important. He adjusted his glasses, pointing at the presentation board. Listed on it were bullet points of specifics, as if you were all children who didn’t know what to sign. The room filled with scratching as everyone began to fill things out.

“Next,” he said as the screen changed. “You’ll find a list of obligations that come along with this privilege. You must have all of your vaccinations up to date before leaving the country. A copy of your shot record proving as such will need to be submitted. Next, the dress code will be strictly formal at all times during the festivities. Royal blacks are preferred, but not necessary.”

He continued on with the list, and you flipped through the pages without really reading anything. It weirded you out how Council Member just stood by, watching everyone while Ignis did all the work. The quiet fwhips of your pages made the ancient man look your way, and you paused, shooting him a sheepish smile. He didn’t smile back.

Looking away awkwardly, you went to the page Ignis was currently on in his explanation. You met his eyes as he spoke. Chewing on your bottom lip, you winked at him.

“Beyond that, you’ve… ah.” Ignis paused, mouth slightly parted. A smile played at his lips for just a moment, then he collected himself. “You’ve been provided with an itinerary. Three days and three nights on Isola D’amore, a western island of Accordo.”

The screen changed again, and Ignis adjusted one of his gloves, looking at you. After a moment of hesitation, he winked before turning away with a small smile. Council Member cleared his throat, and you could see Ignis straighten his back as he went further on in explanations.

Prompto’s knee jerked against your hand as the meeting room door suddenly slammed open.

“Ignis Scientia.” Mirum walked into the room with solid strides, marked with a resounding click of each heel. “I can’t believe you’ve done this. You approved the invitation of the Duke?”

Ignis froze for just a second, then his expression changed entirely. He crossed his arms, and his mouth became a straight line. “Is this professional behavior, Mirum?”

“I don’t give a damn what’s professional right now, Ignis,” Mirum said, glaring at him. If there wasn’t a table between them, you felt like she might’ve tried to slap him. “That odious man can’t attend the wedding.”

Council Member seemed ready to speak up, but Ignis held up a hand. “If you’ll allow me, sir.” The old man closed his mouth, looking between the younger nobles. You loved this even though you had no idea what was going on. It was so dramatic, you wished you had popcorn.

Ignis stared Mirum down. “His vote was needed in order for this wedding to take place. You know that. What sense do you have interrupting this meeting?”

She frowned, pointing at him. “I’m here to contest your approval of the Duke. I’ll see you in front of King Regis within the hour.”

Ignis smirked, which surprised you. “Be sure to arm yourself, Mirum. I’ve expected this response for some time.”
Lowering her arm, she snarled at him and left the room in as much a storm as she’d arrived.

Ignis collected himself, sharing a look with Council Member before nodding. He didn’t look at you for the remainder of the meeting. You found that just a little odd.

—

“Did you see that?” Prompto asked as soon as you left the meeting room.

“Yeah, Prom,” you said, rolling your eyes. “It’s almost like I was there.”

He shoved you, and you shoved him back. When he wrapped an arm around your neck in a loose headlock, you laughed.

“C’mon, dude,” he said. “You saw how heated that was.”

You wormed your way out of his grip, not wanting to be seen roughhousing right in the middle of the Citadel. “Did it seem like they were kinda flirting to you?”

Prompto’s smile waned. “I dunno about that, but it was pretty weird.”

The other people in the meeting shuffled out of the room. Dulcis waved at you before going on her way, and the others filtered through the corridor until it was just you and Prompto standing there. Ignis left the meeting room right behind Council Member, mid-conversation.

He stopped when he realized you had been waiting. Council Member looked from you to Prompto to Ignis, who righted his collar before approaching you.

“It’s kind of you to wait,” he said. “But as you know, I have a meeting at court to attend to immediately.”

You rose a hand, sliding a finger underneath one of his suspenders and snapping it against his chest. “Go show ‘em who’s boss, gorgeous.”

Brows rising over his glasses, he smiled, small at first until it grew into something substantial. “Thank you, darling.”

—

On the way to Noct’s quarters in the Citadel, you and Prompto were intercepted by Ignis’ Uncle. It halted Prompto in his steps, the sight of the older man, but you weren’t worried in the least. Until he invited you to have tea with him in his office. Then, you were waving goodbye to Prompto with a mild look of alarm.

Now that you were sitting in front of his desk with a cup of peppermint tea in hand, everything seemed a lot more worrying. Uncle smiled, and you returned it tentatively.

“I’m glad to see you’ve recovered quickly from your scuffle.” He was referencing your eye.

You nodded. “I heal quickly. Y’know how it is, Uncle.”

With mild surprise, he smiled. “I’m not certain that I do. You’re a surprise every time I chance an encounter with you. Perhaps I should know by now to expect the unexpected.”

With a shrug, you took a sip of the tea. It was too hot, but you hid your wince with another smile. “So, do you think we will find anything in common with each other this time?”
“We shall see,” he said. “Do you have anything specific to offer in the effort to find common ground?”

Looking at him thoughtfully, you said, “I like having a simple but strong drink after a long day.”

Slowly, he nodded. “That, we do have in common.”

You snorted, feeling more relaxed and ready to share more ridiculous stuff. It was all a matter of how much time he had to waste because you felt like you could talk for days.

—

It turned out that, as you’d expected, you had few things in common with Uncle Scientia as a whole. But the few outliers —strong drinks, old music, a dislike for peas— were easy to appreciate. Even if they were kind of random and couldn’t be applied in any way to a working relationship.

Not that you were trying to form any kind of bond with this guy. He clearly wanted to, for whatever reason, and for Ignis’ sake, you were willing to play along. It seemed weird to you, though.

“Honestly, I’d be less confused if you said I wasn’t good enough for Ignis.”

Uncle Scientia frowned. “Whyever would I say such a thing?”

“Because.” You shrugged, not sure how to word anything you were thinking. “Isn’t that how it’s supposed to go? Young noble pursues a commoner and his guardian disapproves because, I dunno, she sometimes appears with a black eye for no reason?”

His expression remained confused. “I admit, I wasn't happy about my nephew’s decision at first. You appeared almost belligerently opposed to respecting any courtship rules. In retrospect, I know now that you both have an unorthodox way of conducting things, and if that’s what makes it work, I shan’t complain.”

That was a small relief to hear. It had always irked you that his uncle had seemed eager about you from the beginning. Good to know he hadn’t exactly liked you even though it wasn’t your fault Ignis hadn’t told you about the fake courtship until nearly two months into the lie.

“I admire your candor,” Uncle continued, face easing into a smile. “You’ll make a wonderful countess one day, I’ve no doubt.”

That startled a laugh out of you. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Uncle.”

“It’s quite alright.” He waved a hand dismissively. “I’m aware of my nephew’s intentions. Courtship leads to marriage, and with it, a family. Which is why I celebrate that he’s found you. A countess, a wife, a mother. I’m certain you’ll do splendidly in every aspect.”

Your smile froze, the weight of his words hitting you heavily. Implying that you’d marry Ignis was already one anxiety inducing thing. You could brush that aside because even Mom joked from time to time about when you were going to find someone to marry. To hear him say you’d be expected to become a parent was really unsettling and, honestly, uncalled for.

—

On your way to Noct’s quarters, following the half assed directions Prompto had texted you, you stressed about the turn your conversation had went into. You didn’t even know if you wanted kids. Did Ignis want kids or would he just be fulfilling another expectation by becoming a father? That’s
how bad parents were made, right? When people who didn’t want to be parents became parents.

Not that any of this mattered to you. Ignis had only just become special in your life. You may’ve liked him a lot, but there wasn’t a chance in hell you’d rearrange your life to accommodate a noble lifestyle.

In a perfect world, Ignis still liked you in a decade, when you imagined you’d actually want to get married. In a perfect world, you’d be a famous film director with many lovers. In a perfect world, Ignis would be the eye candy you brought to galas, and you’d be the powerhouse wife he needed to support him in his role as hand of the king. It was all fun to imagine, but none of it was real.

It was jarring, to say the least, that Ignis’ plan was backfiring so badly, and he wasn’t even aware. By saying he was courting you, now his uncle seemed to expect even more of him. Marriage and children? It was insane.

Ignis needed to tell his uncle the truth.

—

You were bombarded with questions from Gladio the moment you entered Noct’s quarters, which were somehow even larger than his apartment in the city.

“So how was the date? I heard he showed you his county.”

Noct groaned, and Gladio laughed.

“It’s not a euphemism,” he assured the prince. “Apparently Iggy lorded her around his constituents for an afternoon.”

You dropped down onto the couch between him and Prompto. To close the awkward and obvious distance they were putting between themselves. “Who says that?”

Gladio shrugged. “I’m just guessing because you won’t spill.”

“Alright.” You relaxed into the plush sofa. “Wanna hear a play by play?”

“Go for it,” Gladio said. On your other side, Prompto nodded in agreement.

Lifting your hands, you said, “Okay. Opening shot, Insomnia, early evening. Hard cut to me in my apartment as I answer my phone. I hear a sexy voice say ‘Get out of my dreams and into my car’ on the line. I go to my window. Parked on the street in a fancy car is—” You grinned at Gladio. “Your dad. He’s driving and Iggy is in the back seat, totally nude. Actually, they’re both nude and—”

“Hilarious,” Gladio interrupted. “I meant the real date. Not your sick fantasies. But if you don’t wanna tell us, fine. We’ll just ask Iggy about it when he gets here.”

That wasn’t a very strong threat. Ignis would be much harder to glean information from than you, and they knew it. With a small sigh, you put your feet on the coffee table, knocking lightly against a beer someone was drinking.

“There isn’t much to tell. We went for a walk and ate food. He did show me his county, but it wasn’t anything formal.”

Prompto had gotten every last detail after the date so he already knew the significance of everything and how much it had actually meant to you. So he was probably expecting you to say something
vague like this. You hated repeating yourself almost as much as you hated being told what to do.

Gladio seemed incredulous. “That’s it?”

“I mean, yeah. What else was supposed to happen?”

He scratched at his jaw. “Nothing. Just surprised Iggy’s holding back.”

Noct slumped further into the chair he sat in, attention buried in his phone. You felt much the same, not sure you wanted to talk about this with them. You’d told them detailed accounts of other trysts, but this was far different. Because it was Ignis, and you actually really liked him.

And that was the reason you felt the need to ask, “What do you mean holding back?”

Gladio shrugged, stretching out his arm along the back of the sofa. “He might’ve mentioned he’s been frustrated since that morning I caught you leaving his apartment. I thought he would’ve put the moves on you by now.”

Brief memories of having Ignis buried inside you, sweat slicked skin sliding against each other, and his teeth grazing your neck flashed in your mind.

“Nah, he’s a gentleman.”

Gladio let it go at that, clearly disappointed by your answers, and you were able to relish that you were in the prince’s quarters.

“Is this where you’ll live with Lunafreya after you get married?”

Noct shook his head, and as usual, Gladio filled in the space where Noct didn’t feel like talking to you about his love life. Whether it was because you were a girl or that you hadn’t known each other long enough, he just clammed up about Lunafreya in particular.

“They’ll live in a suite twice as big. Not far from here, though.”

Even bigger than this already huge room, you thought, peering up at the high ceilings. Being a noble really was a different lifestyle entirely.

—

The door down the hall opened quietly, disrupting the engaging conversation the guys had you in over who would win in a fist fight, you or Prompto —you and Noct both bet that you could take the blond. Ignis nodded at everyone as he passed you all and went into the kitchen. After a moment of hesitation, you got up and walked after him.

He stood in the kitchen, opening a cabinet for a short glass and another for a bottle of amber liquid. As he uncapped the bottle, you walked across the room to lean on the counter next to him. He didn’t seem surprised at your arrival, eyes flicking to you for a second while he poured himself a drink.

“How’d the thing go?”

Taking a drink from the glass, he winced a little, then looked at you. “I won.”

You touched his arm. “I knew you would.”

He sighed. “I almost wish I hadn’t. Mirum is right; that duke is reprehensible.” He placed a hand over yours. “But I know, should his invitation be retracted, we would lose his council vote. One that
we need to maintain our current schedule for the ceremony.”

His brows were furrowed when he looked down at you. Stress marked his face, and you hated it. You wished you had anything meaningful to say that would make him feel better, but you could barely follow political talk, let alone assure him of his own decisions. Hard choices had to be made sometimes, and this was one of those for Ignis.

“Come relax,” you said, hoping to get his mind off of it entirely. “They’ve been grilling me on our date. It’d be cool to have someone on my side.”

Lifting his hand to your cheek, a smile came to his face. “I’m always on your side.”

You knocked his hand away, blushing. “Gods, Ignis, stop.”

He chuckled and put away the alcohol. “You seem to enjoy it.”

Giving him a shove that did nothing, you went back into the other room. You weren’t going to stick around for his sincere and unsettling statements of fondness. Even if he was right.

—

Noct put on a movie, but all of you spent most of it talking. Because you were an unspoken barrier sitting between Prompto and Gladio, you were stuck on the couch away from Ignis who sat in his own chair. No one noticed your wistful glances at him, but occasionally, he’d give you a soft smile.

Your patience wore thin. Ignis was so far away. Like five feet. And there was a Prompto between you. It wasn’t fair. Digging into your pocket, you pulled out two items. Looking at Ignis, you asked, “Can I put this Li’l Malbuddy sticker on the compact?”

He rose a brow. “You do realize that is a token of my affection for you, correct?”

You nodded, smiling. In one hand was the mirror, and the other held the cute sticker.

“And you wish to cover it with a children’s cartoon character?”

Another nod and your smile grew.

He leaned forward in his seat, looking ready to stand. “For which I presume you paid a single gil in a gashapon at the supermarket?”

You snorted. “Actually I found it on the ground.”

His lips twitched with an almost smile. “I’ll not allow you to put such rubbish on the compact.”

“Wow, Iggy,” you said, slowly peeling the back off the sticker. “Looks like I’m doing it anyway. Because you’re not my boss.”

Ignis reached across the space, making Prompto sink back into the sofa cushions to get out of the way, and snatched the sticker from you. Swiftly, before you realized what he was doing, he put it on his shirt and sat back again.

He took a long drink of what was left in his glass of alcohol, keeping eye contact with you. On his fine shirt, the little malboro rested right next to the pocket at his chest. You frowned, putting away the compact and tearing your eyes from him.

You were tired of the distance, but he hadn’t even needed to get up to stop your admittedly bad plan
to get him out of that chair and closer to you. Whatever. It wasn’t like he knew how to read minds, and you were too embarrassed to say what you wanted in front of the others.

“Prompto,” you heard him say. Wow, so he wasn’t even going to talk to you. Just great. “How are the dance lessons faring?”

Next to you, Prompto said, “Great! We’re learning to waltz. Next, it’ll be the tango.”

From your other side, Gladio chuckled. “This I gotta see.”

But Prompto wasn’t right. The instructor had said you’d be learning something else hadn’t he? Unless you’d missed something, which you probably had. Every class seemed to be a back and forth between you and the instructor over who could flirt harder. It was kind of distracting. “I thought we were doing the foxtrot or something next? The tango is like super hard, dude.”

Prompto appeared just as confused. “But I heard Salvatore say he wanted to horizontal tango with you. You guys speak Altissian all class so I barely understand what he’s saying anyway. I just assumed…” His brows suddenly arched. “Oh.”

You elbowed him, then you elbowed Gladio when he snorted. Looking at Ignis, you found him watching you with a neutral expression. He couldn’t be taking this seriously, right? The dance instructor was fun to innocently flirt with, but you weren’t actually interested. Not that you and Ignis had ever agreed to be exclusive… You sighed, picking up Gladio’s glass of wine and taking a large drink. You ignored his protest, frowning into the glass once you’d emptied it.

“I’d like to see what you’ve learned,” Ignis spoke up. Bringing your eyes to him again, you found him standing up. With a stretch, he looked down at you. Then he reached down, offering you his hand. “I’m well versed in the waltz.”

You shook your head and didn’t take his hand, flustered at the thought of dancing with him in front of the others. It seemed oddly more intimate than you were comfortable with.

Prompto snickered, pushing you a little. “You’re one of the best in class. C’mon, dude.”

That was a lie. You were pretty mediocre. It was just Salvatore thinking you had a nice ass that kept him sending you compliments about your dancing during every lesson.

You looked to Noctis for help, but even he was smiling, pressing buttons on a remote that soon had music playing. You sent him a scowl. “Okay, whatever.” Taking Ignis’ hand, you stood up. “Try not to swoon when I dip you.”

Elbow up and hand on Ignis’ shoulder, you took the lead stance. He let you lead him into the steps, eyes never leaving yours. You were going to impress him, you decided. Because it was always there, that need, and you were going to entertain it just once in your life. Back and forth, side to side, it was easy. A smile broke across his face when you tried to twirl him.

Drawing him closer than the dance called for, you relished the feel of him. He smelled like coffee and ink, like his office. Loose strands of his hair fell over his forehead. His eyes ate at you. Time for that mother fucking dip, you thought. He was a great follower, shifting his weight with ease as your inexperienced movements spun you around the room.

Your hands on him tightened as you let him turn, falling back in your arms. For a second, it was perfect, his taller, larger form hanging off your arm. Then he actually did fall. Landing on his bottom, he let out a startled laugh when you were brought down with him. Sitting awkwardly on the floor, legs tangled with his, you laughed into his shirt.
“I don’t find myself swooning,” he said into your hair, smile in his voice.

You looked up at him ruefully. “It’s not my fault you don’t know how to displace your weight.” So much for impressing him. You affected a royal accent, mocking his earlier words. “I’m well versed in the waltz.”

His smile grew, a hand coming to the nape of your neck. “You’re so cheeky.”

“And you’re a show off,” you responded immediately, leaning into his touch.

Eyes lidded, he angled his head toward you, lips meeting yours in gentle motions. One of your hands grasped a suspender, pulling him closer. You’d wanted to do this all day. The sudden sound of loud booing made you jerk away, looking over at the others. You’d completely forgotten they were there, and by the blush gracing Ignis’ face, he had, too.

—

The book Ignis had lent you was surprisingly hard to put down. You’d not read anything aside from the occasional fanfiction and college textbooks for nearly a year now. So finding yourself absorbed into the tale of a totally average man who ends up traveling to bizarre parts of the universe, you were a bit surprised.

Also surprising was how this could possibly be one of Ignis’ favorite books. It was full of absolute nonsense and subtle mockeries of the government and its procedures. Him enjoying this was like laughing at himself. You told him as much when he met you for another date. It was your turn to choose a venue. Wanting to throw him for a loop, you’d invited him to the shooting range.

“In truth,” his voice drawled from behind you as you loaded. “I was most enraptured by the affair between Jillion and the King of the Universe. All the political intrigue and romance. It begins to pick up at chapter twenty. How far have you gotten, may I ask?”

“Chapter twenty eight,” you said, looking over your shoulder. He’d yet to get into his own alley. Rolled up in his hand was the target—a standard bullseye—and gun he’d chosen to try out. “I like that part of the plot, too. The King is my favorite. He’s a total moron, and Jillion is a genius. I don’t get why they’re together at all.”

Ignis was surprisingly quick to respond. “Jillion obviously craves adventure. The King offered her as much when he asked her to travel the universe with him.”

“Exactly,” you said, louder than you meant as you put on the ear protection. A small smile came to Ignis’ face, and you just knew you looked silly. “Why would someone so smart just randomly decide to leave with a stranger they only met at a party? I don’t care how charming the King is. It seems pretty dumb of Jillion.”

He tilted his head, eying you carefully before speaking. “I understand her sudden decision. There are times when charming strangers make you do things that seem unlikely of your character.”

That was a pointed statement. You turned away from him, readying yourself and taking aim. “I really liked the part where they broke up.”

He waited until you’d fired every round to speak. All of them hit the disturbing clown you’d picked out as your target. You were exceedingly proud of yourself, but when you looked back at Ignis, he was more focused on the conversation than your lame attempt at showing off. “Why is that?”

“Because…” You trailed off, uncertain. This book gave you more feelings than you wanted to share.
And you weren’t exactly throwing him off with this date as much as you’d liked. He’d taken it, like everything he did, in such graceful stride. Turning to him, you reloaded your handgun slowly. “Because the part I’m at— she’s saving the universe right now. Even though she dumped him, she said she still loves the King and wishes he was there to support her while she negotiated with the enemy. Until now, I kinda thought she’d end up with Average Guy, but I guess it’s the King. It was always the King. Even though they’re really different.”

He huffed a laugh, muted by your hearing protection. “I can’t say I disagree with the overall meaning.”

It wasn’t like you disagreed either. Opposites attracted, everyone knew that. It was just so explicit in the book, the way Jill longed for the King even though she knew he was terrible for her. She teleported out of his life for a reason. In fiction, emotions controlled even the most logical of minds. Looking at Ignis, you wondered if the same applied to real life.

“Are you gonna shoot or what?” you asked. It was a change of subject you desperately wanted. Plus, you were curious to see if he had any skill. You’d gotten better at aiming thanks to Mirum’s advice, and you wanted to see if you were better than he was. You had no idea what kind of Crownsguard skills he had in his repertoire. Obviously Prompto would’ve excelled in engineering and marksmanship had he decided to join, but Ignis’ skill was a mystery.

He blinked at your question, looking down at his occupied hands before meeting your gaze. “Yes, of course.”

He unrolled the target sheet and readied himself without the pageantry you were used to from Prompto. Every single shot hit the bullseye, and when he lowered his hearing protection, the ear muffs circling his neck loosely as he smirked, you couldn’t help the frown that cut your face. Gods, he was perfect. It was sickening, really.

—

He did seem mildly impressed by your shot, insisting you hold the target sheet up as he took a photo of you after leaving the range. It was a little dorky, but you pretended to be excited because he was pretending to be excited. At least you hoped he was pretending. He’d gotten used to applying your sense of humor to things, and this sort of thing really fit into your style of dry, immature wit.

So it was with a wry smile that you held up your creepy clown target, smiling as he took a picture with his phone. “Is this okay?” you asked, pouting your lips and pretending to kiss the clown. “Do I look cute?”

“Always,” he quipped, looking down at his phone without a care.

You stared at him, lowering your target sheet with slight annoyance. “Iggy, no.”

He chuckled, not even letting you see the picture. “Where are we going now?”

Rolling up the sheet and tucking it under an arm, you dug out your own device. You had to look up the directions to the next place. “A bar.” It was said by everyone on the internet to be a nostalgia bar with the best old fashioned drinks. It seemed right up Ignis’ alley. Except when you looked up in the face of his extended silence, you found him frowning at his phone.

“What’s up?”

Green eyes snapping up to you, he sighed. “I have to go back to the Citadel.”
“Now?”

He put his phone away, straightening himself and adjusting his glasses. “I’m afraid so.”

Your mood soured. A pout formed at your lips, and when he brought a hand up to touch your cheek, you tilted your head away in avoidance. Ignis had promised he had the time to spare. Why did he suddenly have to go back to work now at six in the evening on a Saturday?

“If you don’t wanna go to the bar, just say so,” you told him, trying to sound sullen rather than whiny.

His frown deepened, and he sighed again as he dropped his hand. “That’s not the case at all.”

“I just think it’s pretty convenient that you have to go now of all times.” You crossed your arms. The target sheet crumbled a little in your grip. You understood that he didn’t find life a constant party that required mind-altering substances to enjoy like you did, but it felt like he was running away.

A new look on his face—defensive and reprimanding—had him tilting his chin up just slightly. “There’s never a moment in which I’m not on duty. You should be well aware of that by now.”

You rolled your eyes. The atmosphere between you couldn’t have flipped harder in such a short amount of time. “Yeah, I’m totally aware that you’re obsessed with work and can’t stand doing things that I like to do.”

He took out his pocket watch, checking the time before turning it around in his hand as he leveled his gaze at you, brows furrowed in frustration. The smooth gold of it shone in the evening sunlight, drawing your attention.

“I don’t want to argue.” His voice was suddenly softer. “I also don’t want to go, but I must.”

Looking up at him from the golden timepiece still in his hand, you nodded. The realization that you might’ve been too immediately defensive hit you, and you blushed a little as you said, “Yeah, I understand.”

Along with his voice, his expression softened, and this time, you didn’t move when he cupped your cheek. “I’ll make it up to you.”

You shrugged, blush deepening. Gods, you’d just acted like a brat in front of him, and he wanted to make up for it? “Don’t worry about it, Iggy. Just go to work.”

In a swift movement, he planted a kiss to your forehead, then backed away. “Thank you, darling.”

“Yeah, yeah.” You waved him off, caught somewhere between sad that he had to go and embarrassed at your own behavior. “I know I’m great. I’ll call you tonight or something.”

When he set off in the opposite direction, you looked at your phone again and sighed. Realizing that you’d been acting childish didn’t negate the fact that you still felt annoyed at his quick departure. Following the directions to the bar, you set off yourself. It wasn’t like you needed him to go with you to have a good time.

—

You didn’t spend a single gil on a drink. Between a group of people out for a party that had taken a liking to you and the numerous others who’d given you hopeful looks throughout the night, you were thoroughly drunk and hadn’t gotten out your wallet once.
Prompto’s new job taking photos for a plant nursery was five blocks away, which would normally be quite a walk, but when you called to ask him to grab you on his way home, he all but insisted to walk you home. You nursed the last of a strong bourbon as you waited.

The walls of the bar were covered with sepia photos in antique frames. A particular photo of a man with a pipe and a cane had been the biggest focus of your attention the entire night. When Prompto arrived, the pipe-and-cane man seemed to be dancing dizzying circles.

“I thought you were on a date with Iggy tonight,” he said, wrapping one of your arms over his neck and lifting you up to your feet.

You waved at the pipe-and-cane man and various other people as you were taken out of the bar. “He bailed on me. Had work or somethin’.” The night air was muggy and clung to you. Prompto’s camera hang from a strap at his neck. You poked at it until he lightly smacked your hand away.

“C’mon, dude, why do you do this?”

You couldn’t focus on anything, body feeling heavy and world spinning delightfully around you. Prompto’s voice was an anchor, and you attached yourself to it as best as you could. “Do what?”

He sighed, stopping at a crosswalk and hitting the button. “Drink yourself to sleep.”

Your face scrunched up. “It’s fun.” You’d always done this, even before you’d met him. Why was he suddenly judging you over it now? All your friends were jerks, you decided. Ignis for leaving in the middle of your date and now Prompto for judging your choices. You were a grown ass woman, for Shiva’s sake.

——

It felt like a blink before you were already home. Your phone was ringing, incessant and loud. Prompto had put a blanket over you, but it was too damn hot so you threw it off as you searched for your phone.

“Hello?” You felt and sounded like hell, your voice scratchy and throat tight with dryness. Everything still spun so you laid back down, eyes trying to find a pattern in the white ceiling.

Ignis’ voice wasn’t so much harsh as it was firm. “Are you alright? Prompto said you couldn’t walk home.”

“He’s such a fuckin’ tattletale,” you whined.

“He’s only concerned. We all are.” Still firm, that voice. You didn’t like it.

“I’m sorry, okay?” You closed your eyes. “I needed it, Ignis. You— you ditched me.”

He inhaled deeply. Probably preparing to say some bullshit about how you didn’t take care of yourself. You knew him well enough by now. When he spoke again, though, it was a return of that gentle voice he used that made you feel guilty rather than spiteful. Damn him.

“I’d been hoping to make it up to you with dinner,” he said. “But I think we should hold off until you’re feeling better.”

Cracking your eyes open, you rolled over and looked at the flowering cactuar plush sitting in a chair across the room. “I really am sorry, Ignis. I didn’t think—”
“I know. Please rest. Goodnight.”

He hung up without waiting for a response. You dropped your phone to the floor, reaching for the blanket even though it was still too hot for it. Things were getting messy. This is why you couldn’t date people, least of all friends. What were you even doing with Ignis? You’d went on a couple of dates and now your personal choices were affecting him this much?

Normally, you’d be affronted. But you only felt sick. And it wasn’t just the abundance of liquor upsetting your stomach.

—

“Align your feet.” Salvatore prodded at a couple of dance students on the other side of the studio, who seemed to be trying their best. “Align them!”

Prompto fumbled a little, but you steadied him as he lead you in a foxtrot. Gods, it was boring.

“Don’t fall,” you whispered. “Or he’ll come over here and yell at us, too.”

“He wouldn’t yell at you,” Prompto said, turning you with surprising ease. “He’d take you away again, and I won’t learn anything.”

“Take me away?”

“Yeah. He’ll come over here and pretend to be teaching both of us,” he whined quietly. “But he’s just flirting with you the whole time.”

“Maybe he’s flirting with you,” you joked. “He probably tightens his buns when you watch him dance with me.”

“Yeah, right. He—” Prompto paused when you both took another wide turn, and Salvatore was standing near, eyes following your movements.

“So glad to see your feet are in sync,” he said with an approving nod. “Yet, if I may steal your partner, I’d like to demonstrate the proper pacing.”

“Sweet.” You let go of Prompto and patted Salvatore on the back as you walked toward a water fountain. He seemed confused, but you brushed it off. If Prompto wanted to learn, here was his chance. “I needed a break anyway.”

Standing near a wall and stretching idly, you watched as the instructor guided Prompto across the room.

“Slow, now quick!” Salvatore grew louder with each step. Prompto glared at you over the instructor's shoulder, and you hid giggles behind a hand. The class had been free, but at this point, you would’ve paid anything to see Prompto looking so helpless and flustered.

—

Squeezed into a, by your standards, modest dress, you walked out of the dressing room to find Prompto standing in front of three mirrors. He kept picking at things — the tie, the pockets, the cuffs — and shifting uncomfortably.

“Dude, you look awesome,” you said, coming up beside him. “And we match.”

The color of the bowtie he’d picked was the same shade as the dress you’d liked. He huffed a light
laugh, finally relaxing. “I know, right? With the lessons and these getups, the nobles won’t realize a
couple of commoners are crashing Noct’s wedding.”

You elbowed him. “I don’t think it’s considered crashing if you’re the best man.”

“I know, but—” He rubbed at his neck. “It’s just. I mean. Yeah.”

You got it. You really did. There had been a lot of times in the short time you’d gotten to know
Noctis and the others that you’d wondered what you’d done to get so lucky. When would they
realize you were a fraud and stop being your friends? To you, those thoughts were fleeting. To
Prompto, they clung like leeches, coloring his sunny disposition into indifference and self doubt on
the worst of days.

“We’re gonna be fresh as fuck at the wedding,” you assured him, giving his arm a gentle squeeze.
The price tag on the dress made you pale a bit, but it wasn’t like you were going to use your
internship funds any other way.

“I’m glad we match.” He posed with you in the mirror, and the proprietor of the boutique probably
thought you were two teens getting ready for a dance. “And I’m happy you’re coming. When Noct
said he was gonna get married in Accordo, I thought about that time you said your dream was to go
there. It’s kinda dumb, I know, but I’m glad I could help make it happen.”

Looking at his warm cornflower eyes, you were dangerously close to admitting you loved him. He
already knew, despite your lack of ever telling him, so the point was moot. But still. You wrapped
him in a one armed hug he didn’t return because he didn’t expect it.

Then, you went back to the dressing room to change and gather up all of your warm feelings of
friendship before they spilled out everywhere, ruining all of the fancy couture gowns that filled the
place.

—

You’re going where?

Mom was awkwardly close to her computer’s camera, but you could still read her hand signs. You’d
specifically cleaned one part of your apartment to act as the backdrop of the video call, not giving her
any clues to the chaos that reigned outside of her line of sight. That had made the conversation easy
so far, skipping all the usual reprimands from her about keeping a clean house. Until now that she’d
found something even better to be worried over.

To Accordo. For a few days at the end of the month. You signed slowly, hoping her internet
connection wasn’t choppy. Typing would’ve been easier, but she liked when you put in the effort to
speak face to face. You rarely talked to her as it was so this bit of effort would hopefully appease
her. One of my friends is getting married.

Slowly, she nodded. Which friend?

Shit. As much as you wanted to, you couldn’t disclose this. You’d signed papers about it and
everything. Thinking quickly, you gave her the same fake name Noctis had told that fisherman
during spring break in Galdin. Noct Gar. He’s marrying someone from abroad.

She accepted that easily, but it didn’t hold back the tide of questions. Where and when are you
leaving, exactly? Want me to see you off in Galdin? Will your friend Ignis be going, too?

You answered them one by one, becoming more annoyed by the moment. She could tell, too, as
moms did, and she didn’t care. You noticed she hadn’t fingerspelled Ignis’ name. She used the signs for serious and glasses. Even though it was kind of sweet, you didn’t like the idea that Mom would give him his own name sign after only meeting him once. Those kinds of things were reserved for good friends.

You refused to do the same, spelling out his name when you answered. Yes, Ignis will be there. All my friends are going.

Is he your date?

Your brows arched, and you shook your head a bit too quickly, a bit too roughly. No way. Prompto is my date.

She scrutinized you. How many boyfriends do you have?

None! You couldn’t believe she was even assuming this much. We’re all just friends.

Her expression softened, a mixture of confusion and curiosity. You’re just friends with Ignis?

You nodded. Far from being the truth, it was still the easiest thing to tell her. Because you didn’t know what, if anything, you were with Ignis, and even if you did have something official going on, Mom would’ve been the last to get the juicy details.

—

It was all much more complicated than you would’ve liked. You were, just to put the facts straight, definitely dating Ignis. But you didn’t talk to him every day, and it had been a while since you’d last seen him.

So, really, you shouldn’t have let Mom’s nosiness get to you. Ignis was just a person that you liked who, for whatever reason, liked you in return. Sometimes you got along, and other times he made you feel like your body existed for the sole purpose of having him against it. Mostly, you confused each other.

You’d moved the flowering cactuar to sit next to you on the couch so you didn’t feel like you were alone while watching movies or finishing the book you’d borrowed. Until now, you’d never had a second thought about being alone or considered yourself lonely. That in itself was frustrating and confusing.

Your thoughts were interrupted by Aranea coming into your apartment with a loud, “I’m back!”

Dropping the book you’d been failing to focus on, you looked up just in time to see Aranea grin as she leaned on the back of the couch.

“Hey, how was your trip?”

“Great,” she said dryly, rounding the couch to sit in the only armchair you had. “I paid my boss a visit. He’s a pain in the ass. I’m glad to be home.”

Weird that she considered this home, but you weren’t going to say anything. You were embarrassed to admit, even to yourself, that you were immensely glad she was back. You couldn’t possibly be alone now with the constant threat of Aranea coming up for an unannounced visit.

She nodded at the plush sitting next to you. “That’s cute. Did your boyfriend get it for you?”
The smile on your face waned. “Who?”

She eyed you, and you knew she could tell you were growing tense. “That hot nerd from the Citadel. Four eyes.”

You looked from her to the cactuar and back. “Yeah, he did. But he’s not my boyfriend.”

She smirked, leaning back and snapping her fingers. “Oh, that’s right. He’s courting you, right? Pretty big deal, kid.”

You covered your face with your hands. What the everloving fuck was going on? You’d rather have been alone than deal with this. Groaning rather than saying anything in particular, you kicked at her. She chuckled, and you lowered your hands to give her a glare.

“I’m gonna tell Prompto that you want his hot little body,” you threatened. “He’ll be around all the time just like he was when I first moved in, and it’ll drive you nuts.”

With a laugh, she was standing up and slapping you on the shoulder as she walked past. “Chill, kid. I get it.”

The rest of the night was spent catching up and reining her in from eating everything in your kitchen because she’d yet to restock her own. Despite the bullshit, you’d missed her.

—

Tan, sweatslicked, and bare, Salvatore’s chest brushed your shoulder as he leaned against the wall, hand resting next to your head. It was easy playing the part of ingenue. He thought you were sophisticated so he wanted you. He thought you were unwitting so he was confident in his chances. You just liked to have fun.

“You are beautiful like a flower,” he spoke in low Altissian.

Fighting a laugh —because fuck yeah, this guy’s flirting had only grown stronger and worse with every lesson— you smiled and placed a finger against that sweaty chest.

“I’m more like a cactus.”

And you were. Prickly, hard to reach, and tough. Or at least you’d liked to think so.

Salvatore’s eyes lit up, flicking from the finger on his chest to your face. “Did you know,” he said, switching to Lucian, but lowering his voice. “That the cactus is contradictory? In some cultures, it represents chastity and purity. In others, it means sexual desire. Tell me.” His voice was almost a whisper, and you knew that tactic. That trick flirty people used to get their prey to grow closer. But you weren’t prey, and he was far from being a predator. So it wouldn’t work. “Which one are you, mia cara?”

Awesome. This guy seriously thought the world of himself. You could see, over his shoulder, Prompto drinking water across the room. Long used to the instructor’s attention toward you, he shook his head and looked away with a smile when you lifted a hand to wave at him.

“I would like to find out,” Salvatore said, regaining your attention. “On Friday, I want to take you somewhere to show off everything I’ve taught you. What do you think?”

Slowly lowering your hand, you considered the sudden offer. It was your last lesson so you’d never
see this guy again. It’d been fun flirting with him, and he was hot as hell, but it didn’t feel okay saying yes.

So you lidded your eyes, looking at him through your lashes. “I’ll think about it.”

For whatever reason, typical of people like him, he took that as a yes. He leaned toward you, eyes falling shut and you quickly ducked, circling around him in time to see him hit his face into the wall. With a quiet Altissian expletive, he turned to you and quickly played it off.

“You are quite elusive. I hope to hear from you by Friday. You have my number.”

You nodded, backing toward Prompto and your stuff. “Totally. It’s been really real, Sal.”

—

“What the hell was that?”

Usually, at this hour in the early evening, you and Prompto would be walking to work at the theater. Now you were ambling away from the dance studio for the last time toward nowhere in particular.

You shrugged. “I dunno. He’s a real charmer, that guy.”

Prompto snickered. “Yeah. Wish I’d gotten a picture of his last move falling flat.”

The early summer day brought breeze after breeze that you silently appreciated. It cooled the sweat on your neck from class and in the corner of your eye, you caught Prompto give a quiet shiver. He really needed to wear sleeves at least sometimes.

“Is Iggy cool with that?”

You bumped his shoulder with yours. “With what?”

“With Salvatore,” he said. “And the weird flirting?”

Again, you shrugged. “Other than your doofus slipup that one time, he doesn’t know anything about it. It’s not like I tell him everything that happens every second.”

He frowned. “Isn’t Iggy your boyfriend?”

Quick as a whip, your eyes snapped to him. “Huh?”

He stared at you in equal measure. “Dude. You go on dates and make us suffer through your obnoxious flirting. He’s totally your boyfriend.”

Your stomach curled inward. “Obnoxious?” You hadn’t so much as spoken to him in days. Prompto posted a picture on binstagram of a gladiolus flower just the day before. All he’d put in the caption was a heart as if none of you were supposed to catch on to his apparent interest in your mutual friend. And he had the audacity to call you obnoxious?

His turn to shrug, he grinned at you. “Not really obnoxious, but… weird?”

Furrowing your brows, you scoffed. Ignis wasn’t your boyfriend. You guys weren’t obnoxious. If they wanted obnoxious, you could definitely do obnoxious, but you wouldn’t. Because Ignis wasn’t your fucking boyfriend.

Was he?
Please list any drug allergies.

You looked at the form, the stale air of the doctor’s waiting room surrounding you in an uncomfortable blanket. Someone coughed three chairs away. You wrote “none” and wished the nurses would hurry up and call your name.

Please list any current medications.

For a moment, you jokingly thought to put “anything/everything” but you thought the doc wouldn’t think that was very funny. Complications while trying to get your travel immunizations was the last thing you wanted. You wrote “none” even though you were currently carrying several drugs you planned to ingest at some point in the week.

Are you pregnant or breastfeeding?

Without hesitation, without jokes, you wrote “no”. By far the least of your concerns was pregnancy. You’d never—

Oh, yeah.

You frowned at the question. But you’d been safe anyway. You were taking the pill. With a last glance at the question, you went back to the last one and scratched out “none” and wrote “birth control”.

Nice, good. You nodded at it before moving on. You were a Responsible Adult™ who knew exactly what they were doing.

—

You went home with a sore arm and the travel vaccine paperwork you needed to give Ignis. It had been almost a week since he had last spoken to you. He was really busy, according to the other guys. But you weren’t fully buying it. Even at his busiest, he’d talked to you from time to time when you were merely friends. Now you were more and being far too busy was somehow a problem?

A simple hi would’ve set you at ease. He couldn’t still be mad that you’d gotten drunk without him.

Sitting on your balcony, enjoying the muggy weather in an odd way with how it made your hair wild and skin shine, you touched your tender arm. Prompto had gotten his shots soon after the meeting because he worried he’d forget altogether. He’d told you his had been done on his butt so you wondered how you’d gotten so lucky.

Your luck was usually terrible.

—

Someone was crying. It was soft and pitiful and had you walking down long, unfamiliar hallways in search of its source.

As you stopped to look at the photographs on the walls, the blurry, senseless figures greeting you within each frame, the cry became a wail. You felt like you should know who was in these photographs. You felt like some of them were of you.

The crying stretched into long rips of air, and you rushed past the photos without further glance.
Someone was hurting and you were letting them suffer. It was your job to make sure they were okay. You were their—

You ran into a door. Your hand finding the knob, you pushed at the wooden surface, meeting strong resistance. You needed to get in there! Shoving against it, you could hear the wails coming from the other room. They needed you! They were your—

With one last forceful push against the door, you were abruptly awoken from your dream as you rolled out of bed, slamming onto the floor. Staring at the ceiling, a biting pain at the back of your head and the elbow that had gotten caught on your nightstand in the fall, you felt sick.

When you’d filled out the doctor’s form, you hadn’t considered that you were late. By a week. But you’d been late before. Because of stress. Because of what you chose to ingest sometimes. Because hormones were funny, fickle things.

That dream had to be the result of the taco you had right before bed. Okay, you’d had three tacos and no regrets.

Getting up, you got dressed. Better to be safe than sorry. You could cut this off before it became something terrible. A baby with Ignis? You were barely a functioning human, and he would probably faint if you had to give him that kind of news.

—

You grabbed condoms along with the pregnancy test, uncaring of the cashier’s curious expression. Yes, yes, these two items would usually render each other pointless. You were completely aware.

Being that close to Ignis had been amazing. You weren’t sure if it was because of him, specifically, or if sex with absolutely nothing between you and your partner was just better. You’d never know! You weren’t going to do that again. You grumbled a thanks as you took the bag and hurried home.

Your luck really was terrible, and you hoped this was the one time the gods would be like lol jk bitch and let you off easy.

—

While you waited for the results, you sat on the edge of your tub, feet tapping against the tile. You would celebrate with another taco or something when you got the answer. Because you knew it was going to be negative. It was definitely going to be negative. This was so dumb.

Negative.

You looked at the test, surprised at your own surprise —maybe you had been expecting the worst despite how you assured yourself— and screamed in joy. It was three in the morning, you were tired, and you were not expecting. Absolutely zero babies in your future. Just to be safe, you decided to take the second test. You’d rather be sure, and you didn’t want to have the unused test laying around in your bathroom ready to be spotted by Prompto the next time he came over.

You accidentally peed on your hand when you heard your front door slam open. While you cursed quietly, grimacing at the situation you were finding yourself in, you heard Aranea call out.

“Are you okay?”

Had you screamed that loudly? By the time she burst into your bathroom, you were washing your hands and shooting a tired look at her over your shoulder.
“I’m alive.”

She leaned in the doorway, calming at the sight of you. “I should get the locks changed.”

You threw the spent test into the trash. “Yeah, probably. Sorry to disturb you.”

Sharp as ever, her eyes honed in on the remaining test sitting on the sink. “Oh, kid.”

Your eyes widened and you rose your hands. “No! Nope, I just had a nightmare. It’s paranoia. That’s all.”

“You’re smarter than this,” she said, walking further in and slapping you lightly on the arm.

You blinked at her. “Am I, though?” You weren’t so sure anymore.

She looked down at the test and smirked. “Looks like it. Congrats.”

You looked down at it quickly. *Negative*. You’d never felt such relief. Leaning on the sink, you threw the test away and laughed. “Is it bad that I’m super happy right now? I mean, I knew I was being stupid in thinking I could be, but still.”

“Everybody’s been there.” She walked out of the bathroom. “Want to get breakfast to celebrate? My treat.”

You followed her out, giving her an incredulous look as if you hadn’t just been planning to make early morning tacos. “Breakfast? Now?”

She shrugged, laughing a little. “Hey, *you* woke me up. The least you could do is keep me company. Come on.”

——

The diner she took you to was lit brightly by overhead lights, disturbingly clean, and completely dead. The single server walked slowly about the place, offering you refills of coffee occasionally even though you hadn’t ordered any in the first place.

Aranea listened to you ramble about your nightmare and the ensuing thoughts that had led to her finding you in the bathroom. When you stopped to take a breath, she smirked, looking down at her plate. “You don’t think you might be trying to find a way to jump ship with Four Eyes?”

“There’s not a ship to jump from.”

She tilted her head, taking a bite of food. “If there was even the slightest chance of a baby, there’s definitely a ship.”

With a frown, you put your fork down. “You know me, I like being alone. There’s no ship.”

She shook her head, eyes still focused on her food, smirk still on her face. “You have a romanticized idea of what it’s like to be single.”

Touching your glass, the perspiration making your fingers slide down the plastic, you sighed. “I know exactly what it’s like to be single, Aranea.”

She looked up, she smirk growing. “If it feels right, why put so much effort into fighting it? Being a kept woman can be fun.”
You snorted. “Oh, yeah? What do you how about that?”

She wasn’t going to tell you, her smirk breaking into an actual smile as she laughed. With another shake of her head, she went back to eating.

“So it was really Prompto’s, right?”

You stared at her blankly, then fought back a smile. “Yep.”

She nodded, brows raising as her smile only seemed to grow. “I didn’t know he had it in him. He’d be a fun dad. Why don’t you give it another shot?”

You ate a bite of food, staring her down and swallowing before saying, “Thanks, we’ll be sure to name it after you.”

—

Ignis had said you’d talk when you’re feeling better, whatever that had meant. You’d experienced several hangovers since that one, and you hadn’t heard anything from him. He’d come at you so hard and so fast with the eloquent, romantic blather in the beginning that you couldn’t believe you were the one to give in and reach out first.

You looked at his contact in your phone with an annoyed grimace, pressing the “call” button with a bit of exaggerated force. You were a grown ass woman, as you’d thought many times over recently, and you knew what you wanted. No amount of stubborn pettiness on part of one particular nobleman would stop you from talking with him.

He answered on four rings. So damn busy, you thought, rolling your eyes as he said “Hello?” like he didn’t know exactly who was calling him. Maybe he didn’t. A quick, fearful thought came to your mind that he’d deleted your contact. Then another came, making you reel back at your own quick assumption. All of this was dumb.

“Darling?”

His voice brought you to the present, immediately killing your worries at his use of the pet name.

“Uh, hey. So I was looking at a map and saw that the exact midpoint between my house and the Citadel is that big, busy four way between Occidens and Third. Would you wanna meet there in twenty minutes?”

He didn’t respond immediately. To be fair, it was a sudden request, but you were antsy. This would either scare him away, or he’d play along. You never could tell which one it would be.

“Why?”

Well, that was some solid middle ground. Confusion seemed to be where you both sat in this relationship most times, anyway.

“Because I haven’t seen you in a while, and I really wanna kiss you.” You knew what you wanted, and you damn well were going to get it. “C’mon, Iggy, it’s not like I’m asking you to tour the galaxy with me.”

“So you finished the book,” his voice drawled through the line. There was a pause, long enough that you wondered if he was going to turn you down. Then, he startled you with a sudden suggestion of his own. “What would you say to meeting me there with an overnight bag? I’ve been exceedingly
busy since we last spoke; I haven’t been given the chance to return to my flat. It may be a bit presumptuous of me, but I believe we could both benefit from you staying in my dreary quarters for a short while.”

That took you by surprise. Ignis didn’t seem the type to suggest things like this. Maybe he’d missed you as much as you’d missed him.

“Like some kind of degrading, live-in sex kitten?”

He wavered, and it was no small amount of cute the way his tone changed from a flirty uncertainty to an embarrassed hesitance. “Kitten? Ah, no. That’s not at all what I meant.”

You sighed wistfully. “Oh, well, that’s disappointing. It’s been a dream of mine to lay around a noble’s house, waiting to be ravaged the moment he gets home. Letting out all of that pent up frustration that comes with such a taxing job…”

He chuckled, and it was heady. “Have I ever mentioned how incorrigible you are?”

You took that as a yes.

—

You leaned on the signpost for Occidens and Third with absolutely zero grace. It was going to look like Ignis was picking up a prostitute. You wished you had a cigarette or something to toss out when he finally did show up, stopping at the corner in his fancy car.

You kissed him as soon as you’d hopped in, door closed and seatbelt not yet clasped. It was hungry, and he seemed surprised, returning it with gentle earnest.

“I missed you,” you said plainly, buckling in as he circled back toward the Citadel.

He had a light blush on his cheeks, only made apparent by the occasional bright streetlamp. “And I, you.”

You couldn’t help the grin that came to you as you went through the city. For better or worse, you were going to sort things out with him tonight.

—

The security, as expected, was adamantine. You were glad you hadn’t been foolish enough to bring anything illegal. No drugs, nothing to embarrass Ignis over. All you had on you were your vitamins. He seemed almost surprised, but you let it pass without comment. You were beginning to accept that he would always bear small judgments like this over you.

Once in his quarters, which were exactly as dreary as he’d said and you’d anticipated, you noticed something interesting. Not bad, just interesting. Unexpected, mostly. Two coffee cups sat on the coffee table in his living space. One of them had bright red lip marks on it. You picked them both up, smiling at Ignis as he came back from dropping off your bag in the bedroom.

“I had a visitor earlier in the day,” he explained, taking them from you. “I came directly from my office when I picked you up so I hadn’t had the chance to tidy things. Apologies for the mess.”

“That's okay,” you said, following him to his small kitchen. His living quarters here were about the same size as your apartment. It was kind of a relief, even though you knew his actual home in the city was much larger. You pointed at the lipstick stained mug and snickered. “I’m glad you wore
your sexy, red, teatime lipstick to impress your guest.”

He seemed surprised for a moment before a smirk played at his lips. “You know how I aim to please.”

—

As he cleaned up, you wandered about his place. Everything was just about as you’d expected, though you were only breaching the surface. He was drying his hands from when you found him in the kitchen. He looked at you with an easy smile, and it was almost as if your small argument hadn’t happened. He seemed ready to say something, but you took the opportunity first.

“Someone asked me out,” you blurted, immediately halting as your eyes widened and you realized it had been on the tip of your tongue from the moment you’d seen him.

He tensed. You hated that. He didn’t think you could tell, raising a hand to adjust the glasses that were already perfectly in place. “The dance instructor?”

“Yeah,” you said lamely. “He wants to take me somewhere. To dance, I guess.”

With a curt hum, he turned away from you and busied himself with putting away dishes that were already clean. “He seems rather single minded, caring only about dancing.”

“I thought so, too,” you admitted before biting your lip.

Ignis finished his ministrations, closing the cabinets and turning to you carefully. His gaze raked over you, serious and thoughtful. “I can’t stop you from meeting that man, but I have to admit,” he said with raised brows and slight trepidation. “I don’t care one bit for the idea. He seems ill-fitting and unacceptable. Does he even know how wonderful you—”

You cut him off, raising a hand and covering his mouth with your fingers. His eyes widened, and you shook your head slowly. Sliding your hand to his jaw, brushing your thumb over his cheek, you tried for something softer, something he would do. It was the only way you thought he’d get it. You weren’t sure you could articulate how you felt, and you really needed him to understand.

You rose on your toes, lifting the other hand to cup his face. Then you pressed a kiss to his lips that he met gently. His arms encircled you, and within seconds, you were melting under the teasing direction of his tongue. You’d missed this. It had only been a week, and you felt like you could devour him from how much you’d missed him.

You sat in that discomforting place, forcing yourself to get used to the idea that you might actually need him. That you might actually deserve him.

Drawing away, you met his gaze. It was penetrating and intense, just as you’d feared, but you met it fully and didn’t back down. He’d made his intentions clear, and you couldn’t help but agree with what Aranea had said.

It was disquieting, but it felt right. There was a reason you were okay doing things with Ignis that you’d never imagine with someone else. You didn’t understand it, but you weren’t sure you needed to.

If it was Ignis, being a kept woman didn’t seem so bad.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for reading and putting up with my overly long chapter titles. I do a little dance of excitement every time I read the comments, so thanks guys for being the best! It warms my heart that people have binged this and that there are so many of you who have stuck around from early on. All of the words of encouragement have helped this self indulgent peacetime AU become so much fun write, and I'm glad to share this nonsense with you. <3
You should be kissed and often, and by someone who knows how.

Chapter Notes

Warning for domestic fluff and a very brief nsfw moment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ignis got up at ungodly hours. He left for his office at six. At five thirty, he woke up for a shower, which you, on the very first morning, had enough energy to join him for. Then it was back to bed, not even the smell of coffee being strong enough to keep you awake after a surprising bout of wet, maybe just a little awkward, rattling the shower door while he held you against cold tile, morning sex.

In the silence of his quarters at half past ten, you stretched from his comfy bed and set out to inspect every inch of his palace residence. If he knew you at all, he expected you to nose about. You had enough curiosity to kill a village of cats.

Like his apartment in the city, he didn’t have a television, but he did have a very impressive stereo system. It was, like most things about Ignis thus far, a nice surprise. You connected it to your phone, playing music while you explored the rest of the place.

Books all over. Not as many as he had in his home in the city, but enough to cover an entire wall. You looked at them appreciatively, wondering which one he’d recommend to you next. The first had been great, despite your reservations, and he had your complete trust in this matter now. You rarely had time to read entire books these days, but if Ignis Scientia said it was good, you were damn well willing to give it a chance.

His bathroom consisted of the most basic things. You found his cologne, a woody, musky scent that you’d smelled many times over. Looking at the grenade-shaped bottle with a bit of curiosity, you sprayed a bit on your arm. Definitely Ignis. He used this every day? It was spicier than you were used to, but the coffee and other lingering scents on him must’ve negated that most of the time.

The fact that it came from a grenade-shaped bottle amused you. Every bit of him was laced with small, facetious bits that you didn’t think many people noticed. His belt was a big one, catching your eye with its skull design more than once. His little necklace, too. You wondered if the little skull themes were just silly allowances that the Crownguard made for their highest officers, or if all of the prince’s entourage were made to be goths by design.

—

While you were sitting at Ignis’ kitchen table, editing some random bits of audio of him from your rejected movie, he texted you.

Ignis: Are you listening to “Insomnia Love” at the moment?

You gaped, looking at the message for a second before saying anything in reply.

You: How did you know?
Ignis: I recently received a complaint that people have heard “Insomnia knows how to party” from my quarters for the last quarter of an hour.

You: I turned it down just now. Sorry, babe.

Ignis: Oh, my. I’ve graduated from dude to babe.

You: Yep, you’ve been promoted.

Ignis: What are you doing to pass the time? I hope you don’t find it terribly boring.

You: Going through your stuff. Putting on a fashion show with all your clothes. Pretty fun.

Ignis: I’m returning early to work from there. I suddenly feel the need to be near you.

—

He came down with an armload of paperwork and lunch, which he said he was used to taking in his office or, you suspected, skipping altogether. You were excited to influence him so heavily that he ditched his office and, presumably, the convenience of his assistant’s help.

Before eating, you pointed at your laptop that still sat on the table. “I’ve got something to show you.”

He set the food down, giving you a curious look.

“You’re gonna hate it,” you warned with a grin.

He nodded reluctantly. “Let’s hear it, then.”

You pressed a key on the keyboard, and it began. In choppy, edited bits of Ignis’ voice, a stream of audio sounding much like “Put your pussy in my face” emanated from the laptop. Then a laughing track.

He looked at you flatly. “Why have you done this?”

Stifling a laugh, you looked at the screen. “Because it’s great. The laughing track was Noct’s idea.”

He sighed. “Of course you shared this with the others.”

“Of course.”

You played it again and laughed when he immediately left the room. You were surprised when he returned minutes later and spent the entirety of his lunch break kissing you thoroughly rather than sulking about the place or working. Even at the expense of himself, that dork liked your antics.

—

Ignis handed you a letter from his pile of documents. Formal and official-looking, it crinkled in your hands as you unfolded it.

You looked from the words to his face. “What’s this?”

He shuffled a few papers around. “A request. The teacher from my district we spoke with at the park would like you to lead a lesson in Altissian.”

With a frown, you read over the letter. “Why are you shirking your duties off on me?”
As if he expected this response, he said, “You’re much better with children than I am.” Then he began to organize the documents and take out his laptop. He was seriously going to do some work here, and it seemed like a lot of trouble just to be close to you. He looked up in the face of your silence, adding, “And I thought it a good way to uphold the image that I’m courting you.”


He reached across the table, touching your hand. “If you don’t wish to, just say so. I should have asked before volunteering you.”

You rolled your eyes. “I can handle an hour in a classroom. I’m just surprised you’re trusting me with this.”

A soft smile came to him. “You’ll do splendidly.”

Bringing your attention to your own computer, you sat in the quiet of the quarters, enjoying his presence as you worked on a lesson plan. The letter suggested you tell a story to the kids in Altissian. You decided to write a remake of that obscure chocobo maiden tale Talcott had shown you. With the occasional peek at Ignis over your laptop screen, you bit back a smile.

The ending as you imagined it, changed as you wrote the tale, the maiden choosing love this time.

The best part of being a mostly joking but you were kinda into it sex kitten was all the tiny details of his life you’d never gotten to see before.

Walking into the bathroom at a quarter to six in the morning, you found him shaving, hair pulled back by pins. The bathroom was lit in purple thanks to an interesting bulb in one of the overhead lamps, and that fact alone made the moment surreal when he turned to you with half of his face covered in foam.

“Good morning,” he said, returning to the task at hand with eyes focused on himself in the mirror. His shirt was open, and he wasn’t wearing trousers. It was some freaky in-between side of him that had you leaning on the doorframe and staring.

“Morning,” you murmured, voice heavy with sleep.

Green eyes flitted to you a few times in a curious side glance. “I’m surprised to see you up.”

“You and me both,” you said, clearing your throat. “I don’t smell coffee this morning. Want me to make some?”

Finishing up, he wiped at his face with a towel. “I’ll just take an Ebony on my way out.” He grabbed something from a cabinet, patting it on his face. He froze when you reached up to touch his jaw, fingers brushing the soft skin delicately.

Huh.

He gave you an amused look, eyes dancing. “You seem rather fascinated.”

Dropping your hand, you shrugged. “I’ve never seen a man shave his face. Is that weird?”

He took out the pins, his hair a tousled mess before he began to expertly bring it to its normal ‘do.
“Not particularly. I have to say, though,” he paused, giving you another side glance. “I’m feeling bashful under your gaze.”

You snorted. “Don’t mind me. I just wanna see how the magic happens. It’s like a slow motion magical girl transformation.”

“Should I do a spin?”

“It might help,” you laughed.

He looked at you wryly. “You’re in a good mood this morning. Sleep well?”

You had. Sleeping with him wasn’t as aggravating as your past experiences sharing beds with others.

You followed him from the bathroom to the bedroom where he finished getting dressed. You sat on the foot of the bed and watched him. In the yellow light of the room, you could faintly see the blush on his face at your open curiosity.

“Do I talk in my sleep?”

He looked at you over his shoulder for a second, taking something from his closet. “No, but you kick.”

Laying back on the bed, you frowned at the ceiling. “Nuh-uh. No one’s ever told me that.”

“Prompto had mentioned it in Galdin more than once.”

Had he? You wracked your brain for any memory of that but came up with nothing. “Nuh-uh,” you repeated intelligently.

Ignis huffed a quiet laugh. “I believe your kicking and Noct’s snoring are the reasons he would migrate to the other bed with me and Gladio in the middle of the night.”

A lopsided grin crossed your face, and you shot up into a seated position. “Are you sure about—”

At Ignis’ calves were things. Weird things that held up his socks. “What the hell are those?” You pointed, face growing hot for reasons you couldn’t even begin to understand.

“Sock garters,” he said simply as he tugged dark trousers up his long legs.

You found yourself staring again, and he returned it as he buttoned up his shirt, tucking it in and reaching for his belt.

“Do you always wear those?” Your voice rose a little. You’d never seen him get dressed before. It had always been while you were asleep.

“Every day, yes.” He cinched the belt’s clasp, dropping his hands to his sides as he looked down at you. “You hate them.”

“Yeah, they’re weird,” you mumbled, bringing a hand up to your face to cover your eyes.

A gentle hand pried yours away, and you looked up to see him smiling, teeth and all. “Weird in the same way that you’d told me I’d looked weird that morning in Galdin?”

You blinked, wondering where that had come from. “You’ll have to be more specific.”
“Gladio and I had accidentally woken you before his morning run.” He leaned down, nose skimming yours. “You’d said I looked weird and proceeded to act very strange around me for the remainder of that day.”

Oh, right. The first time you’d seen him with his hair down. The first time you’d realized how soft he could actually be. “Yeah. Weird like that.”

Fingers trailed up your neck, lifting your chin. His breath ghosted over your lips, and you were beginning to think you should’ve stayed in bed.

“If that’s so, should I expect you to avoid me all day?” His smile had become a smirk, making you feel like he was playing with you as a cat would a mouse. He didn’t have his usual spicy, coffee scent; the soft, subtle smell of sandalwood invaded your senses at his proximity. Must’ve been his aftershave. “I must say your flustered reactions to me in Galdin back then had been quite charming. I’m not so certain I have the same level of patience now.”

He was just guessing, you thought, eyes searching his. There was no way he could’ve figured out how your attraction to him had really pulled at you during your time in Galdin. That entire trip had been one confusing moment after another. You gave him a quick peck on the lips, grinning at him and refusing to fall for his bluff.

It startled a laugh out of him, and he stretched to his full height with a wry smile. “Enough distractions. I mustn’t tarry any longer.”

You pouted. “Can’t you just tell Noctis and whoever else that you’ll be a little late?”

He considered you for a long moment. Long enough that you felt hope rise within. Then he shook his head. “Best not.” He walked toward the door, looking over his shoulder at you just long enough to chuckle dryly. “I’d never make it to work.”

—

He came back to his quarters earlier that day, but it wasn’t, as you’d hoped, to take you to his room and do any number of inappropriate things to you. Instead you sat with him on the sofa while he worked. Your legs rested across his lap, the side of your head against his shoulder as you typed out the story for the Altissian lesson.

Occasionally, his hand would move up your leg, stopping at your knee before lifting away to flip through documents. His fingers trailed small shapes into the skin of your thigh while he made an important call to a council member. Afterward, he interrupted your work to brush your hair back, nuzzling into the crook of your neck with a sigh.

His skin was smooth against yours, the smell of coffee and sandalwood surrounding you. You closed your eyes, fingertips tracing the strong line of his jaw, then up to card through his hair, letting loose the gel. His warm breath tickled your neck, raising goosebumps along your skin.

Thumb still rubbing your thigh gently, he whispered things you never wanted to hear. About how nice it would be if you could stay like this. About mornings where you both could sleep in and go to the market together. About him using his leftover coffee grounds to feed your plants— wouldn’t they look lovely in his windowsills? About a painting of his parents he wanted to show you at his family’s estate someday. About warm summer days spent lounging together under the shade of the tree where Bokeh was buried.

Your chest grew heavy, heart thudding so loudly you were certain he could hear it.
You didn’t tell him to stop.

—you—

“Would you consider going with me to the wedding?”

You looked up from dinner at Ignis, who sat across the table. He’d had food sent up from the kitchens. You’d been suspicious of it until he assured you the sous-chef was honorable and would never spit in the food. Not even the food she made for the stuffy royal advisor.

“But I’m going with Prompto.”

“I’m well aware,” he said. “That’s why I’m making a point of asking if you would attend with me instead.”

You took a bite of food and chewed it slowly, eyes trained on his. That came out of nowhere. Swallowing, you frowned. “Why? We’ll get to be together either way.”

As if expecting this, he had an answer ready. “Prompto has no expectations placed on him to bring someone.”

“And you do?”

“Unfortunately.” He put down his fork and adjusted his glasses. He’d rolled up his sleeves, and you wished he would just put on a t-shirt or something since he was home for the night. Or no shirt. No shirt at all was very good. “I’d planned to ask Dulcis as a courtesy because she’s been so helpful all year, but Gladio has already asked her.” With a sigh, he frowned down at his food. “I believe he did so in part just to irritate me.”

You pushed the vegetables around your plate. Peas. Ugh. “Why do you have to bring a date?”

He looked at you carefully, his frustration meeting your confusion. “If I don’t, it’ll be seen as an open invitation to any nobles that I’m available. Usually, friends go with one another to combat such attention.”

Pursing your lips, you looked at him flatly. “It’s a royal wedding. I don’t think anyone’s gonna be paying attention to the guy without a date.”

With a quick blink, he almost smiled. “Perhaps I’m being selfish because I want to be the one who walks into the ballroom with you.”

That did the trick. Your expression melted into mild surprise. His usually sharp eyes seemed earnest. You picked at your food, saying between bites, “You should’ve asked me that day you saw me singing on the balcony.” He tilted his head as you continued. “In case you forgot, the only reason we ever met was because Prompto wanted to take me to this thing.”

It was kind of a big deal. Plus, you’d already bought a dress that matched Prompto’s tux. Even if Prompto didn’t give a shit who you went with, it was the principle of the thing.

The room was quiet, and you looked at Ignis expectantly.

He rose a brow. “I was waiting for a change of heart. You can be rather fickle, darling. Should I leave the room so you can call after me?”

You gaped, flicking a pea at him with every other word out of your mouth. “I’m not changing my
mind! I’m going with Prompto, and if anyone at the wedding bothers you for not having a date, just send them my way.”

He tutted at the offending vegetables littering the table. “Why might I send anyone your way?”

“So I can give them a detailed account of every part of my body that your mouth has touched.” A grin spread across your face at his disbelieving expression. You flicked another pea, and this time he didn’t even flinch as it bounced off his chest.

“On second thought,” he said. “You’re unfit for polite company. I think it’s best you go with Prompto so he can save you from assured embarrassment.”

You rolled your eyes. “If you want a lady, ask Mirum to be your date. Aren’t you guys friends, or would that be too weird?”

Already, he was shaking his head before you even finished. “Taking her would imply that I accept her advances.”

Again, you scrutinized him. “Exactly who are you worried about?”

“The council.”

“What do you mean?” His careful brows arched over his glasses. “I chose you.”

Your eyes searched his face from across the table. He appeared to have complete certainty, and that might’ve been a comfort if it didn’t freak you out the tiniest bit.

—

You listened to low music, tangled together on his sofa. His shirt was open, his chest hot against your cheek. He wrapped a leg around yours, hands roaming your back. You shifted against him, toes brushing his feet. This was intimate without being sexual; a new feeling you were trying to get used to.

He whispered pretty words into your hair, something you’d grown accustomed to after being there for a few days. They filled the air between you, dripping with meaning. He was always so overwhelming. You let yourself sink into the feeling, laying there and listening. When it became too much, you did the only thing you knew to do.

“I have a poem,” you said just above the music. “There once was a man from Leide, who had a peculiar need. So he jerked off his co—”

Your head bounced lightly as his chest heaved with low laughter, interrupting you. “A dirty
limerick? That’s hardly poetry.”

You tilted your head, chin on his chest, to look at him. “It’s the only kind I’m good at. Are you saying I’m not a poet?”

He smirked, glasses slightly fogged from your closeness. “I’m saying you’re making a valiant effort to be as uncouth as usual.”

You rose a brow. “I’m just not as eloquent as you are.”

“Eloquence isn’t needed if what you say is genuine.”

That made you look away, resting your head on his chest again. The rhythm of his heart rocked against you at a steady tempo. Something genuine. He’d been scaring and exciting you all week with his genuine words.

You swallowed thickly, fighting the blush on your face. “I like…” You couldn’t say it. It sounded so dumb even though the thought crossed your mind multiple times a day.

“Darling?”

You touched his chest, finger tracing circles onto his skin an inch from your nose. “I like the way I feel when you look at me.”

He didn’t say anything, his hold on you tightening a little. You stopped teasing his chest, trying to think of a way to explain your deeper thoughts about just how he made you feel when an unexpected voice joined you.

“Isn’t this domestic.”

Before you could separate yourself from him, Ignis sat up, sending a surprised look to Gladio who stood in the archway to the foyer.

“Gladiolus.” His expression sharpened, and you were being pushed away as he got up. He used a hand to hold his shirt together. “Have you no respect for privacy?”

A long smirk grew on Gladio’s face as he looked between you. “A few glaives invited me out. I was gonna drag you out with me, but it looks like you’re already having a private party.”

Sitting up, you returned his smile. It wasn’t so much awkward as it was unexpected. Gladio really did have a problem with sneaking into people’s homes. Particularly Ignis’.

“I’m not going.” Much to your disappointment, Ignis began to button up his shirt. “So you may leave.”

“Wait,” Gladio said, holding up a hand. “You should come, too, juicy. We’re going to a club on the east end. Your kinda thing.”

You perked up at the invitation. Even if you hadn’t been going a little stir crazy holed up in Ignis’ quarters like some kind of dirty secret, this sounded like it could be fun. It had been days since you’d last drunk and hours since you’d last danced.

Looking at Ignis, you found him staring back at you as he straightened his shirt. You gave him a pleading look. He met it with a hard line of his mouth, eyes boring into you for a moment too long.

“You know I’m gonna go with or without you, right?” you said, changing your tactic. “I’d rather
you be there.”

He dropped his arms to his sides with a light sigh. “Oh, alright.”

Gladio reached out a hand to high five you. When you sat up on your knees, leaning against the back of the sofa to stretch out your own arm toward him, you remembered that all that kept him from seeing your naked body was Ignis’ shirt that hang from you loosely.

Ignis seemed to remember at the same moment, eyes widening for a second before he walked in front of Gladio and ushered him out. “Wait in the kitchen. We’ll be but a moment.”

Gladio chuckled. “It’s just juicy, she’s cool. I’ve seen her topless, Iggy.”

They disappeared into the hall of the foyer, but you could still hear them. Ignis sighed again. “I don’t care, and stop calling my girlfriend juicy.”

“Girlfriend? Finally,” Gladio said, voice growing distant as your mind began to fill with white noise.

You sat there, hanging off the back of the sofa in an attempted high five, surprised. When Ignis came back, walking past you toward the bedroom, he paused just in front of the door to look at you.

“Something the matter?”

Slowly, a grin grew on your face. His eyebrows arched upward, and you tumbled over the sofa, walking toward him with a finger pointed. By the time it hit its mark, poking him in the chest, your grin was massive.

“You just called me your girlfriend,” you teased. You didn’t know how else to react to his blatant admittance to Gladio. You hadn’t had a serious partner in over a year, and the longer you’d gone without, the more it had felt like you didn’t need someone beyond the bedroom.

He hooked your finger, pulling it away. “Am I incorrect?”

Bouncing a little on your feet, you shook your head. “Nope. You already said it, and you can’t take it back.”

Ignis let go of your finger, bringing his hand up to brace in the doorway as he leaned down a little. His expression spoke curiosity and mild surprise. “I’d expected a different reaction.”

In truth, you’d expected the feeling of hearing him say it out loud to be much different, too. But you felt weightless and excited. Leaning up for a quick kiss, you pushed past him. “Let’s go celebrate before we come to our senses.”

—

Gladio switched himself on as soon as you walked into the dimly lit club. Bass reverberated throughout, and you saw the line of people crowding the bar, yelling over the music for their orders.

Your energy grew as you grabbed Ignis’ hand and shoved past Gladio. “We’re gonna dance!” Ignis resisted, and you came to a halt, looking over your shoulder. “Or not?”

“Let’s meet with the others first,” Ignis told you as Gladio scanned the place.

“There they are,” he said, leading you both through the throngs of people.

You looked around excitedly, the black light making Ignis’ teeth glow when he leaned down to
speak over the music. “I was under the impression you hated crowds.”

You did, but places like this were the exception. Everything was dark and people were too busy letting themselves go to care about your existence. It was easy to lose yourself in the flow of this kind of atmosphere.

But it was too loud to explain that. So you shrugged, grabbing onto Gladio’s arm so you wouldn’t lose track of him and following him to a high table in a corner.

Introductions happened in a rush of small waves and little else. Three things became apparent to you in the meantime: Glaives were intimidating even out of their uniforms, two of them looked extremely familiar, and they all thought, by the way you held Ignis’ hand and gripped Gladio’s bicep, that you weren’t just there with both of them, you were there with both of them.

One of the familiar faces brightened when you practically yelled your name over the bass. “I remember you!” He looked between Gladio and Ignis, then back to you with a grin. “Moving on to the prince’s boys, huh?”

The familiarity suddenly hit you, his face and that of the man next to him, talking with Gladio. They were the guys from Ghalad. The ones you’d slept with the night before Valentine’s day. The ones from the threesome you’d been really vocal and descriptive about during your viewing party. Oh, gods.

“Scientia!” He kept going on, and Ignis leaned into you a little to listen. The Glaive pointed at you with a wicked grin. “You’re in for a surprise with this one!”

Ignis’ eyebrows furrowed. “I beg your pardon?”

“Hey!” You grabbed his attention by touching his arm. “Wanna get drinks with me?”

It seemed to take him a moment to understand what you’d asked over the noise. He nodded, looking at the Glaive for a moment longer before leading you away, through the crowds.

You couldn’t believe those Ghaladans were Kingsglaive. That had to be a talking point for all Glaives, some kind of guarantee to get them laid. But they’d never mentioned it once. Had they? Your memory of that night was pretty fuzzy.

Ignis was surprisingly forceful, securing a place at the bar with an amount of graceful authority only he could muster. Within minutes, he was handing you something dark and neat. He wasn’t having anything, though, and that didn’t sit well with you. Offering him your glass, you called for the bartender to pour another.

Without a word spoken between you —one could barely hear themselves think in such a loud club—you took a shared shot, clinking glasses before tipping them back. You weren’t going to let a repeat of the tequila night happen so you kept it at that.

As you led him onto the dance floor, he began to tense. It was slight, and you only noticed because you felt how taught the muscles at his arms became when you tried to get him to dance. In the dim lighting, you saw that his eyes were serious behind his glasses and aimed down at you. He was uncomfortable. Maybe even extremely so.

A small bit of guilt welled in you. He hadn’t even wanted to come, and now you were making him dance in such a… what word had he used? Uncouth. You were trying to force your uncouth ways on him. You reached a hand up, touching his cheek in what you hoped was a comforting gesture. He smiled slightly, then looked up at something over your shoulder.
Suddenly, you were joined by the other Threesome Glaive who’d been talking to Gladio before. Without hesitation, he began to grind on you from behind. It made you jump, sending Ignis a wide-eyed look of alarm. To your surprise, Ignis appeared amused, his eyes widening like yours, his smile growing.

The Glaive behind you pressed you against Ignis, who nodded toward the table where Gladio and the rest of the Glaives still stood. Ignis said something you had no hope of hearing even though he was literally pressed against your front. Then, he made his way to Gladio, leaving you to the mercy of the Glaive whose hands had found your waist.

Well, shit.

—

Breathless, sweaty, and four drinks in on Ignis’ tab, you returned to the table just in time to find your boyfriend slamming a Glaive’s hand on the table in a victorious arm wrestle. He crossed his arms, looking smugly at the Glaive who proceeded to chug a pint of beer. You wondered just what the hell was going on, how their corner of the club had become some kind of testosterone cesspool that had even Ignis participating.

Gladio clapped Ignis on the back, saying something that made him laugh. It softened into a smile when he noticed you, and the next thing you knew, Ignis was wrapping an arm around your waist, planting a searing kiss on your lips that tasted earthy and bitter. Though not your favorite, you recognized the beer he’d apparently been drinking with the others and welcomed the taste, rising on your toes to meet his force equally.

When you pulled apart, things just kept moving and happening. You found yourself, like always in these situations, sucked into the ebb and flow of the excitement around you. Ignis was brought into an intense-looking conversation with a Glaive, you took a shot that Gladio handed you, and the music thrummed as loudly and quickly as ever.

One of the Glaives —the one you’d spent the better part of an hour grinding on— tapped your shoulder. He pointed toward the exit and mimed smoking. It hadn’t been a thought that occurred to you while you’d been staying in Ignis’ quarters, but the idea of getting cross faded was extremely appealing. You nodded at him, grabbing his forearm to not lose him as he led you out of the building.

“This seems like a pretty bad idea for a Glaive,” you said, letting him light the joint for you. Nice of him to let you go first. “Gettin’ high and wasted, then going to work in the morning, doing whatever it is you guys do.”

He shrugged. Smoke filled the air between you, familiar and comforting. You hadn’t had any in ages because you were worried Ignis would keep judging you over it. Which was stupid, you told yourself drunkenly. Ignis liked you. He was your boyfriend. That was still such a weird thought you’d need time to get used to.

“So you’re working on Scientia, huh?” The Glaive glanced at you. Why couldn’t you remember his name? Not that it mattered. You just... He’d been an integral part of your first threeway experience and you couldn’t even— wait. What did he say?

“What’s that supposed to mean?” You unintentionally blew smoke in his face.

He took the joint from you. “No one’s ever seen him with anybody yet he’s here with you tonight. Were you looking for a challenge?”
How could he talk as if he knew you? You’d spent one drunk night together months ago, and most of it had been without conversation. You stared at him for a moment, maybe dazing into space just a little, and then snickered. A hazy film covered your mind, and nothing seemed to matter anymore.

“Ignis is one of my best friends.” You leaned back against the brick of the building. “And if there’s one thing I know about him, it’s that…” Your mind lulled. What were you going to say again? Ignis was—he was—You grinned. “He’s really great at eating pussy, but he won’t say the word pussy because he’s a gentleman.”

The Glaive gave you a side glance. “So it’s like that.”

You nodded, not entirely sure what he meant. You closed your eyes against the sudden brightness of a nearby streetlight. “He’s the best.”

With a snort, the Glaive knocked your arm with the back of his hand. “Let’s go back inside.”

Cracking your eyes open, you didn’t move. “Are you disappointed? Because you wasted time dancing with me?”

A smile graced his face, eyes just slightly glazed over. He was pretty handsome. He was no Ignis, but who was?

“I never regret time spent with a beautiful woman. Who knows,” he propped a hand on the wall next to your head. “Maybe I could work my magic on him, too, and we can all three have a good time tonight.”

Your eyes widened slightly. “Three?”

He rose a brow, chuckling. “Don’t be cute. You know exactly what I mean. And I’m assuming you’re a package deal with Scientia now.”

You nodded, trying to blink away the haze. This didn’t seem right.

He backed away, lowering his arm. “ Weird as that is, I’m into it. Wanna head in now?”

Nodding again, you followed him inside. He continued on to the table while you detoured through the dance floor, feeling a second wave of energy radiating from every last bit of you. People held your hands, wrapped arms around your neck, brushed fingers down your sides as you danced. You knew, as trashed as you were, that this would’ve been a nightmare while sober. Still, you could’ve been drunker, could’ve been higher. Things were only slightly hazy, and you felt like you were going easy.

A look in the direction of your table had you catching sight of Ignis talking to the Glaive, who had a hand resting on Ignis’ forearm. So he was “working his magic”. You weren’t sure you liked that, to be honest. The Glaive was hot, and the thought of watching Ignis do things with him didn’t turn you off, but all of those matters aside, he’d only become your boyfriend today. New relationships rarely stood tests like this.

You weren’t just going to let a guy come in and try to seduce your boyfriend. He was your boyfriend, and you so rarely got to think things like that. So you were going to save him from that horny Glaive. After a quick stop to the restroom.

Because the place was a dive, the toilet was a single room with a door that locked. Right before you could close the door behind you, a hand gripped the edge, blocking it from closing. Delayed fear hit you a moment later, and you stumbled back as the door opened again. Thankfully, it was just Ignis.
He came in, shutting and locking the door.

His collar had been loosened more than you’d made it before leaving his quarters, and his sleeves were rolled up. A blush covered his face, probably a mix of alcohol and something else.

“I believe I’m being pursued by one of the Glaives.” He leaned back against the door, crossing his arms. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

You threw your arms up. “I was gonna save you! If you could’ve just waited until I checked my face.”

“Your face looks fine.”

“It feels gross.” You turned around, walking to the sink. Touching at your smudged makeup, you checked yourself over. You didn’t look bad, but everything felt so heavy. Your head from all the drinks and smoking, your chest from all the feelings you didn’t think you’d ever understand.

Ignis walked over, standing behind you. He placed hands on the sink, boxing you in, and you felt him press against your back as he rested his chin on your shoulder. His eyes were lidded, making you wonder just how much he’d drank so far.

“You’re remarkable,” he said, voice low. It carried through the small room, the bass from the music outside muted and soft. “That Glaive wants you so badly, he flirted with me for the better part of an hour.”

You looked at Ignis in the mirror. “He wants you, too.”

“I don’t want him.” It was sudden and definitive. One of his hands left the sink’s edge to rest at your waist. “And I’ll not share you with him. Or anyone, for that matter.”

You swallowed as he leaned into you further. He was hard against your lower back, the sudden knowledge of which startling you. “O-okay.”

He tilted his head, grazing your neck with his lips, his teeth. “I know they’ve had you. One of them was quite vocal about it earlier.”

It was distracting, him talking about this while pressing you against the sink. You’d wanted to avoid talking about your past partners altogether. The gods were constantly plaguing you with bad luck, making these two Glaives appear now of all times.

You dropped your hands to grip the edge of the sink. “Does that bother you? We can go if it’s—if it’s too weird.” You couldn’t speak properly with everything in your system and Ignis so close. Least of all about this subject.

“I’ve no worries” he said, tugging your ear between his teeth. His hand at your waist slid down, past the hem of your dress to the bare skin of your thigh. “You’re mine now. I don’t care about what happened before, nor should you.”

He backed away slightly to hike up your skirt as he met your eyes in the mirror. With a firm squeeze to you backside, he slid fingers between your thighs. Gently, your undergarments barrier, he rubbed you as he leaned into you again. It was teasing and light, and you knew he wanted to make you squirm by the smirk playing at his lips.

You didn’t move, keeping the eye contact he seemed to love. Ruffled and drunk, he still looked incredible, mouth parting as he ground into you with deliberate slowness. You reached around to tug
“Behave, kitten.” It was a hot whisper against your neck just as he removed his teasing hand, roughly pulling the garment down for you. You heard a click as he undid the clasp of his belt. His eyes never leaving yours, he took you from behind. Still slow and intentional, he moved into you, his girth parting and filling you with delicious friction.

You whined at the slow pace he began with, expression pleading in the mirror. He placed wet kisses on your neck, ignoring your wordless pleas. You tried to press back against him, using your free hand to grab something, anything, to find purchase against. Like he had the other, he trapped that hand at the sink’s edge, driving into you with strong, languid movements.

Finding yourself reveling in the complete loss of control, you dropped your head back against his chest and let him fuck you. You chanted his name like he were one of the Six, a litany that made him push into you harder with each repetition.

“I want you to watch.”

You rose your head, catching his panting expression in the mirror. His glasses were off kilter, strands of hair falling into his face. He quickened his pace, slamming into you as if he had but moments to live. The necklace around his neck bounced at his sweaty collar. It was intense, his expression, his body moving against yours, holding you in place. Breaking through the haze in your mind with sudden clarity, you came undone, knees shaking, his name falling from your lips in a much louder, longer cry.

That seemed to push him over, and he slowed, his final movements seating him deeper, lingering before withdrawing entirely. Your body trembled, the comedown hitting you hard. You leaned back against him, relishing in his firm embrace. Mingled breaths and soft smiles at each other in the mirror, he kissed your neck one last time before releasing you.

You pulled up your underwear, straightening yourself out as best as you could. “Sex in a public bathroom. Classy. Am I a bad influence, or did it actually turn you on to have someone flirt with you?”

He fastened himself with a chuckle and adjusted his glasses. “If Gladio hadn’t so rudely interrupted us earlier, I’d intended to do this anyway.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” You reached up to straighten a few of the stray locks at his forehead. “Besides that first morning, you’ve been holding out on me. I thought I was gonna get lucky every night.”

He grabbed your hand before you could lower it, kissing your knuckles. “I didn’t want you to get the impression that we’re merely lovers.” Your clasped hands fell between you, and he gave yours a gentle squeeze. A smile played at his lips. “I also expected you to grow impatient and jump me upon arrival one evening.”

You snorted lightly. “You wanted that?”

The smile took full form, beautiful on his face. “Hadn’t you promised to be my temporary, live-in sex kitten?”

Letting go of his hand, you shoved his chest and laughed. “Let’s go before they start banging on the door. I bet there’s a line outside.”

Despite having, ostensibly, complete control of himself, Ignis showed how drunk he was by giving
your ass a good squeeze the moment you passed him to unlock the door. You laughed again, leaving the bathroom with the knowledge of how embarrassed Ignis was going to be in the morning. Especially when he realized how obvious it’ll be to the others what you’d done in the restroom.

For the time being, you were going to enjoy the way he couldn’t seem to keep his hands to himself.

—

You were both grumpy in the morning. Nothing was said between you as he showered and trudged around the room as he dressed for work. You always woke abruptly from sleep when you had hangovers, and intended to lay in bed for hours more even though you knew you wouldn’t be able to get anymore rest with how sharply your brain was pounding.

Ignis smoothed hair out of your face before kissing your temple. You curled the blanket around you tighter, mumbling grouchily.

“I’ve left painkillers on the counter in the kitchen for you.” He brushed loose strands of hair behind your ear, his voice gentle. “I’ll return this afternoon.”

As he walked away, you croaked, “I’ll miss you.”

He stopped at the door, hand resting on the handle. “And I, you.”

The room was startlingly silent when he was gone. You connected your phone to the stereo in the living space without ever leaving the room, turning the volume high enough that you could see slight ripples in the glass of water that Ignis had left for you on the nightstand.

You listened to the same song ten times before getting out of bed.

—

**Ignis:** I apologize for my behavior last night.

**You:** Shut up, you were cute.

**Ignis:** Ah, yes. I’ve forgotten cuteness is measured in how close one becomes to a common sexual deviant.

**You:** That’s exactly how it’s measured, babe. On a scale from delightfully darling to undeniably adorable, you were one hundred percent debaucherous.

**You:** I was into it.

**Ignis:** Of course you were.

**You:** I’m into the romantic Ignis, too. And the rigid Ignis. And the Ignis who takes care of me even when I don’t deserve it.

**Ignis:** I hadn’t been aware I held such multitudes.

**Ignis:** I’m going to take you when I return to my quarters.

**You:** Take me where?

**Ignis:** Don’t be coy.
Chewing on the chalky taste of your vitamins, you stared at the message. He was so silly, flirting and being assertive even though he so rarely said things this directly.

Maybe you would visit him for lunch today.

You charmed the sous-chef in the kitchens into making a double order of dumplings. All you had to do was complement her chef’s ascot and lean on the counter as you bit your lip. She even gave you a small, heart shaped pastry. Hell yeah. Even with a boyfriend, you still had it.

Outside Ignis’ office, Dulcis grinned at you. “Want me to tell him you’re here?”

You shook your head. “Tell him I’m here to give him sensual kisses to his very pretty face.”

Her smile faltered, and a blush dusted her cheeks. “I-I can’t say that, miss!”

Snickering, you pointed as his door. “I’m just gonna go in.”

“He has a guest,” she called as you walked off. “But I doubt he’ll mind the surprise.”

When you opened the door, your excitement died down a little at the sight of Mirum. She sat on the edge of his desk, leaned down to point at something on a piece of paper. Ignis was caught mid-laugh, hiding his smile behind a hand. They looked your way, the conversation coming to a halt. Maybe you were supposed to be jealous, but you were kind of glad they were able to get along again without her public interest in him coming between their friendship.

Ignis’ expression brightened further, and he stood up from his chair. “What a wonderful surprise. To what do I owe this visit?”

You held up the carefully made dishes of dumplings. “Lunch.”

Mirum’s face became guarded, and she stood from the desk. “I suppose I should go. I’ll return to discuss this later, Ignis.”

Your smile became awkward for a moment as you watched her leave. You were glad they were friends again, but that didn’t mean you had to like her or tolerate her ongoing pursuit of him.

Ignis didn’t respond to her, rounding his desk to help take the load off of your hands. You looked at the documents scattered on his desk, catching nothing that made any sense. Your curiosity wasn’t strong enough to push you to ask what they had been talking about. Probably boring political stuff about Noct’s wedding.

You hoped it was boring political stuff.

Planning to go home the next morning —you were beginning to go a little stir crazy— your announcement was cut short when Ignis sat next to you on his sofa and sighed quietly. You leaned into him, putting a comforting hand on his arm. “What’s up?”

“I’ve been ordered to help Gladio train the Crownguard who will be watching over the wedding proceedings.” He lifted his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I haven’t the time for this, and I don’t wish to leave you here alone and bored all day tomorrow.”

Great timing, you thought. You could go home and get some much needed personal space, and Ignis
wouldn’t have to worry. But the stressed line between his brows and the tired frown that tugged at his lips made you say, “I’ll be fine. I’m a big girl. I’ll even help you relax when you come back.”

He pushed his glasses back into place, glancing at you. “I’m afraid I may be too tired for lovemaking after training all day, but I’m certainly up to the idea.”

You laughed a little. “I meant I’ll massage you or something. I’m your girlfriend so I’m qualified.”

Taking a deep breath, he smiled at you. Hands pulling you closer, gaze meeting yours softly, he brushed a kiss along your cheek. “Thank you.”

Taking pleasure in the closeness, you asked, “For what?”

“For waiting on me.” He kissed you again, closer to your mouth.

“You have like a million books for me to pass the time with. I’m really not gonna get bored.”

He chuckled, the breath of it caressing your lips. “I meant your offer of a massage.”

You looked at his mouth, eyes growing lidded. “I’m just trying to get you naked.”

His lips brushed yours in featherlight touches as he spoke. “It’s working.”

You giggled as he kissed you, a preamble to the promise he’d made earlier in the day that he fulfilled several times over before you fell asleep. He was going to tire himself out before training even began in the morning.

—

Amidst a flurry of you trying to both cook yourself dinner in Ignis’ kitchen and finishing the final edits on that Altissian story, your pacing from the kitchen table to the stovetop was halted at the sound of someone knocking on the door.

Couldn’t be Gladio, you thought. He didn’t know how to knock. Plus he was training with Ignis right now. Couldn’t be Noctis because he would know that Ignis wasn’t home. Unless someone told him you were there. Maybe he wanted to hang out.

Perking up at the thought, you shuffled to the door, wiping your hands on the apron at your waist. You were met with conflicting feelings at the person who greeted you at the door. Negative feelings because it was Mirum, positive feelings because she had a bottle of wine in arm.

Her expression dropped at the sight of you, her eyes going past you to peer into the quarters. When she met your gaze, she seemed to have gathered herself. “Hello. I’ve come to talk with Ignis about the duke.”

You tilted your head, watching her rest a hand on her hip. “He’s not here.”

Her eyes flicked past you for a moment again as if she didn’t believe you. “He’s not in his office. Where would he happen to be?”

“He’s training right now.” you said, dropping your arm and backing away a step. You waved her in, but she didn’t move. “He’s gonna be gone all day, but I’d love the company, dude.”

It was a test, and you weren’t sure if she passed or failed when she looked from the wine bottle to you, then crossed the threshold into Ignis’ quarters. She hadn’t come here to talk about some duke; she was planning to seduce him. She smelled amazing, and she looked even nicer than usual. You
had to admit, at least to yourself, you were a little impressed at the assertive way she was approaching this.

Your certainty at your place in Ignis’ life wouldn’t be so easily shaken, though. She might’ve been wearing her best, but you were in Ignis’ wrinkled clothes from the day before. It was probably gross, but enjoyed how they smelled like him. The shirt was unbuttoned enough that she could definitely see the little bow on the front of your bra.

“So you spent the evening in the palace last night,” she said, going right for it as she placed the wine on a counter in the kitchen.

You turned your attention to the food still cooking on the stove. It was simple spaghetti, but you really weren’t much of a cook and felt the need to give it a lot of focus. “Actually, I’ve been here for almost a week.”

She didn’t say anything for a while so you looked over your shoulder, finding her frowning at the bottle of wine.

“Why don’t you crack that thing open?” you suggested, trying to sound casual. You weren’t sure why you’d invited her in, but here you were. Maybe the pull of wine was all it had taken. Ignis didn’t have a drop of alcohol in his quarters, which was odd because he had things like corkscrews and wine glasses, suggesting he usually did keep a stock of something. All you’d found so far was cooking wine, though. “I think we could knock out the entire bottle in an hour flat.”

She chuckled softly, and went directly to the drawer where the bottle opener was. You contained your curiosity at how she seemed to know exactly where everything was as she took two glasses from a cupboard.

Things went quietly like that, small quips passing between you as she poured the wine and you finished cooking. You split the pasta with her despite her insistence that she wasn’t hungry.

“Oh, but you’ll just hurt my feelings,” you said, feigning offense. “You brought the wine, it’s only fair.”

She sat across from you at the table, looking a little tense despite how well she’d held up so far. “I suppose I should thank you.”

You smiled, enjoying her discomfort, and took a sip of the wine. “No, I should be thanking you. If you hadn’t come down here to steal my boyfriend, I’d be eating all by myself right now. Gets kinda lonely in this big place.”

Her demeanor faltered, then a small, wry smile slowly came to her. “Why do I get the feeling I’m the one being seduced at the moment?”

With a light laugh, you said, “Trust me, if I was gonna seduce you, that nice dress would already be on the floor.”

Manicured nails tapping against her own glass, she shook her head and looked away. “I’m afraid women don’t quite do it for me, dear.”

“That’s too bad.” You began to eat, actually pretty hungry because you’d had to fend for yourself and all you’d eaten all day was your vitamins. “I know a pretty good move that would leave you jolting.”

When she looked at you again, you licked sauce from your lip. You weren’t even trying to be sexy,
but she frowned uncomfortably, only adding to your amusement.

“I understand why he chose you. From what I’ve gathered, you’re ambitious, intelligent, and tough.” She didn’t touch the food, but drank from her glass heavily. “But you have nothing that I haven’t already. Ignis is playing house with you now, but he’ll realize soon enough that it would benefit him to accept me.”

You swallowed a bite and shook your head lightly. “You’re wrong. I have at least one thing you don’t.”

She rose a fine brow, asking for an answer without saying a thing.

You almost laughed. “I have Ignis.”

—

The heels of your hands slowly kneaded at the muscle along Ignis’ shoulders. He let out contented sighs, and you’d honestly never felt this special. You normally didn’t do this kind of thing. You’d put on soft music before he sat with you on the bed. Maybe you were hoping to get lucky even though he was tired and sore.

He was bent slightly forward as you massaged him, and you resisted the urge to touch the soft hair at his nape. He smelled like magic, a nearly indescribable, almost burnt scent wafting from him.

“So when are you gonna give me that magic lesson?” you asked, leaning forward a bit to kiss the place where his neck met his shoulder.

“You mean the one I recommended while under the influence?”

You huffed a small laugh. “I mean, it still counts, Iggy.”

He shook a little with quiet laughter. “Perhaps someday, but it’s dangerous and should be taken quite seriously.”

Letting the music influence your movements, you went quiet for a time, appreciating all of his back, his neck, and returning to his shoulders. He gave gentle moans under the attention. It was cute, and you wanted to do your best to make Ignis feel as valued as he deserved.

Trying to make light conversation, you said, “Mirum came by today.”

All at once, he tensed. You felt the muscle underneath your fingers grow tight as he looked over his shoulder. “Did she? For what reason?”

You took in his sudden concern with diluted worry. “To talk about some duke or whatever. I gave her dinner, but she wasn’t really into it so she left.”

He let out a sigh. Relief, you thought. “She is adamant about disinviting the duke.” He reached a hand over his shoulder, grasping one of your own. “Did she mention anything else?”

Oh yeah, you thought. She just mentioned that she was waiting for him to change his mind about you at any moment. You didn’t voice that fact, though, turning your hand over in his and gasping lightly.

“Iggy, you said magic was dangerous.”

He frowned, turning around further to face you. “What are you talking about?”
You squeezed the hand you held. “You mean you don’t feel that spark?”

Eyes flicking to your joined hands for a second before he smirked at you, he shook his head a little. “I find your jest shockingly silly.”

Grinning at him, you were glad that he’d let you shift the conversation away from Mirum. “So did Gladio give you a hard time about our night out?”

He sighed, eyes meeting yours in the dimmed light of the bedroom. “We were training both Crownguard and Glaives today so I will admit, there was a moment of unfortunate ribbing at my expense.”

That made you laugh. “It couldn’t be that bad.”

He turned away from you, silently asking for more attention paid to his sore muscles. “In a word, it was…” He sighed softly as your hands returned to their relaxing ministrations. “Repugnant. Though, I’d never felt such comradery.”

You snickered, thinking about how he’d played along with their hypermasculine games at the nightclub. You, at the very least, gave him something that you didn’t think Mirum could: acceptance from his peers.

Even if it was just silly, base desires that drove that acceptance. Ignis was only human, and if it took him sleeping with you in a public restroom to make the others see that side of him, then so be it.

Chapter End Notes

Please feast your eyes on this beautiful artwork by Jurassic_gal that illustrates one of my favorite scenes.

I hope you guys accept this offering of fluff. It’s definitely not meant to cushion any future angst. You can totally trust me…

.Any nsfw stuff that happens from now on will be short and passable or fade to black like what’s in this chapter.

As always, thank you for reading. <3
Why don’t you go back to your home on whore island?

Chapter Summary

If your life was a movie, this is the part where you’d get up for more popcorn.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for minor depressive thoughts, Reader’s constant denial and distorted perception of reality, a kiss scene that no one asked for, and brief (sad?) smut.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You prepared for a hasty exit from Ignis’ quarters when you made the mistake of looking someplace you shouldn’t and saw something you never wanted to see.

Wanting to do something nice the day of your departure from this tiny slice of paradise you’d shared with Ignis, you got up before his alarm went off and planned to make breakfast. You knew a few things but thought the safest bet would be to follow one of his recipes. Because his quarters didn’t house his cookbooks like his home in the city did, your only option was that little black notebook he always carried with him.

So you took it out of his jacket and opened it to a page marked with a small ribbon. You quickly realized, eyes flitting over Ignis’ scrawling script that this wasn’t a cookbook. It was a journal.

She said something plainly awful to me today. “I lost my shellphone. Could you give it a ring-a-ling so I can find it?”

I can only guess she adopted such phrases from Prompto.

We found her phone in the fridge next to the spinach.

The next page was blank. Curious but knowing better, you flipped back through, finding small bits of recipe ideas. So it was kind of a cookbook.

Written on its own page, messier than most of the other scrawlings you’d seen so far, was a passage that made you drop the book and take a step back as if it were suddenly scalding.

It hit the floor with a soft fwump, the pages falling delicately open to that passage as it rested on the hardwood. You looked down at it, jumpstarting when you heard Ignis moving around in the bedroom. Picking it up quickly, hands shaky and eyes wide, you ran down the hall and put it back into the inner pocket of Ignis’ coat.

You went back into the bedroom to find him running a hand through his hair as he considered his wardrobe. When he looked at you, a sleepy smile crossed his face.

“Up before me? Shall I expect a prank awaiting me in the shower?”
You stared at him, not answering. His smile waned, and he blinked the remaining sleep away, stepping toward you. “What’s the matter?”

Trying to seem casual as you avoided his touch, you walked around the bed to your overnight bag. “Just getting an early start. I have a life to live, y’know.” You laughed a little, hoping to set him at ease. When you felt his hand touch your back, you leaned into it automatically, loving his touch and hating how much you loved it.

He wrapped an arm around your waist, and you enjoyed his warmth as he leaned into you. “It’s going to be difficult without you,” he said into your hair, soft and low.

Another small laugh, forced and breathy. “I think you’ll survive, Iggy.”

You left while he was showering, leaving a note that you wanted to get out of there before the morning commuting crowds blew up the transit system.

___

Stepping out of the residency elevators, you were met with an old man. Not the really nice old man who worked for the Amicitias and gave all of your drunk asses a ride home from the club the other night. A much more familiar old man that you really didn’t want seeing you leaving the Citadel at six in the morning with your overnight bag. Especially not with the wild thoughts plaguing your mind.

“Uncle,” you croaked, waving a hand minutely and clearing your throat. “Morning.”

He looked at the bag strapped over your shoulder. It had a monochrome chocobo motif. Very tasteful. When his eyes went to your face, he smiled. “Good morning. It appears you had an eventful stay in the palace.”

You laughed sheepishly, eyes widening at his blatant comment. “Yeah…” You had no idea what to say.

I went out with some Kingsglaive, wrote an entire fairytale, and I spent the rest of the time fucking your nephew. Nope. You weren’t going to tell him that. Hiking up the heavy strap at your shoulder, you said, “Ignis has been super busy so I thought I’d pay him a visit.”

“Ah,” Uncle nodded. “It’s wonderful he has such support.”

You nodded along with him, edging toward the doors. “Yep. I mostly just nosed around his stuff, but he seemed a lot less stressed while I was here. Which was, uh, great.”

Uncle smiled kindly. “I daresay your love is unmistakable.”

One foot just steps from the exit, you froze. You wanted to point at him, to be shocked at his major assumption, but the thought of telling Uncle Scientia that you weren’t in love with Ignis, who you’d just so obviously spent several nights with, was not a compelling one.

You’d built a rapport with this man, and he felt comfortable enough with you to say sensitive things like this, however wrong he might’ve been. You didn’t want to ruin that.

“Forgive me for keeping you,” he said suddenly, motioning toward the doors. Had it been that obvious that you’d been trying to escape? Then again, weren’t you always trying to escape from him in the Citadel? Your life was a sitcom for the gods to enjoy, and that was just one of the running jokes.

With an awkward goodbye on your part, you practically tumbled down the massive set of stairs leading out into the common below. Thoughts pinged through your head like a boss level of Justice
Monsters Five. You didn’t know how you were going to break off the courtship with Ignis. At this point, it seemed like Uncle could potentially be hurt by it. And that thought made you feel trapped.

You spent the train ride home radiating stress, wondering how you were going to play off being the bad guy when the time came. As weird as it was, you still wanted to have those awkward, candid conversations with Uncle Scientia. The more you thought about everything, the less sense it made. The fake courtship, the real relationship, the uncle with expectations.

None of these thoughts were enough to suppress the very real worry you felt about what you’d read in Ignis’ journal. You knew better than to nose about. Why were you like this?

You picked the passage over in your mind, trying to make sense of it.

*I find myself deeply in love with a person who doesn’t want to be loved.*

Was Ignis insane? The passage *couldn’t* be true. It was already a miracle that he liked you at all. He’d only known you for a few months! And— and you hadn’t been dating for very long. You’ve had people say they loved you too early before, but Ignis was keeping this to himself. The way it had been written, it was almost like he was lamenting the fact.

You anxiously walked from the station to your apartment, thinking it best to pretend you’d never seen it. If he really believed he felt that way, he would tell you.

You hoped he didn’t because, even more than pretending to dump him for the sake of your agreement, you never wanted to actually break his heart.

—

“Listen to this,” Prompto said immediately upon arrival at your apartment. He’d come over so you could help him with his best man speech, but now his phone was being thrust into your face.

You pushed him inside to shut the door. “Listen to what?”

He pressed a button on the screen and your hallway was suddenly filled with choppy, raucous noise. Gladio’s voice filtered through, slurring with every other word. “Here’s the thing, shortcake… I love a good slut. And I was fuckin’ serious when I said you’re too sweet for me. You don’t—” He cut himself off with a grunt, then a brief exchange with someone else.

Gods, that was your voice. It was too muffled to make out distinct words, but you vaguely remembered giving Gladio a hard time for being on the phone in the middle of a nightclub. Before you could think on it too hard, Gladio’s voice returned, even louder and a breathy type of muffled as if he had pressed his phone to his mouth.

“Prompto. Prompto, listen. It was sloppy and neither of us are talkin’ about it, but I’m not messin’ around anymore. I’m a ride you wouldn’t survive. So next time I see that obnoxious ass of yours, I’m gonna—”

It cut off there, an abrupt silence surrounding you. Prompto gave you a searching look, blue eyes wide and confusion clear on his face. “What was that about?”

“How should I know?” You couldn’t believe this was what Gladio had been doing that night at the club. “It sounds like he wants to talk about what you did at the tequila bar.”

Suddenly, it was like he was melting right there in your hallway. Hands on his face as he rested his back against the wall, he whined. “Oh my gods, I don’t wanna. That happened *forever* ago.”
“You’ll have to talk about it eventually.” The task did seem daunting. Whatever thing that existed between Prompto and Gladio was a mess. In your opinion, Gladio didn’t deserve your best friend. Prompto was kind and exciting and one of the best people you knew. Gladio was too much like you. Too rough around the edges, take more than you give, commitmentphobic.

But you weren’t going to say a thing; it wasn’t your call to make.

“Give me that best man speech.”

—

“That’s too many compliments on Lady Lunafreya.”

He looked up from the draft he’d typed on his phone. “You think so?”

“Definitely.” You took it from his hand, scrolling through the paragraphs. “And this embarrassing high school story is taking it too far.”

He groaned, and you held the phone out of his reach as you laughed. “It’s not that bad!”

“You can’t talk about Noct getting a blowjob in front of King Regis, dude! That’s his fucking dad. Plus, you think the bride wants to hear about some other chick going down on the groom? And—” You laughed again, handing him the phone. “The Oracle will be there! You’re gonna tell a dirty, embarrassing story about Noctis in front of the Oracle? Are you nuts?!”

“I get it!” He huffed, eyes scanning over the speech. “If you have so many good ideas, give me advice.”

“Lighten up on the compliments on how nice and beautiful Lunafreya is, and try to remember an embarrassing Noct story that has nothing to do with his dong.”

He pouted. “But it’s hilarious.”


“Fine,” he whined. Already his thumbs were sliding and tapping along the screen, and you suspected he was trying to quickly edit the stuff he’d already planned.

“If you wanna embarrass him, just talk about how much you love him and can’t believe he convinced Lunafreya to marry his nerdy ass.”

He graced you with the first smile you’d seen on him since he’d arrived. “That’s simple enough.”

—

Trash had somehow accumulated everywhere since the last time you’d been in Noct’s apartment. You stepped over half empty bottles of soda and molding takeout boxes on your way over to the kitchen where Ignis, having gotten there before anyone, had already started cleaning up.

Noct was moving out soon, back to the Citadel, in preparation for the wedding. You couldn’t hide the deep thrill within you at the thought of all the excitement. You’d be in beautiful Accordo in just over a week. It was almost unbelievable.

Ignis glanced at you, a smile crossing his face as he made a wide sweep of his arm over the counter, dumping all of the clutter into a large trash bin. “Hello, darling. Thank you for arriving on time.”
You looked around, taking note of the wads of blankets on the sofa and the slight hum of Noct’s game system. It was still running, and you walked over to turn it off with a sigh. “Looks like I’m the only one who listened.” Switching it off with a quiet beep, you turned around to catch Ignis looking your way.

“I gave you an earlier time than the others. Noct is with his Majesty for another hour.” He lifted a candy wrapper between his fingers, a melted mass hanging from it. “I’d wanted to spend a moment alone with you under the guise of being productive, but this mess…”

You snickered, walking to the kitchen to help him. “We can multitask.”

Time passed slowly, shared looks of disgust, stolen kisses, and muffled laughter filling the minutes of manual labor that Noctis should’ve been doing. It was his apartment. When the kitchen was finished half an hour in, you hopped onto the counter and grinned at Ignis’ disapproving look.

“So, I was thinking.”

“Mm?” He dusted a high shelf, moving on to the dining space. “What about?”

“I talked with your uncle recently.” You weren’t sure how to broach this subject. So you were just going to bite the bullet. “Why can’t you just tell him the truth?”

Slowly, he lowered his arm, rearranging comic books on the shelf. “The truth?”

“That we’re dating and not courting.” You sighed. He knew exactly what you were talking about; he really intended to play dumb? Ignis Scientia was a lot of things, but dumb wasn’t one of them. “I think telling him would get rid of all the pressure. You nobility are total weirdos. It’s like you only care about the dumbest shit. No offense.”

“None taken,” he responded a little too quickly. You frowned at the way he straightened himself, fingers trailing along books instead of actually cleaning.

“Why does…” You didn’t want him to realize how much it actually bothered you. There had been a respite of several days between your leaving his quarters, late night phone calls and quick messages being the only thing that kept you both on the same wavelength. There had been a lot of time for you to think and work yourself up into a real and true ball of worry.

He finally turned around, facing you with light concern.

You sighed, avoiding his gaze. “Why does it have to be courtship? Isn’t it enough that we’re together?”

He suddenly walked forward, closing the distance between you by rounding the table and grasping your chin. “You mustn’t think of it that way.”

You glared at him, but it only lasted for a moment. Another soft sigh left you, eyes searching his. “How, then? This fake courtship isn’t really— now that we’re together, it isn’t fair, Iggy. I don’t wanna be the bad guy who breaks your heart anymore. I—”

He silenced you with a kiss, leaning into the counter, into you, with gentle force. His hands rested on either side of you, lips teasing yours into compliant movements. You grasped at his shirt, the topmost button coming undone with a soft snap, and drew him further in.

This was a cheap play on his part, and you both knew it. But you’d never find yourself complaining about Ignis kissing you. When his lips were pressed against yours, it felt like you should’ve been
You couldn’t believe you’d wasted so much time not kissing him since that day you’d met him at Prompto’s party.

Breaking apart, his eyes met yours, and he lingered there, in your space. “Let me court you. Earnestly.” It was a whisper against your mouth, and it had you sputtering.

“W-what?”

“I’d like nothing more, if you would have me.”

You leaned back, away from him. The back of your head hit a cabinet, and you winced. “I like what we have now.”

Sharp green eyes nearly pleading, looking at you with unyielding certainty. “Nothing would have to change.”

You squeezed the hands you had gripping his shirt. He was scaring you now. The words from his journal flitted through your thoughts. “Oh, it’ll change. I know all about courtship, Ignis. It’s like an engagement or something. I don’t know if I wanna get married or— or have kids! I know what your uncle is expecting, and I can’t be that.” Anger bled into your expression, welling in you with a solid heaviness. “How can you be more willing to stick to the lie by making it real than just admit the truth?”

His brows met in a furrow, mouth a hard line. “You are well aware that things have changed since I’d been so foolish as to lie to my uncle. If I’m to court anyone at this juncture, I can think of no one else but you.”

With a glare that stuck, you made yourself let go of his shirt. It was wrinkled and your fingers felt tense. As you stretched them, you used that as an opportunity to look away from him. He wanted to actually do this with you? The public declarations and the parties and going over dowry bullshit?

In a soft voice, he continued, “You needn’t feel any pressure to give me an answer without first considering everything.”

You placed a hand on his chest, pushing him away. He stepped back, expression calm, though you could see the edges of concern. You tried to collect yourself in the same way, but you were trembling. With anger, annoyance, and an abundance of feelings you didn’t want or need, you looked at him.

“I like you a lot, Ignis.” You bit the inside of your cheek, kicking a foot suddenly because saying this was rocking your anxiety straight to hell. Your heel hit a lower cabinet with a steady, uncomfortable thud thud thud. “But my answer is no. I didn’t agree to a real courtship back then, and I think it’s asking too much of me now.”

Another step back, and he was smoothing out his shirt with a nod. “Understood. Apologies for my imprudent request.”

A frown cut your face. “You don’t have to be upset. I just—” You let out a heavy breath, hands coming to cover your face. You wouldn’t apologize, but you didn’t know what else you could say.

“Don’t fret over it.” It was soft, distant. You looked between your fingers to find him back at the bookshelf on the other side of the room. Your stomach sank, spirits falling. Jumping down from the counter, you passed him to fold the blankets on the sofa.

Things were tense for the remainder of the afternoon. When the others finally showed up,
conveniently when you and Ignis had done the brunt of the cleaning, they definitely noticed. With a
gentle insistence and impatience, as Ignis put together a simple meal, you kept making attempts at
touching him in an effort to bridge the gap. His hand when you passed him ingredients, his side as
you tried to help him adjust the apron at his waist, his cheek when a smudge of spice was left after he
adjusted his glasses.

“Leave it,” he said, turning his head away. He’d avoided your touch every time, and you were
cUGHT BETWEEN NOT BLAMING HIM AND THINKING HE WAS BEING PETTY.

“Fine.” It came out louder and sharper than you intended, and the conversation happening a few feet
away between the other three came to a halt. You left the kitchen to sit with Prompto, who’d so
kindly wadded up the blankets you’d folded earlier.

He and Gladio were having some kind of silent conversation. You sent Noctis a flat look that he
returned while the other two either looked at their phones or each other, not saying a word. You
were going to grill Prompto for details later. For now, it just made you sick.

Your phone beeped in your pocket, and Prompto’s gaze shot to you. Please, gods, you hoped he
hadn’t added you into whatever private conversation he was having with Gladio.

**Prompto: hey u ok??**

You looked at him, shaking your head slightly. Replying to the message would’ve implied that you
thought it was okay to just text people who were sitting next to you. He seemed to catch that,
scratching the back of his head as he asked, “I’m kinda surprised you’re still here. Didn’t you have
that movie thing tonight?”

“That’s tomorrow.” You thought about the viewing for the movie you’d helped Craigory with. It
was the first student film you’d ever heard of that had a viewing in an actual theater off campus.
Craigory was kind of a big name in your major, and you hadn’t realized it until you’d worked with
him. “He said Friday night.”

Prompto blinked. “Today’s Friday.”

Frowning, you checked your phone. “No it’s—” Shit, it was Friday. You scrambled up and grabbed
your bag. “I gotta go.”

The guys waved and Ignis looked up as you passed on your way to the door. “Leaving so soon?”

“I have a film thing,” you said, not stopping. As you put on your shoes, he watched you from the
other end of the hallway. “I told you about it.”

He nodded once, returning his attention to dinner preparation without another word. You left Noct’s
feeling heavy. Why were relationships so much work?

—it

It was the kind of film you wished you’d thought of, but being a part of its production was satisfying
enough. The number of people who’d shown up to watch it surprised you, and when you saw your
name in the credits, you felt a strong sense of pride.

You went with the crew to a restaurant afterward, wondering if Ignis’ dinner would’ve been better. It
was for the best that you’d left. It had been awkward, and you bet they were all just waiting for you
to leave so they could talk about you. How much would Ignis tell them, if anything?
When a small sheet covered in adorable moogles was passed around at Craigory’s apartment later that night, you tore off a square, placing it on your tongue, and grinned along with the others as you let it dissolve. You were up for anything and wanted to put all of your worries aside to deal with tomorrow.

Events of the night passed as if you were viewing them from a reel in a stereoscope rather than actually experiencing them first hand. When you woke up on the floor of Craigory’s apartment in a puddle of melted ice cream and bent spoons, you weren’t sure who or where you were, but you felt an odd sense of peace as if you’d recently realized something profound.

Craigory, seemingly from nowhere, handed you a bottle of water. You drank half of it down before asking, “What time is it?”

He showed you his phone. Just after 4pm. You stared at it for a long moment.

“What. Really?”

He nodded.

“Holy shit,” you groaned. You couldn’t believe you’d been out that long. Almost an entire day. You were well into Saturday and only now gaining conscious control over yourself? Now that you thought about it, it had felt impossible to sleep while tripping, and you did remember watching the sunrise. What a life changing moment that had been. At least it had felt so at the time.

Stepping over people still sleeping, you went to the bathroom to wash your face and gather yourself. On your way out, you stopped to say goodbye to Craigory who was packing a bowl to smoke. In the middle of the day. “Dude, you might beat me out in how hard you party.”

He shrugged, waving as you left. As you walked to the nearest station, details of the trip began to jump out at you. You were fairly certain you’d told Craigory about Ignis. Like, everything. He’d advised you to follow your heart, that the practices of nobility shouldn’t influence your decisions. Whether you decided to change your mind about the courtship shouldn’t be dependent on spite toward the noble lifestyle or fear toward an uncertain future with Ignis.

It should come from your heart and how Ignis made you feel.

Whatever the hell that was supposed to mean. Romantic blather. Craigory was usually such a good listener, giving the best advice. The night of partying must’ve really done a number on him.

Since your phone was dead, you plugged it in immediately upon arrival home. It was a curse of modern times, the feeling that you weren’t quite complete without a phone in hand and access to the world with a swipe of your finger. It charged while you showered and clambered around your apartment, watering your plants and checking to see if Aranea swiped anything from the fridge.

Thirty two messages and eight missed calls. You went through them, most from Prompto, a surprising couple from Gladio and Noctis. But nothing from Ignis.

Prompto’s devolved from amusement to concern to alarm as time went on.

*Prompto: lol @ ur insta pics 2nite*
Prompto: dude u ok??

Prompto: im worried 4 u :( 

Prompto: r u @ craigorys??

Prompto: he says ur ok but idk...

The messages from Gladio and Noctis were less about how they were worried about you, and more along the lines of “call Prompто before he has a panic attack”. He’d called you just half an hour before, so you figured he wasn’t working a shift at one of his numerous jobs at the moment.

“I’m alive,” you said as soon as he answered.

“Astrals!” He sounded angrier than you expected, and you reclined on your couch with the flowering cactuar, mind reeling for ways to deal with this. “We were worried, dude! Did you check your shit online? You looked insane. You posted a video of yourself eating toothpaste and that’s not even the weirdest post and — and I had to do damage control for your mom so she wouldn’t see anything. That was hard.”

Your jaw slacked. He had to be lying. “Did I really?”

He made a sound, somewhere between a grunt and a whine. “You don’t even remember? I had to ask around to get Craigory’s number and that took a while because I’m not in the same department as you guys. He told me about the acid. Don’t you think you shoulda— I don’t get why you do this!”

Shooting up into a sitting position, you yelled back, “So I ate some toothpaste! It won’t kill me, Prompto!”

“Oh yeah?! You’re not supposed to do stuff like that unless you’re in a safe place!” He was yelling so loudly, you held the phone away from your ear and could still hear him clearly. “Did you even know those people? Aside from Craigory, I mean? I really doubt you did!”

Hating that he was right, you scowled. “So what if I didn’t? I’m safe at home now!”

“They coulda done anything to you!” He slammed something, a jarring noise ringing through the phone. Then, his voice softened as he sighed. “But why did you take it at all? Because you turned Iggy down?”

You calmed yourself in response. There was no use in yelling, even if it was a little cathartic. “He told you?”

“He practically checked out when you left. Didn’t say much, and then he left, too.” Another sigh. “He told Gladio, who told me.”

You touched the pink flower on the cactuar’s head. “I didn’t think it was that big of a deal.”

“If it wasn’t,” he paused, voice growing even softer. “Then I don’t think you would’ve dropped acid last night.”

You considered his statement. You had to admit that you didn’t exercise the best judgement when it came to recreational drugs. But Prompto had to be wrong. You were being avoidant about your disagreement with Ignis, but not every trip or drunken night had a problematic reason behind it.

So you ignored the point he was trying to make. “Is any of the stuff I posted worth keeping at least?”
He sighed again, sounding resigned and unlike himself. “Why don’t you look for yourself. At least let Iggy know you’re okay.”

You glared into empty space. “I don’t think he cares.”

“He’s your boyfriend, of course he cares.” Prompto snorted, though it held no amusement. “Don’t be dumb.”

“He didn’t call or anything.”

“He’s mad at you.”

“For turning him down?”

“For taking acid! He…” Prompto sounded strained all of a sudden. “He called me this morning. It was really weird. He sounded pretty upset and said your reckless behavior was gonna kill you someday. Wanted me to talk with you about getting help.”

Your expression flattened. “That’s nice. What other shit talk did you guys have about me? Really, I’d love to know.”

There was a brief silence. “I don’t think this convo is gonna take us anywhere constructive.” He sounded tired, and guilt puddled in your stomach. “If you need to talk, call me or come over or whatever. I know you’re in a bad place, so just remember—”

“Why do you think I’m in a bad place?” You looked at the flowering cactuar as if it were Prompto in the room. “I just like to let go and have fun. When did this become such an issue?”

“Since always!” He was yelling again, and the guilt grew within you at the sound of his voice breaking. “I love you, but sometimes it’s like you want each night to be your last and there’s nothing I can do.”

“That’s not…” You frowned deeply. “Don’t fucking say that.”

“I’m sorry. I really am, but it’s true. And if— if nobody else will tell you, I will.”

You stared into the dead eyes of the cactuar. Then you hung up, burying your face into its soft, plush body.

—

When Ignis called, you let it ring.

—

Gladio: meet me for lunch

You: No.

Gladio: don’t make me drag you out

You: I said no.

Gladio: we need to talk, I’m not gonna let you keep doin this to us, especially Iggy and Prompto

You: I don’t even know what you’re talking about.
You: I’m just trying to live my life, Gladio. Fuck off.

Gladio: look I get why you rejected Iggy’s proposal but you don’t get to just drop off the planet for an entire day and get completely fucked without telling anyone what’s going on

You: I do whatever the hell I want. Friends don’t control each other. Just leave me alone.

Gladio: meet me at the cafe by your old job, it’s just a small chat, you better be there at noon

—

You were loathe to listen to Gladio, but talking with him would be easier than facing any of the others. Of all your friends, he had to be the most understanding. He’d dated Ignis before; he had to know how intense the man could be and how that could potentially lead you to escapism. With Prompto and Ignis both upset with you —you were not going to bother Noctis with your personal problems right before his wedding— it would be nice to have someone on your side.

You sat across from Gladio at a small table. He’d already ordered you both coffee. You didn’t touch the one in front of you, even if it would’ve been the polite thing to do.

Gladio looked at you warily. “Don’t get mad.”

You frowned. Why was he leading off with that? You weren’t necessarily mad. Annoyed, yes, but you hadn’t come here in a rage or anything.

He got up from his chair, moving to another one. Too busy watching him in confusion, you didn’t realize until the chair across from you made a noise as it scraped against the floor that Ignis was taking his place.

You sat up, back straightening as if you would get up any moment. But you didn’t move. You hadn’t planned to see him until you brought your remaining paperwork for the wedding in. You hadn’t wanted him to be expecting you. Now the element of surprise was out of your favor. He was prepared to say something eloquent and meaningful that would make you face the fact that you were hurting him. And Prompto, too.

It wasn’t like you didn’t know. But being self aware didn’t mean you knew how to stop. It didn’t mean you wanted to stop.

Sending Gladio a glare, you said, “I should’ve known it was a trick.”

He didn’t say anything, shaking his head. Ignis cleared his throat, and you faced him hesitantly. You weren’t sure you could do this. His expression spoke confusion and concern. You hated how that was such a familiar sight to you.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, pushing Gladio’s coffee toward the other man.

You shrugged. “I’m fine.” And you were. Everyone was overreacting right now. Sure, you didn’t normally find yourself out of it for a full day, but this wasn’t all that out of the ordinary for you. They had come into your life knowing what kind of person you were. Ignis had decided to date you knowing it. Why the sudden intervention?

Ignis’ gloved hand went from the tabletop to his glasses, and he crossed his legs. “Why did you ignore my calls?” It was so plainly stated, enhanced by the confusion on his face.

“I wanted to talk in person,” you said with another shrug. It was a half truth. “Since we’re here, I
guess I’ll just say what I have to.”

His expression eased a little, his eyes searching your face, and you knew he was expecting an apology. For what? Rejecting him or doing something fun? You had nothing to be sorry for. Everything about this was irritating.

You took a sip of the coffee before saying, “You’re my boyfriend, not my boss, and I can do what I want.”

He frowned, crossing his arms. “Harming yourself hardly constitutes such an attitude. There has to be an exception for things like overindulging in drugs and alcohol.”

You scowled. “I’ve never harmed myself. I’m just a little depressed and anxious, not suicidal.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, his mouth a hard line. When he opened them, he seemed sad. “If you aren’t high, you’re drunk. You don’t need to have your perception altered to be happy. Is there nothing I can do to convince you of this?”

Something pulled at you. As much as you lived by defiance, you wanted to get rid of that disappointed look on Ignis’ face. Crumbling a bit, you looked down into your coffee. You didn’t think you could stop, even if you really wanted to.

A part of you thought Ignis was being selfish; he wasn’t presenting any solid examples of how your behavior had negatively affected him. He just wanted to change you, to remove this flaw about you he had always disapproved of. Now that he was your boyfriend, apparently he thought he had the right to do that.

Gladio’s hard look made you shrink a little into yourself. He cut such an imposing figure, and you were a little afraid of him for the first time since you’d first met him. They were doing a really shitty job of trying to help you. Since that’s what you were to them, apparently, a pity case.

Hands gripping the mug, you tried to dispel these negative thoughts. The vitamins you’d been taking weren’t working, obviously. You’d really hoped they would keep the depression at bay, but everything that had happened to you so far this year had been heartbreaking. It was difficult being completely happy when you were constantly waiting for the next terrible thing to happen.

The only good thing that had come into your life was Ignis. He had been there for every bad moment. He’d created really good moments out of nothing. You had grown to revel in the way he made you feel.

You could see your reflection on the surface of the coffee, distorted and dark. Still uncertain if you could actually keep yourself in check, you flirted with the idea of going sober. You didn’t think it was something people just tried out. You’d have to actually rework your life if you wanted Ignis to be happy.

That thought pulled at you harder than the sad look on Ignis’ face. A simple fact came back to the forefront of your mind; a reminder. You weren’t right for each other. This time the thought came with the main point being that Ignis would get hurt if he stayed with you. Thinking about his journal passage for the nth time that day alone, you knew there were endless ways you could hurt him, if the words he’d written carried even a spark of truth.

“This is a lot to think about,” you said, letting go of the mug and looking up at him. “Give me some time and space, and I… I’ll get back to you.”

“What’s there to think about?” Gladio asked gruffly, hand on the table curling into a fist. “You party
all the damn time, you make us worry, and you don’t wanna admit to any kinda wrongdoing. Get your head out of your ass and straighten up.”

Glaring at him, you hissed, “Like you’re any fucking better. Leaving Prompто that message. *I love a good slut. I’m a ride you wouldn’t survive. Give me a fucking break.*”

He frowned, leaning toward you slightly. “Watch it.”

“Gladio,” Ignis warned. “What exactly are you doing?”

The larger man shook his head, shoving up from the table. His cup rocked, coffee spilling onto the tabletop. “Leaving. I don’t need this misdirected self hatred.”

You watched him walk away, calling after him, “And I don’t need your misguided, judgemental bullshit.”

What an asshole. You ignored the little swell of guilt that, as always, began to build up inside. Moving your glare to Ignis, you faltered a little in the face of his disappointed look.

“Take your time to think about it,” he said, reaching across the table to touch your hand. You jerked both of yours away, hiding them under the table before he could. He frowned, eyes falling to his hand before he drew it back.

It was time to get the hell out of there, you thought as you stood up. You couldn’t be there alone with him, not with all these conflicting thoughts and feelings overwhelming you.

“I’m gonna go.” You made to leave, slowing when he reached for you again, only to curl his hand and drop it.

Brushing past people on your way out, you let loose your inner turmoil, grimacing at how close Ignis had gotten to touching you. He was such a positive point in your life, but hadn’t the last guy started out that way, too? Ignis was different; you knew without a doubt that he would never be the kind of scum that your ex boyfriend had been.

Ignis was dangerous in a completely different way. He made you feel like no one else could. This was exactly why you didn’t do relationships.

—

You missed the Altissian lesson. It wasn’t that you weren’t prepared, that you had chickened out, or even that you’d gotten trashed again at the worst moment. You just didn’t go.

A permanent fixture on your couch for the past several days, you read and reread the Altissian story until the words no longer held meaning, and you could read it backwards without looking. You couldn’t believe you’d written such a lovey dovey ending. It was trash. You were trash.

Ignis had listened to your request for space, and you’d heard nothing from him since leaving the cafe. He must have said something to Araneа because she’d come upstairs occasionally to check on you. She acted like she was just borrowing something or leaving something for you, but she lingered for far too long.

The best thing you could say about the situation was that you’d unintentionally sobered yourself for a few days because you couldn’t get yourself to leave your house. You really needed to, you knew, because you hadn’t given Ignis your immunization paperwork for the trip yet, and it was fast approaching.
During one of Aranea’s visits, she got you off the couch. Her complaints that you smelled terrible had you grumbling as you took a shower. When you reemerged, you found her reading the Altissian story. You hadn’t even known she could read the language.

“This is… actually beautiful,” she said, looking up from the pages you’d printed off.

That made you snort, the closest thing to a laugh you’d had in days. “Don’t fuck with me, Aranea.”

“No, I mean it. It’s not formatted like a screenplay.” She put the papers down on the coffee table, her gaze scrutinizing you as if she wasn’t sure you’d actually cleaned up. “Thinking about changing your career? I think the populace of Insomnia has enough depressed writers.”

You picked up the papers as you sat down next to her on the couch. “It’s for a lesson I was supposed to teach to a group of kids today. I didn’t go. I just… laid here and read it to myself.”

She hummed, and that somehow spurred you forward. You looked at her, frowning as you admitted, “It was a favor for Ignis, and I totally bailed. He’s probably gonna be mad, but… He’s already upset with me so I guess I don’t care.”

“You guess?”

With a shrug, you tossed the papers down. “I should’ve went, but I couldn’t make myself go.”

“You’re such a ray of sunshine lately, I’m sure they’ll be disappointed they missed out,” she said. Her words made you roll your eyes, and she let out a small laugh. “You could send a copy of the story to the class. Maybe the teacher could read it instead. That way you did at least half the job.”

Peering down at the crumpled papers, you laughed a little. This was helping. You’d been annoyed at Ignis for asking Aranea to keep an eye on you, but this was actually helping. “Good idea. I’m all for half-assing things.”

—

When you printed a better copy of the story, you included an apology letter to the teacher and the class for flaking out. You stated the reason being that you were very sick and asked that they didn’t let this reflect on Ignis.

You weren’t sure it mattered, though. People tended to stick to their convictions so if they liked Ignis as much as they seemed to, your less than impressive performance as his betrothed probably wouldn’t change much about their perception of him.

Putting the letter and fairytale into an envelope, you prepared yourself for a trip to the Citadel. You hadn’t done much thinking in your days since you’d left the cafe, despite what you’d told Ignis. You didn’t think you could deal with any of it. You felt too raw, emotionally and physically, to withstand his expectations.

Your mind had itched for distractions while you’d been a vegetable on your couch, and now that you’d gathered the energy to be productive, the thought of when you’d have your next smoke was overpowering much else.

That’s not even bringing Ignis’ supposed deep feelings for you into the equation. You could only deal with so many things at once.
The room of secretaries that led to single offices, including Ignis’, was bustling as usual. With a copy of your shot records and the apology letter, you approached Dulcis. She perked up a little at the sight of you, even though all you felt was dread.

Ignis was the point of contact for all things the commoners, such as yourself, had to turn in for the royal wedding trip. It was only one day away, and you’d been cutting it close with your shot records.

It would be quick, you told yourself. In and out. You weren’t sure you could face Ignis quite yet.

Dulcis looked at something on her computer screen that you couldn’t see, probably clicking through a schedule. “Lord Ignis is meant to be taking lunch right now, but if I know him, he’s probably in the gardens instead of the cafe. The weather is too nice to ignore today.”

You pasted on a smile. “Yeah, great. I’ve been to the gardens before, but I don’t exactly remember where…?”

She gave you directions, sending you off with a giddy smile. “I won’t tell him you’re coming. It’ll be a sweet surprise.”

You looked anxiously out the windowed back end of the elevator moments later as you descended with it. Dropping from this height seemed less scary than facing him right now. Thank the gods Dulcis thought you were paying him a cute surprise visit. That way you could just give him the documents and the letter and leave before he could get you alone somewhere to talk it out.

You weren’t in any mood to face the brunt of his disappointment.

—

The gardens were lush as ever, pansies and geraniums surrounding you in swaths as you crossed through the entrance. You wondered if —hoped that?— you’d come across Uncle Scientia. The admittedly hesitant acquaintanceship you’d formed with him was half the reason you were willing to traverse the Citadel in search of Ignis, and you couldn’t decide if you were glad for it or hated it.

A deeply familiar, accented voice cut through the air. Ignis. You rounded the corner of a hedge, then another, the voice growing closer until it was cut off. When you finally found him, you stopped short, flowers and vines brushing against you with a gentle breeze that went by. The wind ruffled the folded papers in your hands, Ignis’ coiffed hair, and Mirum’s dress.

He didn’t notice you there. Neither of them did. Too absorbed into each other, their lips connected, her delicate hands pressed at his chest. She had him pushed against a trellis. Like deja vu, you’d found them in the same place as you had the last time. Only there was no cute adventure, just Ignis’ closed eyes and your chest ripping painfully.

This had to be a bad dream. You’d been worried you would be the one to break his heart. You felt a sick churning in your stomach, bidding you to run between them. To yell and scream. To do anything other than stand and watch this happen.

You backed away a step. Then another. You turned around, stomach plummeting as you backtracked. Passing the fountain, you paused and took the compact out of your pocket. Tempted to throw it in, you lifted your arm. The hideous, screaming faces on the side of its base felt like a perfect representation of your inner feelings.

Faintly, you heard Ignis say, “Mirum, you must understand—” You dropped your hand, squeezing the compact tightly as you rushed out of the gardens. Whatever else he planned to say, you knew you couldn’t handle.
You went back upstairs, quietly fuming in the elevator. It was going to take a bit for it to really sink in, but for now, all you felt was anger. At Ignis for going behind your back. At yourself for not giving all the clues the merit they’d deserved.

You weren’t jealous by nature, and you trusted your instincts, which had told you that all the little signs you’d noticed were just marks of their rekindled friendship. Now you felt like an idiot.

Of course Ignis would come around to her eventually; she’d been right. *She* didn’t hurt him. *She* didn’t run at the first sign of commitment.

___

Dulcis rose a brow when you returned, winded and upset. “He wasn’t there?”

Trying to calm yourself and failing, you shook your head. “I didn’t see him.” Better to lie, you told yourself. It was easier. No need to bring his assistant into it. “Can I just leave these with you?”

She blinked, taking the papers with a slow nod. “Are you sure? I could call and find out where he is.”

You seriously doubted he would like that. Unable to keep the frown from your face, anger superseding the hurt, you looked at her for a long moment. “Y’know what, I’ll wait in his office.”

Her grin was back, but you didn’t share it. “Go ahead. I bet he’ll love it. I’m sorry I sent you all that way for nothing.”

“Nah,” you said, making your way to his office and waving her off. “I needed the exercise.”

Once the door was shut behind you, the solitude of the office suddenly an overbearing presence, you walked to his desk. You wanted to knock his nameplate off, throw around his important documents, shred a few files. But you sat in his chair, not sure how you were going to unpack what you’d seen.

Rolling your shoulders, you talked yourself up. You *would* be assertive about this. You wouldn’t give him a *chance* to gaslight you like your last boyfriend had. With every point of encouragement you made to yourself came an even stronger pang of mixed confusion and sorrow. You just couldn’t believe Ignis would do that. Not Ignis. Ignis was perfect. And he’d chosen *you*, hadn’t he?

Tears pricked at your eyes, but the sound of Ignis’ voice had you wiping them away before they became anything more. He’d gotten up here so quickly. He had to have left the gardens right after you did. You readied yourself, not at all prepared to face him like you’d hoped. Too late now.

He walked in, stopping just beyond the doorway. Hand on the knob, expression of minute surprise, he looked at you. Then he looked down, a frown on his face as he shut the door and walked to his desk. He placed down files, avoiding your gaze. “I’d thought Dulcis was acting a bit strange just now. Why the visit?”

It tasted like there was wasabi in your mouth, burning and intensely sour. You couldn’t bring yourself to speak, mouth curling. So you put the copies of your shot records and the apology letter on his desk, pushing them across the polished wood toward him.

“Oh.” He picked up the records, finally looking at you. “Thank you. This should be the final necessary step for your preparation. I’d begun to worry you’d forgotten.”

You shook your head. Eyes wide and searching, stomach falling into a bottomless pit, heart burning, *aching*, you stared at him. He didn’t appear even slightly out of place. Standing up from his chair,
you slowly rounded his desk until you stood in front of him. It was easier now that you were face to face to gather the strength to say what you wanted.

“I think we should call off the fake courtship.” That hadn’t been the first thing on your mind, but it tumbled out of your mouth. The compact weighed heavy in your pocket. “I don’t think I’m the right person for the job, anymore.”

Looking a bit taken aback by the sudden suggestion, he asked, “Is that why you didn’t show for the Altissian lesson yesterday?”

You nodded. Of course he knew about it already.

“You simply want to quit?”

Another nod, throat feeling tight. “I’m tired of this.”

His jaw tightened as he drew in a deep breath through his nose. Broad chest expanding, he said, “What you are is infuriating. I’ve spent months wondering why I care so much about you, how to stop it from growing stronger, reminding myself why it’ll do me no good in the long run. And I can’t find a single reason why I lov—” he tensed, shaking his head as he looked away, out the large window on the western wall.

What he’d almost said didn’t go unnoticed. So he really thought he felt that way, and he’d decided now, of all times, would be the best time to tell you. You refused to believe it after what you’d seen in the gardens. He could lie to himself all he wanted, but you weren’t going to fall for it.

“You don’t need reasons to care about someone, Ignis,” you spoke up, shifting your weight from one foot to the other. Your hands shook. “You just do. You think I wanted to get involved with an uptight asshole like you? You’re just a—”

He brought a hand to your jaw in a swift movement, smashing his lips to yours. It hurt, your teeth clashing lightly when he immediately coaxed you into a deeper kiss. He backed you into the desk, and you pressed back, hands on his chest.

“I tire of being upset with you,” he said, drawing away a little at your resistance. His forehead rested against yours.

You were tired of him being angry, too. You were tired of everything. You were still trying to process how he could go from kissing someone else to kissing you within minutes.

“I love you,” he whispered against your mouth.

You glared at him. “Don’t lie to me.”

Taking your lower lip between his teeth, he nipped at you, letting it go with a breathy chuckle. “Nothing could be closer to the truth.”

Your insides churned harder. This didn’t make sense. “Show me,” you breathed. It was selfish. You wanted him to prove this even though you knew it was the last thing you wanted to be true. You were desperate to feel like what you’d seen in the gardens meant nothing.

He straightened, covering your hands with his own over his chest. His heartbeat was steady against your palms. “I’ve felt nothing greater. Do you not feel the way it beats for you?”

You furrowed your brows. “No. Show me.”
Eyes widening slightly, he let out a quick breath. Then, his knee slid between your legs, rubbing against you as he leaned further in. He dropped his hands to your face and kissed you again, even harder this time. Before you could kiss back or do anything, he planted another at your jaw, then your cheek until he was swirling his tongue just below your ear. “Is this what you want?”

You nodded, hands gripping his shirt tightly, breaths coming out in quiet pants. He shifted his leg into you harder, grinding against you in slow movements. He was growing hard against your side, and a fire burned in you as hot as the new tears that threatened to fall from your eyes.

“Show me now.”

He let go of your jaw, hands coming to your waist to squeeze you almost painfully before lowering to the button of your jeans. You shoved his hands away, kicking off your shoes and shuffling out of the pants yourself. You fell back against his desk, staring up at the arching ceiling, listening to him undo himself.

Documents scattered beneath you as he thrust into you with enough force that the feet of his desk shrieked against the marble floor. You let out a broken moan. He crooked a leg at his elbow, arching over you impatiently and driving himself deeper. You weren’t wet enough to accept him so roughly, but you took the slight pain with a large amount of twisted enjoyment.

This wasn’t what you’d imagined, not in coming here and not in your past fantasies about having sex in his office. It still didn’t feel like reality because this wasn’t the Ignis you knew. You weren’t sure you knew Ignis at all, and the heavy feelings that drove his desire were as foreign to you as ever. You felt you deserved the pain of taking him so unreadily because, if he truly believed what he said, you were only going to hurt him later. You were achingly aware of this, even as you rocked with pleasure.

“I love you,” he repeated in a breath at the place between your neck and shoulder. It was tender, unlike the movements he made against you. He brought a hand underneath your head, cupping it to keep it from the repeated thumps against the desktop, his fingers curling in your hair gently. His mouth parted as he gazed at you softly, eyes brilliant and focused.

You were disgusted with yourself. By the look in his face, the certainty he held, you could tell he thought this was beautiful, a special moment shared after revealing how he felt.

“Please,” you said, a near whine. His lips grazed yours as his hips rocked against yours at an unrelenting pace. You wouldn’t say it in return; you weren’t going to pretend. You tilted your head away, digging nails into his shoulders. “Just fuck me, Iggy.”

The visit was brief. In and out. Just like you’d wanted.

—

Smoke wafted from the joint at your lips. The plants around you neutralizing the smell of the weed, not that you noticed it anymore. You could hear Aranea laughing at something downstairs. The day was calm. Dulcis had been right. The weather was too nice to ignore. So you sat on your balcony, lounging and forcing your mind to be blank.

Vision hazy, you blinked when you saw someone walking down the sidewalk on the other side of the street. Blond hair. Pale skin. His bag bouncing with the cheerful hitch in his step. He didn’t even look your way as he passed. Furrowing your brows when he disappeared around the corner, you picked up your phone and dialed his number.
He answered on the first ring. “Hey, I’m glad you finally—”

“Fuck you,” you said, feeling behind your words, misdirected at him.

“What the hell?” You heard him heave a breath, then a short cascade of footsteps. He reappeared at the corner, looking at your balcony and yelling, “What’s your problem?!” His voice carried over the phone and across the street.

You stood up, flicking away the remains of your unfinished joint. “Y-you were right. I’m in a bad place, and I’m really sorry, Prompto. You deserve a better friend than me.”

He sighed. “Don’t say that. I’m coming over.” He tried crossing the street but a passing car honked, making him jump back.

“Don’t,” you said, glaring at him though you doubted he could see it. “I look like shit.”

“Hey, me, too.” He laughed lightly. “I just got back from my shift at the cafe, and I smell like spoiled milk.”

“I mean it.” You didn’t want him to see how unhinged you really were. “Don’t come up.”

He crossed the street when it was clear. “If you don’t let me in, I bet Aranea will.”

She would’ve and you knew it. Taking a deep breath, you went inside to let him in. As you padded across your apartment, your throat tightened and you felt a strong wave of tears overcoming you. You hated crying in front of people. It was humiliating. You’d done a good job at holding off the waterworks ever since you’d left the Citadel.

But these were brought on from a different place. From realizing you had a friend who really did care about you unconditionally. When you opened the door, it was like a dam had burst. Prompto didn’t hesitate to pull you into a hug. He did smell like spoiled milk, and you inhaled the stench deeply, sobbing into his shirt. That’s what genuine love smelled like, you thought. Like salty tears and spoiled milk.

—

You sat on the balcony together, crying and talking until it was almost sunset. You’d promised yourself you’d tell him what was going on just in case things went wrong again, like they were now. He listened to every bit of it with little comment, though his expressions told you a lot of what he was thinking. When you finished unloading you thoughts and fears and speculations over Ignis, you touched a nearby plant, waiting for him to say something.

Instead, you heard an unexpected voice below you. “Go back to the part where you ran away from seeing him kiss the Lady.”

You stood up, leaning over the balcony awkwardly to see Aranea sitting below. She looked up at you with mild amusement.

Sighing, you sat back down. “How long have you been listening?”

“You know how it is,” she said. “Long enough. Now explain why you were a coward over the kiss.”

Looking at Prompto with a frown, you shook your head. He rose his brows, giving you an apologetic look as if her butting in were somehow his fault. You rolled your eyes.
“Why didn’t you stop them?” Aranea asked, pressing the issue. “You’re defiant about everything, but you ran away from that?”

You didn’t need her analyzing your entire day. Inhaling a deep breath, you said, “You weren’t there. I was frozen, and I just—I just couldn’t.”

Aranea didn’t even ask for further elaboration. “So you run, and what? He shows up in his office right after you? You don’t think he might’ve made a quick escape after she came onto him? You made it sound like you knew she was after him.”

Your frown deepened. “Because she’s always been after him. Everybody knows—”

“Right,” she interrupted. “She was pretty upset after you left the club with him that night we had that meeting. Makes sense now. That doesn’t explain why you didn’t try to stop her from assaulting him —”

You stood up, calling down, “You weren’t there, Aranea!”

Not the hesitant type like most of your friends, she seemed to get up as well, her voice louder. “I listened to you describe in detail what his eyes looked like while you fooled around on his desk. I didn’t have to be there. Your story doesn’t add up, kid, and you know it.”

Heart sinking because she was so much more perceptive than Prompto, you peered down at her again. “Aranea, you’re lucky I’m all dried out from crying, otherwise I’d drop a big slimer on you right the fuck now.”

She blinked, then huffed a small laugh. “A what?”

The skin on your face tight from dried tears, you said, “A loogie. A bogey. An uhh... Y’know what.” You looked over your shoulder at Prompto who’d stood up, his expression contemplative. “You do it for me, Prom. Get her with a big one.”

Immediately flustered, he joined you at the railing, batting away vines from some of your plants. “Dude, I-I’m not spitting on Aranea.”

Full and lovely, her laugh put you at ease temporarily. “How gentlemanly of you.”

He grinned down at her, sputtering out shy nonsense as you leaned into him.

Aranea made good points, and that was a big reason you wouldn’t have shared this particular set of issues with her by choice. You couldn’t deny that you were torn with anger and hurt over what you’d seen, abated only by what you’d taken of him in his office. Despite what you’d seen, you believed him.

He loved you, had shown you in a way that he knew you’d understand, and you wanted to throw that into Mirum’s face the moment you saw her again, but the stinging, conflicting feelings that throbbed in your heart bid you to not even bother. Because it wasn’t about her. It wasn’t even about Ignis. It was about you.

I find myself deeply in love with a person who doesn’t want to be loved.

You were the problem, and you were never going to change.
Thank you for reading this far and being so kind to me. <3 I also accept criticism, don’t be afraid to tell me how I suck. I expect this chapter to turn a lot of people off... but it’s always been coming so I dunno.

I hope you guys like cliche nonsense because the royal wedding is up next, and it’s going to be a category five shitstorm of drama. Probably.
You left Insomnia on a bus with a sleepy Prompto at three in the morning. On the way through the desert of Leide, you suddenly felt Prompto’s morning breath in your face.

“Do we there yet?” he mumbled, lifting his head as he woke from the immediate sleep he’d fallen into once the bus had left the station in Insomnia.

You jerked a thumb at the sprawling desert out the window, sending him a flat look. It was mid-morning and you were a little grumpy because, unlike Prompto, you hadn’t been able to get much sleep on the ride.

Instead of complaining, he enjoyed the view, leaning over you to gawk as if he hadn’t seen it before. You were meant to be in Galdin Quay by early afternoon, where you’d take a ferry to be in Accordo by nightfall. Noctis and the others had gone by airship and were probably already there. The rest of you, as commoners, had to take the scenic route.

Not that you were complaining. You were just excited to be so lucky to go. Not just to Accordo but to be a part of Noct’s big, life changing experience.

“I read online there aren’t any stops,” Dulcis spoke up from the seat in front of you. She turned around and held a bag over the headrest. “So I brought snacks.”

You returned her smile, taking the food and sharing it with Prompto. Dulcis had been nice company while he’d been asleep. Very distracting. She talked about almost anything and needed very little help in rambling.

“Are you tired? Here, use this.” She looked at you with mild concern, offering you a tiny bottle of some kind of lotion. “It’s a caffeine solution. Rub it under your eyes, and you’ll feel like you can take on the world.”

You snickered a little at her encouragement, following her advice and handing it back to her. Looking out the window, you asked, “You aren’t coming to take notes of everything and help Ignis are you?”
She shook her head. “No, I didn’t get an invitation. I’m going as Gladio’s guest.”

Oh yeah, you remembered Ignis mentioning that before. Prompto perked up at the mention of Gladio, and you rolled your eyes. He leaned forward a little, tilting his head. “You are? He didn’t say he was taking anyone.”

She waved it off. “It’s just a formality. He knew I wanted to go. I helped Lord Ignis so much, it was just a bit disheartening when I found out I wasn’t even invited. Besides, he has to take someone. As a noble and all.”

“He doesn’t have to take someone, right?” You looked at her a bit seriously, and she seemed surprised by your sudden question. “Is it really that big of a deal?”

With a shrug, she nodded. “I think so. There are a lot of underhanded political and social formalities that govern the nobles.” She giggled a little. “You know that. You’re courting with one.”

“Ignis isn’t taking anyone,” you told her. “Will that make him a target for being bullied by other nobles or something?”

She furrowed her brows, her face losing its humor. “He didn’t tell you?”

You could see from the corner of your eye how Prompto’s gaze teetered between you. “Tell me what?”

Dulcis frowned, looking more confused than anything. “He’s taking Mirum. She went with him in the airship this morning. I just got the message that they’d all left Insomnia an hour ago.”

You sat back, returning your gaze to the passing scenery. “Oh.”

Dulcis sat up, turning around fully in her seat to sputter, “Like I said! It’s only a formality.”

Tensing, you nodded. “Sure.”

Prompto’s hand grabbed yours, and a large part of you wished you weren’t so upset by the news. After Aranea had butted in on your crying fest, you’d decided to give Ignis the benefit of the doubt over the kiss you’d been so unlucky to witness. Mirum was pretty assertive, and Ignis could’ve been taken by surprise.

But this didn’t make sense to you. Ignis had said that going with her would mean accepting her advances. The thought that you were going to be treated like his side piece sprang to mind, and you sat with that thought, letting the anger build up into a heavy weight in your chest.

—

The rest of the ride was uneventful, Galdin Quay a welcome sight once you rounded the corner through the mountains and down the long hill. You stretched like a cat once outside, racing Prompto to the restaurant and sharing a dessert with Dulcis before making your way to the port.

“Hello there,” drawled a voice in the most ridiculous accent you’d ever heard. An interestingly dressed man sat on a bench just outside the port’s entrance. He gave your small group a little wave. “Goin’ to Altissia?”

“You know it,” you lied. The confidentiality of the wedding had been stressed so much, and you didn’t want to be the moron who’d accidentally tipped anyone off about it. Noct deserved the privacy he wanted. “Have any advice for newcomers?”
“Yeah,” he said, grinning at you in particular. “Watch out for street artists. Usually it’s a scam. And don’t fall in love.”

You took a step toward him. He was okay looking, and the accent was certainly entertaining. “It’s the most romantic city in the world. That’ll be a challenge.”

Brave man that he was —quite forward, at least— he stood up and reached for your hand. “I’m only sayin’ that because I want you to come back and fall in love with me, sweetheart.”

You laughed, looking over your shoulder at Prompto and Dulcis but they seemed to have found interest in other things. Prompto was snapping photos, and Dulcis was looking at a bulletin board.

Looking back at this guy who was the oddest mix of goofy, sleazy, and just a little cute, you introduced yourself.

“Name’s Dino,” he responded in kind. He let go of your hand, tucking his into his pockets. He winked at you, and wow it had been a while since you’d flirted with anyone new because that made your smile grow. “I hope I catch you on your way back.”

“Yeah, sure.” You nodded, completely abashed at the guy’s gall. He must not have seen many people hanging around the port if he was so taken by the first person to talk to him.

You hadn’t even been trying to hit on someone this time. The less you tried, the more people wanted you. That’s always how it seemed to go. And when you did win people over, you ultimately pushed them away. You’d never felt less sexy than you had in the last several days.

You’d left something behind in Ignis’ office. Your dignity, maybe.

—

The captain of the boat fussed at Prompto more than once on your journey across the sea. For going into places he shouldn’t, for leaning a bit too far over the railing, for yelling loudly in wonder at a few dolphins that breached the water near the ferry. He was like a kid, and you found it entertaining reigning him in. He was the perfect distraction.

The sun set on the sea to the west just as you were beginning to see land. Prompto threw an arm around you, easy as could be even though he’d consistently sent you long, scrutinizing looks all day. “We’re almost there. Are you excited?”

You inhaled the salty air, suppressing the biting pain in your chest. “Yeah. Totally.

He squeezed you. “It’ll be alright. We can just snub Iggy when we get there. Nobles like doing that kinda thing. He’ll realize what he did wrong. He loves you.”

Tilting your head, you rested it on his shoulder. “You’re the only one who loves me, Prom.”

He sighed, but didn’t say anything. Accordo was just an hour away, and the wait was spent like that, a supportive arm around you and a ball of dread in your stomach.

—

Cars were waiting for you at the port. Piling into one with Prompto and Dulcis, you heard the driver tell you welcome in broken Lucian. Even in the darkness of the early night, you took in all of the scenery with a misplaced sense of excitement. It wasn’t Altissia, but you were actually in Accordo. And it was pretty beautiful.
Narrow, winding roads. Miles beyond miles of blood orange groves that eventually opened up into a village. There didn’t seem to be sidewalks, the driver slowing occasionally on the cobblestone roads for pedestrians walking in the streets. You passed a large statue of a man in the middle of a square, and Prompto gasped, quickly snapping a picture.

The resort where everything was happening was gated, and guards checked everyone’s IDs before you were let in. If the trip hadn’t already felt pretty official when you’d clambered onto the bus in Insomnia, it did now. You were all ushered inside, into a large lobby where people took your bags and piled them onto trolleys. Dulcis was attended to separately once you checked in, and it was only minutes before you were looking around your suite with Prompto in uncontained awe.

“Two beds!” Prompto threw himself onto one, face buried in the plush blankets. He said something more, but it was too muffled to make out.

You looked over the wedding greetings and schedule placed on a table, fingers tracing the logo on a bottle of fine wine next to it. The label indicated that it was bottled the year you —and Prompto— were born. Oddly specific. It was like every detail had been planned out perfectly. This was fancier than anywhere you’d ever been in your life. “Why are you excited about two beds?”

He raised his head, looking at you with a grin. “You have the power to maim in your sleep. I should probably warn Iggy before he finds out the hard way.”

“He already knows,” you murmured, drawing your hand away from the wine and looking at him. “So, I noticed there’s a meet and greet going on, like, right now. Wanna head down and mingle with the nobles?”

Groaning, he dropped his face back into the blankets. You felt much the same. It had been a really long trip. Then again, you wanted to see if what Dulcis had said was true. Not that you knew how to deal with Ignis yet. You were still unpacking those feelings. Every time you tried, you withdrew into yourself further. It was best left to deal with after all of the celebrations.

At the very least, you could indulge yourself in some alcohol to help get by because the schedule of events had clearly stated that absolutely everything was included.

—

Taking a flute of champagne from a server, you downed it in one large gulp, strictly avoiding a certain part of the lounge. Ignis stood next to Mirum, talking in a small circle of finely dressed people. The more he smiled, the more you frowned.

Prompto had come down with you, sticking by your side and talking with people awkwardly if they deigned to speak first. He’d been hesitant, but you could tell he was growing more excited to be there as people spoke to him. Noct was nowhere to be found, unsurprisingly, and Gladio had nestled himself on a sofa with a veritable gaggle of gorgeous women.

You sighed, eyes alighting when you caught sight of Iris. Skittering past a few people, you touched her arm. “Hey, it’s been a while.”

She smiled at you. “Yeah! Isn’t this amazing?”

You nodded, peeking in Ignis’ direction occasionally as the conversation went on. It was as if you didn’t exist to him. You were beginning to wish you didn’t exist at all.

—
“What have we here?”

A middle aged man in arguably one of the strangest outfits present—Tenebraen fashion?—approached you with a long grin. You gave Prompto a wide eyed look, and he returned it with a shrug.

“Oh, hi,” you said, hating it as soon as it came out of your mouth. Introducing yourself, you held out a hand to shake, then retracted it to bow. Fuck. How did this go, again? Ignis had mentioned it before, but your mind was all jumbled.

He watched you with amusement, then held out his own hand as if you were supposed to, what, kiss it? You just stared at it for a few long seconds before he dropped it with a light laugh. He introduced himself in turn, but his name fell to the wayside when he said he was a video producer in Tenebrae. He carried on about himself for a while, long enough that Prompto wandered off.

The Producer was here on behalf of his lover, a Tenebraen baroness who couldn’t attend because her husband was ill due to an unfortunate case of playing too much croquet. It was an inspired tale, really.

“That young man recommended I speak with you,” he said, pointing in a general direction. Looking that way had you meeting Ignis’ eyes. He gave you a small smile that you didn’t return. You averted your gaze as the Producer continued. “I heard much about you and your aspirations to direct. Though, I must be quite frank, I specialize in music.”

You rose a brow. “Like musicals?”

“Like music videos.”

“Oh,” you said, grabbing another glass of champagne from a tray as a server passed by. So he wasn’t a major producer or anything. Still, you had more in common with him than any other stranger there. “Better than porn, I guess.”

“Better than *most* porn,” he corrected with another light laugh. He seemed easygoing, and the longer you spoke with him, the more you realized he was also superficially judgemental. There it was, the sign that he truly was in the entertainment industry.

“Fake.” He nodded at a woman and patted his chest.

You checked her out, the mild buzz from the champagne a comfort to your stressed mind and spirit. “Super hot, though.”

“Incredibly hot,” he agreed with a nod.

Not once did you talk about anything related to film, but you were having fun with him, in a way. So when he called you “a fucking delight” and gave you his information, you didn’t hesitate to share yours in return. At least networking wasn’t an issue, even if you were just a depressed, drunk friend of the groom.

—

Drying your hair with a towel, you left the bathroom and walked across the suite to let Prompto have a turn. “Are you excited about the spa day today?”

“Spa day?” He crawled out of his bed and rummaged through a bag for his schedule. Of course he didn’t have it. When you handed him the general schedule that had been left in the room, he sighed
heavily.

“That’s not fair. The spa day is for the bride and the women only.” He pouted at you. “Seems pretty sexist if you ask me.”

You snickered, watching him make faces at the schedule. “What’s on your agenda, then?”

He tossed the schedule back onto the table, rattling the bottle of wine a little. “Deep sea fishing. Until dinner. I can’t believe this is Noct’s idea of a bachelor party.”

As he trudged toward the bathroom, you laughed. “I can.”

—

You met Lady Lunafreya for the first time in a bathrobe. Her hands were delicate, squeezing yours as she thanked you for being such a good friend to Noctis. It was hard to be upset around her, and you felt yourself relaxing at first.

Mirum seemed to want to sit near you, passing by the attendants who were trying to seat her in a chair somewhere else. She smiled when she relaxed next to you, saying, “I can’t believe we’re finally here. Some days this felt impossible.”

You chewed on your lip, examining her face without a response. It was the first time you’d ever seen it bare. She seemed a lot less perfect, but still pretty. It made you uncomfortable, envy biting at you just a bit.

The masseuse at your feet paused as you squirmed. “Am I tickling you?”

You shook your head, using it as a chance to escape the conversation with Mirum before it could even begin.

The morning stretched on, everyone prattling about whatever nonsense nobles liked to waste time on. Mirum kept trying to talk to you, but you gave her the coldest shoulder in Eos. You may as well have been Shiva reincarnate. It was pissing you off, though, the way she acted like you were close to each other in front of the other nobles. Even before you’d seen her with Ignis, you hadn’t exactly considered her a good friend. A good person, maybe, but now even that seemed unfitting.

The only time you spoke up was when you asked Lunafreya how the proposal had happened since Noctis wouldn’t ever tell you. Turned out it had been through some magical book? You weren’t sure you understood it, but joined the others in the chorus of coos of how romantic it was when she finished the story.

You couldn’t wait to rag on him about it.

“Tell us about your date,” a nameless Tenebraen noble said, looking at you. Her accent was a little thick, like most of the Tenebraens you met, and you were glad they’d chosen to speak Lucian while here. “He’s very cute. I saw him last night but didn’t get a chance to talk with him.”

You talked Prompto up to the women, hoping he’d have a growing fanclub by the end of the day. Questions about everyone’s dates made the rounds, and it was the first time you’d ever experienced a genuine rush of what it must’ve felt like to be a worry free noblewoman, chatting about nonsense. Dulcis looked equally as fascinated with the entire thing.

When questions arose about Mirum’s date, she looked at you before speaking.
“Why don’t you ask my friend?” She waved a hand at you. “He’s courting to marry her.”

Across the room, it looked like Iris’ eyes were going to pop out of her head as she squealed in excitement. “It’s finally out in the open now?” She gave you the widest grin, and your stomach turned inward on itself, twisting at the turn of conversation.

“I don’t have much to say,” you said with a shrug, fighting the irritation you felt. “The wallet’s fat and the dick’s thick, what else could I ask for?”

A sort of awkward air settled after your answer, and you realized the audience wasn’t quite right for such a dryly delivered inappropriate statement. As the others began to talk amongst themselves, your apparently too forward comment ending the discussion of dates, Mirum looked over at you with a curious smile.

“You’re not holding anything back, are you, dear?” She sounded amused, and it grated at you. You sent her a glare, the quiet rage that had festered in you all morning bubbling up to the surface. “I’m surprised you’re holding back.”

Mirum’s smile waned into shock, and she sat up in her seat, delicate brows drawing together. “Excuse me?”

“I saw you together,” you said, unable to stop yourself now that you’d finally said something. It didn’t feel good, but it was better than keeping it in. “In the Citadel gardens the other day. You were shoving your tongue down his throat.”

She blinked several times, jaw growing slack. “You saw that?”

Hearing her confirm that—the tiniest part of you had entertained the idea that it was all in your head—made the tear at your chest cut just a little deeper.

“Y’know, he fucked me in his office like five minutes later.” Your hands were shaking, and you didn’t feel like giving her a chance to respond before more words tumbled out of you, fueled by spite. “I bet it’s nice, coming here as his date. Did you get lucky last night? I somehow doubt it, knowing him.”

Slowly, she returned your glare, finally dropping the pretense of being a friend. “I’ll have you know we didn’t.”

“I bet you tried.”

She had the audacity to blush, pink overtaking her bare, angry face. “And if I did?”

You scoffed, hand gripping the armrest of your chair as you turned to her fully. “You stupid bitch, even if we broke up, he wouldn’t court you. He doesn’t want to court anyone. The only reason I’m with him is to protect him from people like you.” You were scowling and the room had gone quiet.

Her glare faltered for a moment. “He brought me as his date for a reason.”

You snorted derisively. “Because I turned him down.” Seeing the flash of hurt on her face gave you a sick sense of enjoyment. You didn’t like hurting other people, women especially because it was hard enough out here, but you couldn’t control the anger you felt. Letting out a sigh and trying to manage your animosity, you eased up on your glare. “Look, he’s all yours. I don’t care anymore. If you want any pointers, just flirt with him a lot, and eventually, he’ll let you suck his dick.”
The room was tense, and even the attendants were looking around as if they weren’t sure what they were supposed to do.

Mirum’s gaze went to the hands on her lap for a moment before she looked around at the faces in the room. “Please excuse me.”

She made to get up, but you stood first, knocking the masseuse back. “No, I’ll go. I feel sick anyway.”

You gave Lunafreya an apologetic look on your way out, the reality of what you’d just said hitting you in full force. You shouldn’t have confronted Mirum like that in the middle of the party, in front of mostly strangers. You hadn’t planned to confront her at all, but her overly friendly behavior had become too much.

You got dressed, grabbing one of the two joints you’d been able to bring. Smoking in the room wasn’t ideal because Prompto would get annoyed by the lingering smell so you left, wandering the resort for a secluded area to get high and drift away from reality for a few hours.

Just off the lobby, outside and around the lush entrance was a small alcove in the building. It was blocked by thick bushes, and you pushed your way through a gap in them. It was perfect. Except for one thing. A man.

He was sat on a crate, and when you stopped after emerging from the brush, he turned his bored expression on you. Acting as if this were totally normal, you nodded at him and walked over to one of the several crates that littered the area and sat on it.

You felt his eyes on you as you flicked your lighter over and over with no give. Sighing, you let the joint hang from your mouth and shoved the lighter back into a pocket. Of all the times for it to run out of fluid.

“The gods really hate me,” you grumbled, kicking at a nearby crate.

“Here.”

Looking up, you saw the man striking a match. He’d put a cigarette to his lips, and after lighting it, he stretched his arm your way with the lit match between long fingers.

“Thanks,” you mumbled, meeting him halfway and letting him light the joint.

You sent him glances, the time passing in silence save for the birds chirping and the wind blowing. He was tall, had silvery hair despite not appearing to be beyond his late twenties, and didn’t look like he’d ever smiled a day in his life. He had to be from Luna’s side of the wedding party because you didn’t recognize him at all. He had a sword attached to his side, and you wondered if he was some kind of special guard.

“Are you hiding?” You weren’t sure why you asked, but curiosity was getting the better of you.

“Is that why you’re out here?” He was quick to respond, not looking at you. His gaze was aimed at the bit of sky you could see between the lip of the alcove and the top of the bushes. Clouds passed slowly. You watched them for a few beats.

His Tenebraen accent told you that your assumption had been right. Though, his was less pronounced, as if he’d known Lucian much longer than the other nobles you’d spoken to so far.
You slowly looked down at the dust of ash he continually flicked to the ground. “I guess you could say that.”

He didn’t say why he was out there, turning to you with a look of mild interest. “From what are you hiding?”

“I might’ve caused a scene at the bride’s spa party.”

His expression hardly changed, but his brows furrowed ever so slightly. “Did you upset Lunafreya?”

“What?” You gave him an incredulous look. “No, but I looked like a hateful asshole.”

“Good that you left, then.” He looked away, back up at the sky, taking a long drag before dropping the unfinished cigarette and stepping on it. “I should’ve known Prince Noctis’ guests would be the type to cause trouble. Particularly you commoners.”

“Rude.” You felt defensive. Sure, you were a mess, but none of the other commoners had done anything wrong. “I’m guessing you’re some Tenebraen Duke or something, right? Duke of being an asshole. Ruling over your asshole duchy in the southern fork of Tenebrae where all the assholes like you live.”

“Eloquent speech. Has anyone ever told you what a ghastly presence you exude?”

You blew out a puff of smoke, chuckling despite yourself. “I’ve actually been told I’m a fucking delight.”

Your phone chimed in your pocket, and you checked it to find a message from Prompto. Apparently, he was miserable and had been smacked around by three large fish already. He sent a photo along with it. In the corner, just behind him and Noct, Ignis was looking at something out of the frame, wiping his glasses with a handkerchief.

He hadn’t reached out to you once. Not a single time since you’d left his office. There hadn’t even been the how was your trip? message you’d fully expected. It was like he wanted to purposely let you stew in your own confusion and distress. You sighed, sending a laughing emoji and putting your phone away.

“Why aren’t you fishing?” You looked at the man, trying to think about literally anything besides Ignis.

He’d been looking at you and didn’t stop when you met his gaze. “I’m not particularly fond of the hobby, and I won’t be missed.”

Well, that was succinct. You let the topic drop. “Right.”

You wanted to make the joint last, but you were burning through it. Your head felt lighter, your limbs looser, so at least it was doing its job.

“Who’d you bring to the wedding?” You needed to fill the air with something. If it wasn’t smoke, words would have to do.

“No one.” He sounded bored. Didn’t he have anything better to do than sit around here? “It’s precisely why I find myself in this filthy alcove.”

You giggled, resting your chin in your hand, elbow on your knee. “So you are hiding. From the women, I guess?”
“From everyone. I hadn’t expected anyone to be absurd enough to crawl through the brush to this hidden place.”

“Yet here I am.”

“Yes, whoever you are.”

Telling him your name, you finished what was left of the joint and put it out against the ground. “What about you?”

He rose a brow, the most interest in the conversation he’d shown so far. “You don’t know?”

You shrugged. “Should I?”

He looked away, mouth twitching with a suppressed smile. When his eyes met yours, he narrowed them slightly. “Ravus.”

It didn’t ring a bell. You eyed him for a bit longer, lingering on the way his hand kept touching the hilt of the sword. He was probably the Tenebraen Gladio for Lunafreya or something. It was the only thing that made sense that he’d be sticking around the resort, hiding from the estrogen rush inside.

“Wanna go to the bar, Ravus?” You stood up from the crate and stretched. You felt relaxed and hazy.

He surprised you by following you through the brush, back out into the open. It was good that no one was nearby to come to conclusions about such suspicious behavior. You grinned up at him, but he only pursed his lips, looking away.

“I’m only joining to ensure you don’t cause any undue dramatic situations that might distress the princess.”

You raised your hands. “Cool with me. I’ll totally behave from now on.”

—

Ravus drank similarly to you, simple with no frills, and it put you even more at ease. He didn’t talk much, but he answered whatever dumb questions popped into your mind. All in all, he wasn’t as much of an ass as you’d originally estimated.

You periodically checked your phone for a reply from Prompto. Or something from Ignis. But there was nothing from either.

“Is my company so terrible you find staring at the time more interesting?”

Your eyes snapped to Ravus. Was he serious? His expression was hard to read. He didn’t seem like the type to joke so you shrugged.

“No, I’m just hoping for a message from someone.”

He didn’t ask who you were hoping to hear from. Which was annoying because you really wanted him to. So, like you had with everything thus far in your short acquaintanceship, you just opened your mouth and said whatever.

“My boyfriend is Noct’s royal advisor. Do you know him?”
Ravus took a sip from his glass. “Scientia? I know of him.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not good for each other.” You peered down into the amber liquid in your own cup.

“How terrible.”

You drank what was left in your glass, pushing it toward the bartender for a refill. “It is. You don’t even know.”

He tapped fingertips on the bar idly, and you continually got the feeling that he didn’t care to know. But that was too bad. It was one in the afternoon and you were slightly drunk and pretty high.

Taking the new glass from the bartender with a grateful nod, you said, “I saw him with someone else back in the Crown City. I was gonna confront him, but I don’t know what happened. We had— I mean, we just— and then he said— ugh, anyway, now I don’t know what to do. I keep clamming up at the thought of facing him.”

“Avoidance rarely ever solves issues.”

It surprised you that he spoke up. Surprised you he was even listening. “I know. But I can’t get it off my chest. I confronted the other person and looked like a total asshole. It’ll be even worse if I say anything to him here, but it’s taking up so much space in my mind that I can’t even enjoy the celebrations.”

He hummed, sounding almost impatient. “It’s simple. For the sake of others, do it quickly, subtly, and privately.”

You sent him a long look that didn’t phase him. “Quick and private I can do, but subtle isn’t really possible.”

He shrugged, saying nothing more. So that was the end of his advice? Figured. You thought on his words. You could try for subtlety. Pulling out your phone, you typed a quick message to Ignis and hit send before you could overthink it.

You: How are you?

It was simple and subtle. Sure, it seemed like a pretty normal message but you despised niceties, and Ignis knew that. His response was surprisingly quick, coming less than five minutes later.

Ignis: I’ve had worse days, but the smell of fish on my person may be permanent after this ordeal. How are you?

You stared at it for long enough that Ravus snapped his fingers, catching your attention.

“You’re in a daze. Did you get what you wanted?”

You shook your head, putting your phone away without responding. Ignis was talking to you, but it wasn’t really what you were hoping for. You were being too subtle. Taking another drink and wincing a little at the burn of it, you turned to Ravus.

“So why the sword?”

Without missing a beat, he rolled a shrug over his shoulders. “Not everyone can summon weapons at will like the Lucian royalty. A noble should always be prepared.”
You hadn’t known weapon summoning was a thing Noct could do. If you were him, you would’ve bragged about that kind of thing all the time. Then again, if you were him, you would’ve wasted a lot of time on tawdry things and had a harem of babes on your arms by now instead of a wedding. You would’ve made a pretty disastrous princess, you thought.

It wasn’t until Prompto beelined past the bar for the elevators that you realized all of the guys were back.

“The boys are back in town,” you sang quietly, just drunk enough to be leaning toward Ravus with a grin as if you’d known him your entire life. “Sing with me, Ravus.”

“I think you’ve had enough for now,” he said, motioning for the bartender to take the remaining drinks.

You pouted but didn’t argue. Something told you that the bartender would listen to him over you without question.

Snickering to yourself, you asked, “Will you sing with me if it’s a Tenebraen song?” You knew one, and it was a nursery rhyme. He had to know it. “What about Au Clair de la Lune?”

He inhaled a deep breath through his nose, giving you an unamused look. It bothered you that he, in the smallest of ways, reminded you of Ignis. He had none of Ignis’ warmth or beauty, but he was kind of handsome in a purely exotic sense. You’d never been with a Tenebraen. Maybe that’s why you were so intent on bothering him.

“Au clair de la lune,” you began, laughing a little between lines. “Mon ami Perriot, pré—uh, prête—wait, how does it go?” You grabbed his sleeve, curling your fingers into the fine fabric.

With surprising patience, he pried your hand off, placing it on the bar. He held it there, probably to keep you from grabbing him again. “It’s prête-moi ta lume pour écrire un mot.” He didn’t sing it, saying it plainly but with a grace that naturally came along with the language.

“What does it mean?” You reached for him with your other hand, but he grabbed it as well, larger hands ensconcing your own. His hands were cold, and his palms were calloused.

How someone could seem so sober after so many drinks, you certainly wanted to know. Actually, he was kind of a big guy. No Gladio, but who was, really? His voice was curt and almost abrasive in nature, but his hands were gentle. A contradiction. “It loosely translates to Lend me your light so that I may write.”

You blinked heavily. “Huh.” Looking over, you noticed the bartender had placed water in front of you. Ugh, now you had to sober up and try to act like a decent human being.

“Good afternoon.”

You jumped a little at the voice, hands jerking away from Ravus. Over your shoulder, you saw Ignis standing near the bar’s archway entrance. He wore something equally as nice but different than what he’d had on in the picture Prompto had sent earlier. You noticed it immediately because you may or may not have looked at that photo several times over throughout the time you’d spent at the bar.

He’d cleaned up, smelling decidedly unlike fish when he took a seat on the other side of you. “Lord Ravus,” he said with a nod at the other man.
You followed his gaze and found Ravus’ expression to be just as hard and unreadable as ever.

“Scientia,” he replied, resting a hand on the bar to shove himself up. He straightened the sleeve of his shirt before looking at you with astute seriousness. “It would behoove you to heed my advice.”

You watched him leave, feeling somewhat abandoned. He would’ve been a great buffer but clearly didn’t want to get involved. Turning to Ignis, you realized he was staring at you with a small frown. You didn’t know what you were going to say, but you knew you had to say something.

You both spoke at once, stopping abruptly to tell the other to speak. With a sigh, he went first.

“I’m beginning to think, considering the circumstances, that I shouldn’t have given you so much space these past days.”

You rested your elbow on the bar, head in hand. “What circumstances?”

His eyes went to the entrance where Ravus had disappeared, then back to you. “You’re drunk.”

You frowned back at him. “I’m not that drunk.”

“It’s barely three in the afternoon,” he said, brows pinching in a glare. “And I find you at the bar, draped over another man. Forgive my concern as both your friend and lover, but it has become apparent that you didn’t use any of the time or space I gave you to consider quitting this behavior.”

You lifted your head, looking away from him to the water in front of you. Your mind was on pause as you stared into the glass. The ice rattling around in it was large and spherical. You poked at it with your straw.

“You said it would be weird and everyone would get the wrong idea.” You took a generous drink from the glass of water and wiped your mouth with the back of your hand. “So you came with her because you don’t care anymore or because you want people to get the wrong idea. Which is it?”

He stared at you for a beat, then looked away. “If I’m to be honest, I’d asked her to be my date because I’d wanted you to eat your own words.”

Finishing off the water, you felt a little better. You thanked the bartender in Altissian, and he rolled his eyes while taking your glass. With a long look at Ignis, you said, “Explain.”

“You said it didn’t matter who I came with, if anyone at all.” He met your eyes, brilliant green pulling you in. You’d always liked his eyes. “I’d childishly hoped you’d become jealous.”

Chewing on your lip, you looked from one of his eyes to the other. You were drunk enough that you considered kissing him because damn did you really like him. Instead you sighed. “That’s okay, Ignis. I’m not the jealous type. You can do whatever you want.”
His eyes searched yours in return. “How can you say that?”

You were growing tired of this conversation. Getting down from the barstool, you stretched a little. Wow, you’d been there for a while, your back was aching. “You’re gonna do whatever you want anyway, right?”

He turned to face you, but didn’t move to get up. “I wasn’t aware relationships worked in such a way.” He sounded upset, though his expression remained searching and confused. “Are you giving me allowances because you intend to be with other people yourself?”

A slow, drunken giggle escaped you. Reaching a hand up, you patted his cheek. “That’s a huge leap in logic, Iggy. You’re better than that.” You drew your hand away, smiling at him. “I have to get ready for the rehearsal dinner. I’ll see you later, okay?”

You didn’t wait for his response before you went on your way toward the exit. You were excited to hear about the fishing trip. Even though Prompto probably had mostly complaints. Which was fine. You could commiserate on your individual experiences with shitty wedding parties.

—

“He’s really quiet, but when he does talk, it’s worth hearing,” you said as you fixed your hair.

In the mirror, getting ready behind you across the room, Prompto sent you a confused look. “Okay?”

“I’m just saying it was more relaxing sitting with him than it was in the spa today.”

“Who is he?” Prompto was struggling with his tie. “I thought all the guys went fishing with us.”

“I dunno. His name is Ravus.” You smiled at the memory of him reciting the Tenebraen lullaby to you in the bar. Maybe you should learn that language next. It was kind of sexy. “He’s a bodyguard for Lunafreya, I think.”

The tie fumbled out of Prompto’s hands and flopped to the floor. “Really? That’s, uh, something.” He picked it up and began to tie it again. “Did you talk to Iggy? He asked about you. Like more than once.”

“Yeah, I told him I don’t care about the Mirum thing.”

His eyes widened. “You told him you saw the kiss?”

“Oh, no.” You shook your head. “Just about coming here with her.”

“But you do care.”

Finished with your hair, you turned around to face him with a small smile. “We’re going to break off the fake courtship soon anyway. Then I’ll move back to my mom’s for the summer so I won’t see him for a while. I figured I’d just….” You shrugged.

His jaw dropped a little, brows furrowing. “You’re gonna ghost him? Iggy?”

You shrugged again. This was how you normally dealt with things. You’d known relationships weren’t your style from the beginning. It had been fun for a while at least. This way, you wouldn’t have to confront Ignis about Mirum or your fear of his love at all. He’d move on in your absence, and you could maybe look at him without feeling sick again when you moved back to the city in the fall.
You weren’t so optimistic as to think you’d ever be friends again, but it was also hard to imagine a life without him.

You just had to make it through this trip, and you’d be home free to figure out the details later.

—

You clapped the loudest for Prompto’s speech during the rehearsal dinner. He’d changed the story about Noctis like you’d suggested, and didn’t call Lunafreya every synonym for beautiful in one long run-on sentence. It was perfect. When he returned to his seat at your side, you squeezed his arm reassuringly. At his own table with Lunafreya, Noctis looked flustered but happy. It was easy to forget your own problems in all this excitement for your friend’s big life change.

Dulcis sat on your other side, and she kept sending you apologetic looks. You ignored them, smiling at her occasionally and trying to keep the conversation going between everyone around you. That stopped abruptly when Ravus gave a toast, seeming almost begrudging in its delivery as he told Noctis to take the best care of his sister.

As he sat down, you gave Prompto a wide eyed look. “He’s a prince?” you whispered frantically. “Why didn’t you tell me I spent all day bitching to a prince?”

He returned the look, raising his hands a little as if in defeat. “I wasn’t gonna say anything because you’re already upset enough about Iggy.”

You sighed, looking around the table and finding a few eyes on you over your whispering outburst. The hardest pair to deal with were from Ignis, who had sent you several meaningful looks that went ignored throughout the dinner.

Next to him, Mirum ate quietly, pretending you didn’t exist. It seemed like she was pretending no one existed, keeping her chin up and shoulders squared. It was almost admirable that she was able to retain her dignity at all times.

Ignis sent you another, incredibly subtle glance, eyes flicking toward the door as if he wanted to meet you outside for something. You awkwardly cleared your throat and returned to eating. You still couldn’t face him, even if you got him somewhere private so that you could do it quickly and subtly. What would you say? You didn’t have the faintest idea of how to approach him about any of it. His feelings for you, his ambiguous relationship with Mirum, and the growing dread that filled you by the hour.

You spent the dinner ignoring him because you wanted to enjoy this. When would you ever get to attend another royal wedding? One being held in Accordo, of all places. This should’ve been a life-changing experience, but all of your excitement was dampened by the ever increasing feeling you had that things were going to go terribly wrong.

—

Dulcis grabbed your hand as soon as you met her in a lounge area just off the lobby. She squeezed it so hard, it took you by surprise. Throughout the dinner, she’d seemed off, but you hadn’t realized it had anything to do with you specifically. She had been sending you a lot of annoying looks.

“It’s not your fault, Dulcis.” You tried to calm her. She was being too loud. There wasn’t anyone else in the
lounge, but you didn’t want anymore attention. Not over this. You were tired of thinking and talking about it.

“But I feel like I should’ve noticed. I see him almost every day.” She began quietly, but grew louder again with each sentence. “Mirum used to come by all the time. How long do you think it’s been going on? He never seemed like the kind of person to do this!”

Her distress caught the attention of an attendant, and you told them to bring you something strong from the bar.

“One for each of us, and just keep them coming,” you said as they nodded, walking away. You sat Dulcis down on a plush sofa. “First of all, you need to get a grip. Second, Ignis didn’t invent infidelity, okay?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “I know. But I’ve never respected anyone more than him. He works so hard, and he’s the best boss I’ve ever had. It’s disappointing that even the best of them can be like that.”

That was a very black and white way of thinking. People had reasons behind their actions, things that drove them. Everyone had goals in mind and hidden issues.

You couldn’t even begin to try understanding Ignis and what drove him to do everything he did. You recognized the apparent love he had for his profession, and for Noctis, that kept him going. It was the rest that made no sense. The secrets he kept had purposes that you couldn’t pinpoint.

You thanked the attendant when they handed you a drink. Dulcis sipped from hers, but you had the attendant bringing you another within minutes. This was way too much thinking for you.

A few other guests came into the lounge. You recognized the Producer, who smiled widely at you. And Ravus. They hadn’t entered together, but you stood up to wave them both over. The Producer motioned that he wanted to make a phone call, and Ravus blew you off entirely, walking past to sit by himself in a different part of the room.

You followed him, not that you were trying to get away from Dulcis. Or maybe you were. “Why didn’t you correct me when I called you the Duke of Assholes? I can’t believe you’re a prince.”

He didn’t have his sword, oddly casual as he sat back in a large armchair. “I can’t believe you didn’t know who I am.”

You sat across from him, sloshing your drink just a little bit on your dress. You gave him an incredulous look. “Who takes the time to research royal families from foreign countries?”

“Who attends a royal wedding not knowing the potential royalty she may meet?” he was quick to fire back. Everything about him was calm, and you got the impression that he was examining you by the way his eyes mapped a course over your frame.

The attendant was back, giving you a new glass. That made Ravus raise a brow, but he remained quiet, which you appreciated. Yes, you were clearly drunk. Yes, you were still drinking more. No, you didn’t need someone giving you shit over it. If Prompto or Ignis were to show up, you would’ve lost your mind. You’d left your phone in your room to keep yourself from sending Ignis anything stupid or desperate. Drinking with near strangers was more fun than wallowing in your worry. You were stabilizing yourself anyway by eating the nuts that were offered in small dishes throughout the lounge.

You were going to be fine.
Things became a blur the longer you sat with the prince who seemed to reluctantly humor you with conversation. At some point, someone played the piano that sat in one corner of the room. It was beautiful and made you want to dance. Drunk and dancing alone. It had never bothered you before, and you weren’t going to let it now.

The last thing you remembered was someone holding you, your cheek pressed against their hard, warm chest as you stumbled with them into a guest room.

They didn’t smell as amazing as Ignis, but damn was it a familiar sort of old comfort to be in the arms of someone who didn't give a shit about you.

Chapter End Notes

My city is in a state of emergency right now because of a hurricane so I don't know what that means as far as internet goes since it's a bit spotty at the moment. I thought I would just post what I'd written so far and get the second half of the wedding trip out whenever.

Of course, I made sure to end it at the least provocative moment... A million thanks for reading and suffering with me for a bit. <3
I may not have had sex, but I could fuck you up.

Chapter Summary

This is it. This is the worst day of your life.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for this heavy soap opera of a chapter having, probably, the silliest title so far. I have zero class.

Thank you for all of the well wishes. Luckily it's only torrential rain with the occasional power outage so far, but gives me a reason to stay inside and have no life all weekend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It felt as if your head were split open. Like a melon after an unfortunate altercation with a mallet. Sunlight burned at your eyes when you opened them, and you hissed. In a daze, you peered around. You were in a resort guest room. Not your own because none of the things you could see in the room were yours or Prompto’s.

Far from being the first time you’d woken up in an unfamiliar bed, you tossed the blankets off of yourself and stretched. You were still wearing the dress from the night before so that was something. You vaguely remembered coming here with someone, but couldn’t place who. Smacking your lips to get some kind of moisture going in the desert of your mouth, you froze at the sight of Ravus appearing from the bathroom.

Indifferent to your presence, he went to a mirror and began affixing something at his collar. Tenebraen fashion really was interesting. Even half dressed, he looked nice. You watched him until he seemed to grow impatient. He glanced at you over his shoulder.

“Are you well enough to show yourself out?”

This was the worst hangover you’d ever felt in your life. The pain in your skull may as well have been Ramuh himself striking your brain with lightning. But you knew you could manage.

Out of the bed and slipping into your shoes, you grunted grumpily. He was so cold and straightforward. Not even an offer of breakfast? You looked at his reflection in the mirror and asked, “We didn’t have sex, did we?”

He frowned, and it was the most expressive you’d ever seen him as he gave you a look that spoke complete disbelief. “Under no circumstances would that ever come to happen.” Turning back to his reflection, he continued in a matter of fact tone. “You drank yourself under the piano last night. I couldn’t find anyone who knew you or the room in which you’re staying so I brought you to mine to sleep it off in my extra bed.”

Seconds passed before you fully comprehended what he said. You being drunk near anyone
remotely attractive usually meant more than just sleeping things off. “I didn’t come on to you at all?”

His movements slowed for a moment as he looked at you in the mirror. “If your idea of seduction is
to blubber about how I don’t compare to Scientia, ultimately deciding I’m okay enough before falling
unconscious, then yes. You certainly tried your hand at sleeping with me.”

Covering your face with your hands, you sighed. It was a relief you hadn’t slept with him, but the
fact that you’d apparently spent the entire evening talking about Ignis was a little embarrassing.

“It was almost enough cause for me to leave you in the lounge,” he continued, tone serious. “But I
heard rumor of a Lucian Duke on the premises with a reputation for taking advantage of people like
you.”

You dropped your hands. “People like me?”

Ravus rolled a casual shrug over his shoulders. “Young women susceptible to suggestion and
undeterred by bad decisions.”

You opened your mouth to rebuke him, but he had you pinned to a T. So you closed your mouth and
pouted a little, looking at the bed you’d climbed out of. There was a bottle of water on the nightstand
next to it. Ravus was a bit cold, but he’d done something nice in bringing you here.

You bit your lip, confused by the way he made it seem so normal that he’d help someone like you.
“Thanks. It probably wasn’t easy getting me here.”

“You were a quivering mess in my arms. The difficult part was making sure you didn’t vomit on
everything.”

While thinking to ask if you had gotten sick anywhere, you noticed the strange wording of his first
sentence. “I was what?”

Looking satisfied with his state of dress, he turned to you. “Pardon?”

You pointed at him. “You said I was a quivering mess in your arms. You can’t say stuff like that, or
I’ll really think we slept together.”

He blinked, unbothered. “I can see what you mean, but it’s no matter. You worry about absurd
things, don’t you?”

You sighed, dropping your hand and wishing your head would stop throbbing. “I’m leaving.
Thanks, again.”

You patted yourself down, freaking out for a moment when you realized you didn’t have your phone
on you. Then you remembered you’d purposely left it in the room to keep you from sending any
more messages to Ignis while drunk.

Finally making your way out the door, you gave Ravus a final wave that he didn’t return. You’d bet
anything you looked as bad as you felt. If not worse.

—

Just down the hallway from your room, you almost slammed face first into Gladio. He held you by
the shoulders, looking down at you in mild surprise.

“Watch out, juicy.” He dropped his arms, then gave you a once over. Which was fair because you
were giving him one in return. It looked like you weren’t the only one who’d spent the night in someone else’s room. He crossed his arms, smirking. It was such a stark contrast from the way he’d been the last time you’d seen him, arguing with him in that cafe. He must’ve been in a really good mood to be smiling at you right now. “You coming back from Iggy’s room?”

“No.” You said it too quickly, and Gladio’s smirk waned. Before he could say anything, you motioned a hand over his appearance. “Where are you coming from?”

The smirk was back. “Your room.”

It took you a moment for it to click, then you were gaping a little and slapping him lightly on the arm. “No way. You didn’t.”

He began to chuckle, walking past you. Before rounding the corner, he looked back. “Twice.”

“Seriously?!” you called after him.

All you received in response was a deep laugh.

—

Prompto was in the shower when you got back, and remained there for some time. You didn’t know what he could’ve done with Gladio —just hands? mouths, maybe? fingers in butts, dicks in butts?— so when you called the front desk to have painkillers delivered for your hangover, you asked for a double dose. Just in case Prompto was feeling… sore.

He finally emerged from the bathroom, drying his hair with a towel and whistling. You smiled at him as you dug through your suitcase for your clothes. “I ran into Gladio on the way here.”

He jumped. “Uh, hey! When’d you get here?”

Standing, you held up your dress and admired it. “A while ago. I’m gonna shower. I’m having painkillers delivered for us so answer the door when they come.”

“For us?”

You lay the dress out on the bed, ignoring the small wrinkles of it from being in your suitcase, then made your way to the bathroom. “For my hangover and your sweet little butt.” You nudged him with an elbow as you passed, and he blushed.

He stopped you with a hand on your arm, words bubbling up almost desperately. “Just so you know, Gladio let me be the one… y’know. To him. Like, uh, more than once.”

That surprised a small laugh out of you. “Good for you, Prom. Should I have them send the painkillers to his room instead?”

“No,” he muttered, face growing even redder. You’d never seen him so flustered. Not since you’d caught him in your bathroom with a picture of Aranea. “We were safe so he should be okay. I actually have a question. What happened to all the condoms you used to have with you? I thought you’d bring some like you did when we went to Galdin Quay. Luckily Gladio was super prepared. But gods, it was totally awkward at first because I told him you’d definitely have some.”

The thought hadn’t even crossed your mind when you’d packed your luggage. Despite the condoms you’d bought recently, you still hadn’t even been using them. That fact was terrifying now that it was there in the forefront of your mind. Slapping a hand over your eyes, you groaned. “Prom, I’m the
biggest idiot.”

He snickered. “It’s not a big deal.”

“No, I mean,” you mumbled, spreading your fingers to peek through them at your friend. “I haven’t used condoms in a while. I’ve been letting Ignis raw me.”

Slowly, he took a step back, shaking his head. He turned, tossing his towel to the floor without a care. “Nope. That’s the worst thing you’ve ever said to me, dude. I don’t wanna hear anymore.”

Dropping your hand, you huffed another small laugh. “You were just telling me about how you fucked Gladio.”

“Iggy’s so responsible. I can’t believe he would go for that,” he defended. Then he shook his head again as if he shouldn’t even have said that much. “Let’s talk about something else. Like where you were last night. I texted you to warn you about having Gladio in our room, but you never got back to me.”

“I left my phone here,” you said with a shrug. “And I slept in Ravus’ spare bed. I stayed up late hanging out with him.”

Actually, you stayed up late getting wasted and avoiding Ignis, but it was pretty much the same thing.

He scratched his head, messy hair dripping slow drops of water over his freckled shoulders. “Dude, what are you doing? With Prince Ravus, I mean. Are you really not gonna talk it out with Ignis?”

His searching and worried expression ate at you.

You sighed. “Prompto, he says he loves me. You know how I…” You gave him an uncomfortable frown. “I just can’t.”

He nodded slowly, brows drawn. “Yeah, okay.”

You couldn’t take that look. He respected your feelings, but he didn’t understand them. That made two of you because if you could even remotely grasp why you were like this, you’d have a better time of dealing with yourself, you thought. Delving into the source of your issues only pushed you to seek more comfort in the wrong ways. It was a cycle, and that was something both of you did understand.

Turning away, you went to the bathroom, wishing showers were able to wash away worries as well as your completely wrecked smokey eye makeup from the night before.

—

Prompto wasn’t in the room when you came back out. He left a note next to the painkillers saying Noct was freaking out a little so he had to leave to help the prince relax. Pre-wedding anxiety.

Getting dressed in something simple since it was far too early to actually put on your dress, you popped the cork of the fine wine and tossed it back with the medicine, praying for the gods to grant you peace for just long enough to enjoy this special day.

Intent on breakfast, you found Dulcis sitting at a table alone in the resort’s restaurant. She was nursing a coffee and another mug sat on the table in front of an open seat across from her. You stopped by the table and offered her a smile.
“Morning,” she said, eyeing you carefully. “Sorry I couldn’t stick around last night. I like to go to bed early.”

“It’s totally fine. Is that for me?” you joked, nodding at the coffee. That was the first thing you were going to order.

She looked at it and laughed a little. “It was for Gladio, but I don’t think he’s coming. Apparently it’s all hands on deck for prince duty this morning.”

It sounded like Noct really needed the support. You hoped he wasn’t having regrets. He’d seemed so certain of his decision anytime you’d brought it up, albeit embarrassed. It was normal to have doubts, from what little you knew about this kind of thing. Gladio was probably lambasting him right now for letting himself get worked up.

You took the empty seat, grabbing the coffee without hesitation. “Sucks to suck for Gladio.” You took a generous drink, the bitterness of it a strange taste on your tongue when mixed with the remnants of the wine flavor. Gross. You choked more back and looked at the assistant. “Excited for the ceremony?”

She nodded, grinning at you. “I’m going to cry, I just know it. I have tissues if you need them.” As if you wouldn’t believe her, she took some from her purse, handing the small package to you. She must be good at her job; she was prepared for everything.

While you tucked them away, you heard her gasp a little. Looking at her, you followed her gaze to a man nearby who was smiling toward your table. He was a little older and good looking enough. When he nodded in greeting, you heard Dulcis sigh softly.

“That’s the Duke,” she said when you looked at her again. She began a short ramble about him, looking his way every few seconds. The way her cheeks reddened and the excitement with which she spoke about him told you she was kind of smitten with the man.

Sparing him another glance, you caught him winking at her. Oh, gods.

“Is this the same guy everybody says has a bad reputation?”

Her smile waned slightly. “Yeah, but it’s all alleged.”

You gave her a wary look over the coffee mug. Ignis had said the Duke was reprehensible. He seemed pretty normal to you, boring even, but his invitation had been controversial and had given Ignis a large amount of stress.

You told yourself you’d keep an eye on him, but you doubted you’d be able to look out for potential trouble with how much emotional detritus that was already taking up your mind. Besides, there were guards everywhere.

—

It was a feat finishing the bottle of wine before the wedding began. Prompto returned, laughed at your wine stained teeth, and helped you zip up while you brushed them with a bit of force. Lucky for you, it was actually pretty hard to get drunk on wine. So you were only a little buzzed and completely at ease. You were really getting this whole staying out of trouble thing down.

Arriving to the large ballroom where everything was to be held, you caught the tail end of Noctis and others being photographed. You remembered him complaining about this aspect of the compromise he’d made with his father and the council. It was either photos on the day of the wedding or Noct
would have to stand for an oil painting with his new wife to be hung in the Citadel.

There was no sign of Lunafreya, but you knew she wouldn’t arrive until the pivotal moment. You made your way over to Noctis and the others, Prompto at your heel. You slowed to a stop when you realized you were also walking rather quickly toward King Regis — oh no. He was looking at you now. What were you supposed to do when the king was looking at you?

Prompto bumped into you, knocking you into an attendant. Their serving tray wobbled in their palm, and you helped them steady it, apologizing quietly. You took one of the finger foods off their tray — some kind of cheese wrapped in prosciutto — and smoothed down your dress while shooting Prompto an unamused look. He laughed sheepishly and shrugged.

To your luck, when you finally made it to Noctis past the tables and guests milling the place, King Regis had moved on to a different part of the ballroom. You didn’t think you could handle meeting the king right now.

“Nice,” Gladio said as soon as you stopped in front of him. Noctis smiled, and you were glad to see he’d clearly gotten over his anxiety from before. You did not, however, like that his amusement was at your expense.

“I get all dressed up,” you said, motioning over your dress with your free hand. Then, you elbowed Prompto who’d stopped next to you. “And he’s already trying to make me look bad in front of the king and everything.”

“I didn’t mean to. I didn’t expect you to slow down like that.” He shrugged again, eyes going to Gladio, who was giving him his own appreciative stare.

Ugh.

You looked purposefully away, finally sparing Ignis a glance. He’d been standing there the entire time, quiet as ever, a serious look on his face. He’d cleaned up really nicely. Not that there was much by way of cleaning up that Ignis ever had to do. Despite all the issues you knew he had, he really was the definition of flawless.

He seemed contemplative, eyeing you in return. He opened his mouth to speak, his bow lips a distraction that had you taking a step toward him. Maybe you were a little drunk from the wine.

“You look beautiful.”

“Thanks.” You pointed at Prompto. “We wanted to match. Cool, huh?”

Noctis snorted, and you resisted the urge to shove him. There were too many guards around the place, and you didn’t want to find yourself detained for ruining the groom’s tuxedo with your dirty commoner hands.

Someone saying your name caught your attention. Looking over your shoulder, you saw Ravus approaching your little group. He had put on more layers to his formalwear, and looked properly… oracle-y. The sheer white of it was such a stark contrast to all the black suits from everyone on Noctis’s side. He stopped near you, and shot a look past you to Noctis, who sighed. From the toast Ravus had given at the rehearsal dinner, you’d caught on to the fact that the two princes didn’t seem to get on very well.

Ravus returned his gaze to you, retrieving something from a pocket. Something round and golden.

“You left this in my room. Given its quality, I assumed it’s important to you.”
Shoving the finger food into your mouth, you thanked him around the bite and took your courtship token. The full impact of his words hadn’t quite hit you until you’d tucked it safely away in the clutch you had hanging from a thin strap over your shoulder. Eyes darting back up to him, you coughed on the food a little.

Ravus didn’t seem to notice, nodding at you. “Good to see that you’re eating something substantial seeing as you only saw fit to put nuts in your mouth last evening.”

You choked down the food and said, “Ravus, we talked about that this morning. You can’t just say —” You stopped yourself because you were only making it worse. Ravus didn’t care, evidently, what his words were implying.

Gladio cleared his throat and your eyes snapped to him. He gave you a hard look of disbelief. All of your friends appeared confused, Ignis’ expression the hardest to look at. His eyes tore over you as if he were trying to solve a complex riddle. He regarded you with a frown, arms coming up to cross over his chest.

The chamber orchestra began playing an instrumental tune that had Noctis visibly tensing and Ravus looking around. He nodded, giving you one last look. “At last. I’ve held you long enough.”

As he walked away, you looked between the others with a forced smile. “I guess I’ll go sit. Try not to ruin your vows, Noct.”

He was the only one to react, rolling his eyes. The others didn’t say anything, not even Prompto, who seemed the most baffled. The weight of the compact in your bag felt heavy as you found your seat for the ceremony. You needed to set the record straight with them as soon as you could. At least with Prompto.

Across the ballroom, readying himself near Noctis at the ceremonial dais, Ignis still frowned, having a quiet conversation with the rest of them. He looked your way, finding you in the audience, frown growing. He couldn’t actually think that you’d sleep with someone else, right?

Hypocritical of him or not, it hurt to think that he would let a few mangled words cause him to think the worst of you.

—

You cried during the ceremony. It had less to do with the event than just serving as an indication of your mental state. As you wiped your eyes with the tissues Dulcis had given you, all you could think about was when you could get your hands on another drink.

—

To your surprise, when you were seated for dinner, you were placed directly across from Uncle Scientia. The table was crowded with much younger people, Prompto on one side of you and Dulcis on the other. By the place card on the plate next to Uncle, Ignis was meant to sit there, too. So you were going to have to sit through a dinner with the guys without being able to tell them that you did not, in fact, sleep with Ravus, the fucking prince of Tenebrae. Because, while there were plenty of things you’d say in front of Uncle Scientia, that wasn’t one of them.

“I haven’t seen you all weekend,” you said before you realized it was kind of rude not to greet him first.

He didn’t seem to care, a warm smile coming to his face. “I only arrived this afternoon. I had to stay behind to clear a few things. Even in such great times as this, there is much work to be done.”
You nodded, picking up your champagne flute. What began as a sip became a large gulp until you’d downed the entire glass. This stuff was really good. If you could live it up like this all the time, living a noble lifestyle might not be that bad.

Not giving you the response you were expecting, Uncle Scientia chuckled. “It seems as though I’ve been placed at quite the party table.”

You pointed a finger at him, grinning your widest as Ignis took his seat next to the man. “Don’t you know it, Uncle. I might even be DTF if I get enough drinks in me.”

He nodded. “Understandable. I’ll be sure to moderate any dance in which you may find yourself.”

This guy was great, you thought as Prompto sputtered next to you.

“What did he say?” he whispered to you.

You just smiled at Prompto, saying to the old man, “I dunno. What if I set my sights on you, Uncle?”

Prompto’s sputtering worsened, and Ignis sent you an unamused look.

Uncle Scientia took a small drink from his glass and chuckled. “As I told you before, those days have long since passed for me. I’ll admit, at any rate, such excitement would be compelling to witness even in such an inappropriate setting.”

Prompto choked down a sip of his own drink, sending wildly confused looks between you and Uncle Scientia.

You laughed into your hand, sitting back to let an attendant place the first course in front of you. Knowing that Ignis’ uncle was there helped you make up your mind. You’d entertained an idea as you’d emptied the wine bottle earlier in the day, and now it seemed perfectly feasible. You were going to knock out so many birds with the golden stone in your bag.

In the middle of the main course, a few grains of rice disappeared into the top of your dress. “Oh no. I’ve dropped food between my tits.”

Prompto snickered, elbowing you lightly and whispering, “Dude, what the heck?”

“Oh, I forgot I’m in polite company.” Uncle Scientia’s gaze went up to you. You could feel eyes on you from all over the long table, and in your peripheral, you could see Ignis looking your way. You smiled at his uncle, fingers dipping beneath the top of your dress. “I’ve dropped something down my bosom. I’m such a fuckup.”

Next to you, Prompto snickered again, shaking his head. You ate the scavenged rice and sipped on the champagne in your flute, a constant run of it granted to you by the tireless attendants who worked at the resort. This was fun. You weren’t going to see most of these people ever again. Who cared?

You were basking in the irritated looks Ignis kept sending your way.

“I’m a fan of Ovid, myself,” Ignis said when the topic of poetry came up during dessert.

Prompto had mentioned the statue of the man in the middle of the plaza you’d passed on the way there. Apparently the statue was of a famous poet born on this island centuries ago. He was known
for his erotically themed poetry, eventually giving the island its name Isola D’amore. Literally, *Love Island*.

Everyone seemed to want to chime in with their opinions on who their favorites were at that point. Ignis hadn’t said much so far, but this was a subject you were certain he knew perfectly well.

“Ignis is a poet,” you spoke up, looking at him directly for the first time since the wedding had begun.

He met your eyes, unrelenting in his analytical gaze. “I’d never make such a claim.”

“Don’t be modest.” You waved a hand, not entirely sure where you were going with this. You were skirting on the edge of constant drunkenness and hurting. “Here, I’ve got a poem to share, and then maybe we can hear one of yours.”

You cleared your throat, thinking on it for a few seconds before nodding, a slow grin growing on your face. You’d been working on this poem ever since the topic had come up fifteen minutes prior, and you thought it was pretty good. Your eyes didn’t leave his once as you spoke.

“There once was a count from Lucis, whose duties hang over like nooses, so he played pretend and fucked his friend, while giving his uncle excuses.”

Ignis’ fork clattered on his plate. He seemed startled for a moment before he sent you a hard look, his jaw clenching. “I’d like to have a word.” He slid his chair back, standing up and not waiting for you to follow as he strode to the exit. You glanced at Uncle Scientia as you got up, catching his perplexed expression.

“It’s been an age since I’ve heard a limerick,” he said, trying to lighten the situation even though he clearly didn’t understand what was going on.

You sighed as you followed after Ignis. You weren’t drunk enough for this.

He stood with his back straight and arms crossed in the large area just outside the ballroom. He was fuming, a heated glare aimed at you. “I hope you’re enjoying making an utter ass of yourself.”

“I am.” You held a hand over your mouth to quiet a burp that tasted like champagne. “Very much, thanks.”

“It’s one thing to be angry with me privately,” he said, lip curled slightly. You’d never seen that look before, much less aimed at you. “But I draw the line at humiliation.”

You opened your mouth to tell him he was wrong, that you weren’t trying to humiliate him. But you didn’t know if that was true. He didn’t seem to want to wait for a response.

“You say I played pretend, but I asked for your hand.” This was quieter, and his green eyes were blazing, narrowed at you. “As for the excuses I’ve given my uncle, those were as a courtesy to you. My sincerest apologies for considering your feelings about commitment when dealing with my own personal burdens.”

Loud music started in the ballroom, but you couldn’t look away from him. Every word he said struck a chord within you. It was painful to have things laid out before you so plainly. When the music grew longer, a swaying lilt to it, you forced yourself to look inside the open archway. Noct and Lunafreya were dancing and everyone was watching. He appeared so into her and the moment that he hardly had time to feel uncomfortable with so many eyes on him.
People didn’t wait for the entire song to play out, filling the dancefloor with bodies halfway into the song. You wanted to be out there.

Facing Ignis, you said, “I’m gonna go dance.”

As you turned to head back in, he grabbed your hand, holding you back. “Stop avoiding me. I’ll overlook the fact that you haven’t stopped drinking since you arrived to this island if you’ll just tell me what’s going on.”

Jerking your hand from his grip, you glared at him. “I’m ending it, Ignis. Today.”

He started, the curl of his lip easing into a soft frown. “Today? You still wish to end it that badly?”

Grinding your teeth, you nodded. “It’s been going on long enough. We’ve had our fun.”

When you turned away to go back into the ballroom, his voice made you stop.

“You’re not merely talking about the false courtship… are you?”

Unable to look back, you said nothing as you left him to find Prompto so you could show off everything you’d learned together in your dance lessons.

—

Making the rounds, you danced with both friends and strangers. You assured Prompto that you hadn’t slept with Ravus, and he laughed, telling you that he hadn’t really thought you did.

“Since when were you afraid of telling me about your one night stands?” He let go of one hand to spin you around, his face faltering a little when you faced him again. “Except for Iggy, I guess.”

You let that comment slide, just happy to know that you’d been overthinking the entire thing with the prince’s careless phrasing.

When you found yourself dancing with said prince at some point, an hour or so into the night, you couldn’t help but ask, “Why have you been so… Nice wasn’t the word. He wasn’t nice. “Patient with me? Are all Tenebraens just really kind like the Oracle? Because no one asked you to humor me for this long.”

He gazed at you, his expression flat as ever. “I refuse to let an emotional mess such as yourself ruin what is meant to be the greatest day of my sister’s life.”

You gaped a little. “I’d never ruin the wedding.”

He scoffed. “Carrying on with enough alcohol in your system to kill a normal person is an indication that you could and would have the potential to ruin much. You’re unable to confront your partner, and there are rumors about you leaving my room this morning. You’re a walking disaster. I needed to keep you from Luna lest she catch whatever unfortunate case of idiocy that seems to be plaguing you.”

He chose to dip you at the end of his little speech, and you clutched at his shoulder to keep from falling in your surprise.

“You really are the Prince of Assholes,” you laughed as he brought you back up.

That didn’t seem to bother him in the least. “I think of myself as honest above anything.”
You couldn’t disagree. Most of the things he said were matter of fact and straight to the point. You remembered Uncle Scientia saying something about honesty being rare in politics. But if Ravus chose to be so straightforward in everything he did, things couldn’t have been easy for him. Except now you were realizing why his attitude toward others’ opinions of him was so nonchalant. He wouldn’t survive otherwise.

“May I cut in?”

You stopped dancing, dropping the stance and backing away from each other to look at Ignis. He held a hand out, and you almost made a joke telling him he could dance with Ravus all he wanted. But Ravus was already bowing slightly, walking off as if you hadn’t been in the middle of a conversation.

Big surprise. He bailed at any sign of Ignis as if he wanted to be as far from ground zero as possible when things decided to blow up between you.

Ignis took the lead seamlessly, looking down at you with hard eyes. You didn’t understand why he wanted to dance with you when he was so clearly pissed.

“Seems as though you can’t get enough of Prince Ravus.” He said it as if he were talking about something mundane. “Tell me, for what reason could your token have been left in his room?”

Immediately defensive, you grit your teeth and glared up at him as you spun around together in slow movements. “What are you asking?” You knew what he meant, but you were going to make him say it. Maybe then he’d realize how ridiculous the idea was.

“Did you sleep with Ravus last night?” A frown cut his face, much less angry. More hurt, confused. His brows furrowed, eyes still hard.

Would he even believe your answer? You could tell by his expression, by the way he’d squared his jaw, that he’d already made up his mind. “It’s doesn’t matter if I did or not.”

He missed a step somewhere, stumbling for a second before returning to the dance. “You are unbelievable.” It came out in a low growl, his expression becoming sharp. “How could you do this? With the bride’s brother, no less.”

Coming undone yourself, you pulled yourself away abruptly, halting your dance in the middle of the ballroom. You couldn’t believe he thought so little of you that he just assumed the worst with no proof. Even loving you, he thought this lowly of you. Suddenly, you realized it had to be done now while the pain was fresh. You grasped at it and forced the words out.

“Yeah, okay, I slept with him,” you lied. “Does it make you happy to be right about me?”

His glare froze but didn’t abate. You didn’t give him the chance to argue back.

“You’re so hypocritical!” You shoved at his chest, but as always, he was solid and unyielding. “You’re seeing someone behind my back. It’s only fair that I get to have fun, too.”

Despite the control you were trying to keep, your eyes began to water. You wanted to get out of there, but you had to see it through. It was best to get it over with like ripping off a bandaid so the wound could get some air and heal.

His expression twisted into confusion. It didn’t look right on his face. “What?”

You clenched your hands into fists, tasting the insincerity even as the words came out. “I fucked
“Ravus because I saw you with Mirum.”

Confusion becoming realization, he shook his head and reached up to place a hand on your shoulder, but you knocked it away. “Darling, what—”

“Don’t call me that!” Your breaths came out heavy, your brain scrambling to make coherent thoughts come out of your mouth. You had to do this. “Sure, I’m messed up for using drugs to get by, but you’re no better than me! As soon as things get hard, as—as soon as I show reluctance to courtship, you move on and don’t even tell me.”

The music continued on, but as they began to notice the commotion, more and more people stopped dancing to watch. You hoped Uncle Scientia was among them because you were about to keep your promise to Ignis.

He shook his head again, frown cutting deeper. “What you show isn’t mere reluctance but a blatant disregard for yourself and the people who care for you.”

Your anger melted somewhat into slight confusion of your own. What the hell was he even talking about? This had to be his attempt to move the conversation away from his own guilt. Because of course you had to be the bad guy. “Oh, shut up! You think your love is gonna save me? I’ll never change for you.”

Eyes glossed over with wetness, you had a little bit of difficulty opening your bag, but once it snapped open, you were pulling out the compact and pressing it roughly to his chest. Wiping at the tears in your eyes before they could fall, you sniffed. “Take this and don’t ever fucking talk to me again.”

Slowly, he lifted a hand and took the token from you, hand closing around it so hard his knuckles were white. “You’re making a mistake.”

You scoffed wetly. “Like I haven’t heard that one a million times. I’m just giving you what you wanted.” Turning away from him, you were caught again, this time by his arm at your elbow.

“This is a misunderstanding. All I want is you.”

Looking at him over your shoulder, you stopped trying to hold back the tears. Your vision of him swam into blurry lines as you let out a small scoff. “Life doesn’t give a fuck what you want, Ignis.” You tugged at your arm, and he let go with little resistance. “And neither do I.”

You left the ballroom, wiping at your face to keep from looking like some kind of sad clown with your makeup running. You had one joint left, and you were going directly to that alcove to smoke until you felt better. It wasn’t going to work. No amount of alcohol and weed could make you come back from this. But you could try.

You heard footsteps behind you, and for a second your heart sparked with hope. But a glance back told you it was Mirum. Why the hell she felt the need to follow you out, you didn’t care to know.

“Fuck off,” you said when she got closer.

“I can’t believe you did that. You truly broke it off with him!”

You ignored her, walking outside and rounding the corner of the building. The brush was a little more difficult to push through in heels and a tight dress, but you managed to get into the alcove. A sight halted you immediately, Mirum bumping into your back as she followed you through.
Between crates, Dulcis lay unconscious. Above her, caught trying to push the hem of her dress over her waist was the Duke. He froze and stared at both of you in shock.

Reacting quickly, Mirum drew a gun from somewhere under her dress. “You!” As he got up, she shook her head. “I knew it. I knew I should’ve fought harder to have you uninvited, you twat.”

Your gaze went rapidly between her, the gun, the man, and Dulcis. All you could manage to pull out of the situation was, “Why do you have a gun?!”

She looked at you very seriously. “A noble must always be prepared.” As if it were common sense. Unfortunately, that was enough of a distraction for the man to try making a run for it. He shoved past both of you, knocking you to the ground and the gun from Mirum’s hands.

With a yell, she jumped on his back as he tried to climb through the bushes. He struggled, trying to shake her off. The gritty feeling of dirt and concrete scratched at your hands and knees as you got to your feet, sudden adrenaline speeding through you. Mirum screamed at you to do something.

Thinking quickly, you picked up her gun. The man kept flailing, but you’d had a lot of practice thanks to Prompto so you took aim somewhere south on his body and squeezed the trigger. The recoil hurt your wrists, the sound so much louder without anything to protect your ears.

He fell to the ground, landing on his side. Mirum regained control, sitting on his back and doing her best to hold him down. She looked him over frantically, then said, “You hit his knee. Good aim.”

Hands shaking harder than ever before, you lowered the gun and stared at her, at the man crying out in pain below her. Putting the gun down delicately despite your rush —you didn’t go to the range so often just to be senseless with your handling— and went to Dulcis, pulling down her dress to cover her exposed areas. Your mind was completely shot, your focus dedicating itself to the single task of making sure Dulcis was okay.

That’s where the Crownsguard found you when they arrived seconds later.

—

The wall was damp against your back. Your dress clung uncomfortably to your body, your bare feet scraping against the rough floor of the holding cell. You sighed. It had been half an hour. The Crownsguard hadn’t taken anything from you when they’d escorted you here so you’d watched the time as the seconds ticked by on your phone.

“I’m sure they’ll have us out soon,” Mirum spoke up. “Once they’re finished examining Dulcis and the Duke.”

For the first time since being locked away, you flitted your gaze to her. You were exhausted in every way. The drunkenness had worn off; you felt busted and groggy. Your chest was an open hole of frayed nerve endings, and your mind was a culmination of echoes, replaying the worst things over and over unbidden.

You didn’t say anything, but kept your gaze steady on her. She’d sat on the other side of the small room, legs drawn up. Moonlight filtered in through a high window, lighting everything up in silvery blues.

“You’re wrong about me and Ignis, by the way.”

You didn’t react, wrapping arms around yourself.
“When he asked me to go as his date, I misunderstood his intentions,” she continued. “He’d seemed so unhappy recently, and he’d been spending more time with me. I’d assumed something terrible had happened between you so I took a chance.”

Looking away, you sighed again. “Please stop talking.”

“No,” she said, insistent. “I need you to know that I’ve never been with Ignis. I’ve never even slept with a person.”

Despite yourself, you sent her a doubtful glance. “You’re a virgin?”

She lifted her chin. “Of course. How many do you think are worthy of sharing a bed with a marchioness? Very few, I assure you.”

You snorted. “You’re so fucking full of yourself.”

“It’s a defense mechanism, if you must know,” she was quick to say as if this was far from being the first time she’d been told this. “I refuse to think of myself as less than you, even if Ignis chose you over me. He was almost mine, then you come from out of nowhere, and it’s as if I never existed.”

“He’s not something you can own,” you bit back. “The more I learn about nobility, the more antiquated and pointless your lives seem. I get why Ignis wanted to avoid courtship.”

“You said that before,” she said, giving you a searching look. “What do you mean by him avoiding people like me?”

You just stared at her, growing quiet. She didn’t deserve any answers, and you weren’t in any mood to give any. Your head ached from slight dehydration, and there was a large scrape on one of your elbows that stung anytime you moved. She kept talking even though you just wanted her to shut up.

“If you won’t tell, fine. But you will hear me out. What you saw of us in the gardens… After that beautiful moment, he utterly destroyed me.” Her lipstick was smudged, some of it on her teeth. “When you said he slept with you only minutes later, that was… You can be cruel, do you know that?”

Burying your face into your folded arms, you didn’t want to deal with this. Her attempts at making you feel bad were moot; you couldn’t possibly feel worse than you did now. You had no pity to offer, and you wouldn’t have given her any if you did. True or not, what she said changed nothing.

You and Ignis didn’t see eye to eye with one another or want the same things. You couldn't love him the way he loved you. You could tell yourself that cutting things off here was only for his benefit, to save him from getting hurt, but you’d already hurt him. This had been for yourself. You deserved this.

As soon as you were released an hour into your detention, a doctor from a local hospital checked you over. Other than a few scrapes, you were fine. Prompto was waiting for you when the Crownsguard let you go in the lobby. They kept watching you as you approached the blond, and you knew you were going to be watched for the rest of the stay.

Just great.

“How’s Dulcis?” was the first thing out of your mouth.
He pointed a thumb over his shoulder at the elevators. “Last I heard she was still out of it, but she’s doing okay. They took her to her room.” Dropping his hand, he looked you over. “How are you?”

You shrugged, showing him the bandage on one of your elbows. “Could be a lot worse. Can we visit her?”

“That wouldn’t be advisable.”

Head jerking toward the source of the voice, your chest tightened and you took a step behind Prompto to avoid facing Ignis directly. Aranea had been right; you were becoming a coward when it came to this man. Looking at him over Prompto’s shoulder, you wrapped your arms around yourself. You hadn’t counted on seeing him again tonight, let alone having him speak to you directly.

It wasn’t very late, but he looked tired, hair a little flat and expression tense. He looked from you to Prompto, who moved when he realized you were behind him.

Some human shield he was.

“I’d like a word,” Ignis said, looking at you.

Shaking your head, you willed your arms to drop. You didn’t want to make yourself seem smaller right now. You needed to be tough so you could face him. Why he wanted to speak at all confused you. Hadn’t you hurt him enough?

“I don’t have anything to say,” you said, arms hanging loose before you finally decided to cross them. There. That would work. A small boundary that gave you the barest comfort.

“That shouldn’t be an issue,” Ignis said, voice deep with irritation. “I have a number of things to say so I will take point.”

You looked at Prompto, seeking backup, but he shook his head and threw up his hands. “Please don’t. I-I can’t get into this. You’re both my friends. I’ll let you talk it out.”

Frowning at him as he made his leave toward the elevators, you sighed. When you looked at Ignis, he motioned toward one of the small lounges. “That should be acceptable.”

You didn’t follow him at first, watching him walk across the lobby and go under the archway into the smaller room. When he looked back, you steeled yourself and walked after him. He wasn’t making this easy. Guess you hadn’t hurt him enough.

—

Sitting across from each other in plush chairs, a coffee table creating distance, you both looked at each other tentatively. You were grateful for the distance but felt like it could be bigger.

“I see that you haven’t been gravely injured,” he spoke first, nodding at your patched up elbow.

Not offering him anything other than your tense look, you said, “Just spit out what you wanna say. I’m tired.”

Irritation marked his features again. “Alright.” He seemed to think, looking away for a second before he sighed and met your eyes. “I want to know why you’re doing this.”

He seemed calm, a quiet anger in him that barely touched the surface. One that you only saw because you’d always been able to read him.
Considering his statement, you chewed on your lip and shrugged. Tightening even further, the pain in your chest pulled taught. “I don’t want to be with you anymore.”

By the shake of his head, apparently he didn’t think that was a good enough answer. “What have I done to drive you away?” His mouth held a soft frown. “Is it because I press you about your issues? I only do so because I love you.”

The words made you feel sick, and you got up from the lounge chair. Ignis watched you but didn’t move. Pacing a little, you looked down at him and said nothing. If you opened your mouth, you were at risk of throwing up everything you’d eaten at the reception dinner.

The silence sat between you uncomfortably. Before you could come up with a plan of escape, Ignis broke the silence with another question.

“Why do you believe yourself incapable of change?”

This one was gentler, and you suddenly hated the softness he held only for you. Why couldn’t he let the anger out like a normal person and yell at you? Where were the insults and the threats? Why wasn’t he trying to intimidate you into staying with him? The confusion you felt over this fueled an anger that you desperately needed.

“I’m not something to be fixed,” you seethed.

A flash of something crossed his face. Irritation, maybe. You couldn’t be sure because he was already saying, “Is it so wrong to wish to fix you? You must admit you are rather broken.”

With a glare, you scowled at him. Curling your hands into fists, you made your way to the open archway to leave. “I don’t have to stick around and listen to this.”

“Wait,” he called after you, but you didn’t stop until he continued, “Give me a reason. Beyond your lie about Ravus and the misunderstanding over Mirum. With everything that we’ve been through, I have a right to know why you would leave me so readily.”

Thoughts racing, you looked down at your hands. He’d figured out your lie about Ravus; you’d hoped blind hurt would keep him from seeking the truth over the matter. You couldn’t imagine Ravus talking to him about it since the prince was so ardently unwilling to become involved. How he found out wasn’t important. The unfortunate fact remained that he wasn’t buying any of the reasons you were giving him. He wasn’t letting you go without a fight. A gentle, disturbing, rationally calm fight.

“You really wanna know?” Turning around to face him, you let the anger melt from your expression. He’d stood up as you were walking away and remained standing there, eyes searching your face. Answers flitted through your mind. *You’re too intense. You fell in love with a piece of shit. I’m only going to make you miserable and resentful.* All that came out was the simple truth. “You scare the hell out of me, Ignis.”

He faltered, eyes falling for a moment. It wasn’t enough, you realized. It was the truth, and he cold feel that, but it wouldn’t be enough to carry the point across.

“You know how I feel about you,” he said, taking a step toward you. “I would never intentionally hurt—”

He rose a hand to touch your cheek and you backed away, scowl returning. “Don’t touch me.” His hand hang in the air, and you met his gaze without relent. “What don’t you get? Do I have to get a restraining order on you, too?”
For a moment, his expression twisted, his lips parting in a pained grimace as he curled his hand and drew it away. Then his jaw tensed, and he was schooling himself into something not quite but almost calm. He didn’t say anything, gathering himself in seconds, eyes boring into yours painfully before tearing away. He walked past you, through the archway and out of the room.

Squashing the thought of following him, you stayed in the lounge, counting to a hundred. It was over. You did it. You thought you might’ve felt free, but there wasn’t a scrap of relief in you. Instead, a heavy weight in your heart held you in place.

Pushing past it, you left the lounge and went outside. The night air was warm, and you could sense guards watching you even though you couldn’t see anyone. You sat at the foot of a large statue and dug out the joint you’d planned to smoke before.

With it hanging from your lips, you remembered that your lighter didn’t work. Sighing, you put it back into your bag and tried to even your breathing. You were going to be fine. You needed something stronger, anyway.

—

At the bar, after ordering a drink, you asked if the bartender had anything off the menu. This only worked about thirty percent of the time so you were pleasantly surprised when they nodded, picking up a small, handwritten list from underneath the bar and handing it to you.

You gave them two hundred gil for a handful of narcotics, desperate to grow numb and forget the entire day. As you opened the little bag, dumping the pills onto your palm, a large hand came down on the bar next to you. Almost dropping them, you jumped and turned a glare over to Gladio who met it readily.

“What the hell are you doing?” He looked from your face to the drink you had in one and the pills you had in the other.

“I shot a guy today,” you said. “I deserve a strong nightcap.”

He shook his head. “If you take that, I’ll be more than happy to punch you in the gut until you spit it up.”

You opened your mouth, raising your hand to dump them in. “Watch me.”

He grabbed your wrist, making you drop them into his other hand. As you jerked against his grip, he threw the pills across the lobby, scattering them with soft pings against the floor.

He let go when you pulled at your hand again. As you seethed, he brought his arms up to cross them over his chest. This was something you knew how to deal with. Intimidation. It worked on you, unlike Ignis’ softness.

“I don’t know what you said to Ignis,” he said, expression hard. “But I fucking hate you for it.”

You were ready to rail him, to let out the pain through anger. He didn’t stick around for that, though, saying his piece and leaving. You waited until he’d disappeared into an elevator to take a drink of what you’d ordered. At least he hadn’t ruined that.

Did they all hate you now? This wasn’t surprising in any way. You drank what was left in a few quick gulps. You’d forgotten in your haste to get away from Ignis and how he made you feel, that you’d also be losing all of your friends in the process.
You didn’t know what you were going to do next, but you knew you’d be doing it alone.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the cop out with Reader not actually sleeping with Ravus, but the thing that made her end it with Ignis is the same reason she couldn’t bring herself to sleep with someone else. Also, I think Ravus took one look at Reader and immediately decided he’d discovered the lowest life-form on the planet.

I love you for reading. I really do. This is a point I wasn't sure I'd reach. I seriously thought I would lose motivation, but you guys have been the best.
(♥‿3♥)
And now for something completely different.

Chapter Summary

Local coward runs from her problems and accidentally gets better in the process.

Chapter Notes

Here’s the last of the angst. Think of this chapter as a necessary evil. It’s coming at you long and lazily edited so sorry for any typos, inconsistencies, and repetition because I still (probably more than ever) have no idea what I’m doing.

Warning for ambiguous time skips, self hate, oracle! R avus in training, and no sign of Ignis.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stacks of movies piled into a box, you folded the top closed and taped it over several times before writing a label on it. You carried it to your entrance hallway, past the kitchen table littered with odds and ends you weren’t sure you would keep.

Eating cup noodles between bouts of packing, you considered everything on the table. Some old curtains, a video game that you actually hated even though Noctis had promised it would be fun, and the book Ignis had lent you.

Giving it back to him was a challenge you weren’t up for. You could’ve just given it to Prompto to pass on, but you hadn’t talked to each other since the wedding days ago. Now that you and Ignis were over, you knew Prompto would be next to drop out of your life. That’s how it went when two friends within a group broke up. It was a given that Noctis and Gladio would choose Ignis’ side; they worked together, and their lives were deeply involved.

Prompto had chosen your side the last time you’d broken up with someone. You doubted he’d do that again. Especially with how dramatic it had been. You still felt guilty for causing such drama at the wedding. Even if the incident with the Duke hadn’t been your fault.

So, no, passing the book along through Prompto wasn’t an option. You also considered just meeting with Ignis and exchanging it for your stuff. That would be the mature thing to do, and you bet he’d be compliant because he probably wanted to rid himself of remnants of you, too. But you couldn’t bring yourself to contact him.

Sighing, you put a hand on the book. You’d just mail it to his office.

As you rummaged around your packing supplies for an appropriate sized box, your phone rang. The name on the screen was surprising, and you dropped what you were doing to answer. “Hello?”

“My dear!” The Producer sounded excited over the phone, loud music blaring in the background, almost swallowing his voice. “I’m so glad to hear your voice. I must be quick so listen to me. I have
Slumping back in your chair, you pulled a face of confusion. “Okay?”

“Now, it’s for five months, and you’ll need to be here in Tenebrae within three weeks,” he said, practically yelling. Where was he that he needed to be so loud just to carry his voice over a phone call? Wasn’t it really late in Tenebrae right now, anyway? “I simply need you for my crew this season. Your passion and unrestrained disregard for the system will give new life to my team, I’m certain of it.”

“Okay.” You were trying to follow what he was saying, but it felt more like he was talking at you. “Um, why the sudden interest? Have you seen my blog or something?”

It took him several beats to respond. “Oh, yes! It’s all well and good. You’re a talent. Now, I suggest you find a sponsor. This is a paying job, not a charity. You’ll need somewhere to live.”

Mind trying to catch up with the conversation, you stood up and nodded at nothing because no one could see it. “Right. I’m, uh, I’ll find a sponsor.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will, you silly bitch,” he laughed. He sounded almost manic. “I’ve already sent your contract and everything you’ll need to the email you gave me. Have it back to me and be in my studio within three weeks. Otherwise, I’ll assume you’ve found something better to do with your time.”

The line went dead as he hung up. You looked around your empty apartment as if it held some kind of answers for what the fuck just happened.

Biggs and Wedge helped carry your things downstairs. Aranea was oddly quiet during the entire process.

“Are you that sad about moving out, kid?” She looked you over, not looking that cheerful herself.

It had been a couple of days since the Producer had called, and you weren’t sure exactly where you were going to get a sponsor. How did that even work?

You were moving out of the apartment today. Officially. If you ever wanted to hang out with Aranea again, you’d have to go out of your way to visit and hope she wasn’t on a work trip. You were going to miss her brash attitude and advice.

So you spent the last afternoon you had with her, watching Biggs and Wedge load your life into the back of a moving truck and telling her about your problems. Not the deep ones. Not the ones you weren’t ready to deal with. Maybe you’d hoped she’d be your sponsor somehow. She seemed to like buying houses abroad. You could try to convince her to buy one in Tenebrae for you to live in, you thought.

Instead, she listened, laughed at your suggestion, and wished you luck with little else to say. It had been a long shot, but getting it off your chest had been enough. The idea of actually going abroad to work was kind of crazy, anyway.

You thought of the work visa you had in your bag as you climbed into the truck with Biggs and Wedge. You’d had it expedited the day of the phone call. It had taken all of your remaining Altissian internship funds to obtain so quickly.
It had been a glimmer of hope of running away from the mess of a life that you’d made for yourself.

—

Mom kept on you like an overbearing airship, hovering and asking you more than once a day if you were okay. She was a slew of questions. How was the wedding? Did you have fun in Accordo? How is that friend of yours? Yes, the one who visited with you in the spring. Yes, I mean that nice young man. Yes, that boy Ignis, how is he?

Hiding in your old room became your favorite thing to do, only sneaking downstairs to find food and stretch your legs for a bit. Several days passed into a week, and you hadn’t so much as left your childhood home for any reason. You could’ve spent all summer like that with no issue, closing yourself off from the world. But things itched at you.

You wanted to get high, but didn’t know where to find any in your town. You wanted to get wasted, but didn’t want Mom freaking out. It consumed your thoughts to the point that you’d do nothing but lay in bed for hours at a time.

That’s what you were doing when your phone rang. You let it go to voicemail twice, unmoving until it began ringing for the third round. The number wasn’t recognizable.

“Hello?”

“At last. I’d thought I’d been tricked.”

The voice on the other end had you shooting up, eyes wide. “Ravus?”

“Yes. Let’s keep this brief. Just to be clear, I am only doing this because I owe Aranea a rather large favor.”

“Aranea?” You frowned, not following.

“Do try to let me finish before you keep blurting out names. Aranea, whose connection to you I’ve yet to ascertain, informed me of your situation.” He sighed, and you could imagine he was pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m to be your sponsor. The appropriate documentation you’ll need is already on its way to you. As my charge, there will be expectations placed on you. Remember this. I’ll see you in one week.”

He hung up on you, and for the second time in just over a week, you were left more confused than ever. Walking downstairs in a daze, you found Mom sitting in the living room.

*Come sit. It’s time for the news,* she signed.

“Gross,” you complained, though you joined her. “The news is boring.”

She huffed a silent laugh. *This is the first time I’ve seen you downstairs all week.*

You let her wrap an arm around you. You’d never been particularly close to Mom, especially after losing your other one. Small things like this felt huge between you. Telling her about the job, the sponsor, everything fell to the wayside when you realized what was on the tv.

Usually the subtitles taking up a third of the screen annoyed you, but you wished it covered everything because standing at a podium on the screen was Ignis. He gave a short speech about the wedding, revealing it to the public and directing future questions to be addressed to the council since Noctis and Lunafreya were still abroad on their honeymoon.
Mom gasped, giving you a look that you ignored. She withdrew her arm, signing frantically, *Is that Ignis? You went to the prince’s wedding? That’s so exciting.*

Seeing Ignis, even though it was a little pixelated on the old tv, made your stomach churn. He’d sounded as put together as usual. Like nothing had changed for him at all. And here you were laying around in your old bed, miserable and pathetic.

—

You waited two days, when you received a small, reinforced box of documents, to tell Mom about your departure. She dropped the book she was reading to look at you, at the box of important things you held. *Are you serious?*

You shrugged, putting it on the coffee table. “Yeah. Why would I joke about this?” Sitting next to her, you began to rifle through it to see exactly what Ravus had sent that you supposedly needed. In one envelope, you found travel tickets and a localized SIM card for your phone. In another was a Nox Fluret credit card in your name. All you had to do was authorize it by signing the back. Wow. He really wasn’t fucking around.

This... this was really happening.

Turning to Mom with a look of surprise, you found her tearing up. Oh, gods. You were going to be guilt tripped. She was going to point out how you’d just gotten home. She’d tell you that she was all alone without even Bokeh to look after. She’d—

She hugged you. Returning the gesture, you stayed like that for several minutes before she got up to make tea.

*You don’t have anything to say?* you asked in sign language, not sure if you could find your voice. *Of course I do. I have a lot of feelings about this.* She sighed, but it ended with a worn smile.

She left it alone at that, supporting you silently and helping you go through the things in the box. Signs of her concern revealed themselves in the way she examined everything precisely, reading the fine print of the sponsorship contract. Except she laughed at the unicorn motif on almost everything inside.

*The line of Oracles have always had a unicorn on their family crest,* she told you.

You gave her a speculative glance. “You know a lot about the Oracle family?”

*Before I moved to this farm to be with your mother, I worked in the archives in the Citadel.*

You’d had no idea. The thought that she’d had a life before you existed hadn’t crossed your mind before.

She smiled at your look of surprise. *I know all about noble crests. I knew Ignis was a Scientia as soon as I saw his pocket watch.*

That startled a small laugh out of you, and you wondered why you’d thought so little of including her in your life for the past years— *his* influence, you realized. But you’ve long since been out from under his thumb.

At least, if that were the case, why did the oppressive feeling remain even now?
The day before you were to set off, you sat on the large rock near the pond and watched as the time passed. The weather was nice, overcast and windy. You still itched for distractions, but it was a waiting game now. As soon as you were in Tenebrae— no, as soon as you were on the road, you’d get something to fill the void. As much as you enjoyed getting a little closer to Mom, you were ready to be on your own again, free to do whatever and whoever you wanted.

A few seconds passed, then one of the back passenger doors opened, and Prompto was climbing out, looking around as the car made a loop and left.

Scrambling down the rock in surprise, you called out, “Hey! What are you doing here?”

His head whipped your way, and he yelled, “I can’t believe you!”

Then, he was running straight for you. Too caught up in his sudden appearance, you were trapped in a headlock within seconds. “You were just gonna leave without telling me? I thought we were best friends!”

You tried to pry off his arm, but he held tight. Kicking at him, you were able to knock him to the ground, but he pulled you down with him. Dust kicking up around you, you elbowed him in the stomach and managed to escape.

Sitting up, you looked down at his hurt expression. He held his stomach, frowning up at you.

“How’d you find my mom’s house?” You shoved at him.

He avoided it. “She told me the address when I asked.”

“You told me I was leaving.”

He sat up, fixing his hair and pouting. “No. Lunafreya told me. She wanted me to give you something.” He picked up a small rock, throwing it at you. “I have several things for you, actually, but I don’t think you deserve ‘em.”

You looked at each other, his pout meeting your confusion in a draw that lasted well beyond a reasonable amount of time.

“I waited for you to call or something,” he finally said. “I even visited your place and Aranea said you moved out over a week ago. Why do you just drop people like that?”

Inhaling a quick breath, you tried for honesty. “I did it before you could drop me first. Since Ignis and I failed spectacularly, I thought that you’d…” You shrugged. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be,” he told you, though his pout was slowly giving out to a small smile. “If you weren’t being so dumb, I would’ve given you an amazing going away party.”

Mom walked out of the house, looking at you from the porch. Prompto waved awkwardly, and she waved back, a slow smile crossing her face.

Come inside, she signed before walking back in.
Prompto gave you a confused look, but you brushed it off, getting up from the ground. Dusting off the dirt on your clothes, you laughed a little. It had been kind of dumb to assume Prompto would ditch you so easily. He was one of the few people who loved you, after all.

“Let’s go in,” you said, smiling at him. “She’ll be so glad to meet you. She might try to feed you everythin in the house.”

He threw an arm over your shoulder, and you tensed for a second, prepared for another headlock. Instead, he walked with you toward the house with a quiet chuckle. “Sounds like my kinda lady.”

Prompto wouldn’t sit still long enough enough to let you paint his nails even though he was the one who asked you to do it in the first place. You pinched his fingers, the black, slightly sparkly polish crossing over onto skin every time he moved.

“You gotta stop chewing on your nails,” you said, frowning as he moved again.

He sat with you on your old bed and couldn’t seem to sit still, as usual, because he wanted to look at everything in your room. He’d already laughed super hard at the bad painting you’d made in middle school that Mom hang proudly downstairs so you weren’t willing to allow him to nose about quite yet.

You watched him crane his neck to look at a poster on a wall, hidden slightly by your open closet door. It was for an alternative rock group you liked in eighth grade. You may or may not have drawn hearts next to some of the band members... You needed to distract him. “What did Luna want to give me?”

“Oh, right,” he said, using his free hand to pull things from his pocket. A slightly lumpy envelope, a second, smaller envelope, and a little carbuncle totem that made you pause. “The big one’s from Luna, and the—”

“Is that from Talcott?” You put the polish down to pick up the little doll. Like before, it still sent a little thrill through you, a barely-stinging sensation against your palm that made your hands shake slightly.

“Oh, right,” he said with a small laugh. “He wanted you to have it when he heard you were leaving. Gladio said he’s into cactuar statues now.”

You rubbed a thumb over the smooth face of the carbuncle. It was sweet that Talcott had thought to give you this little gift when he’d been so excited about keeping it the day you’d found it. Though, you didn’t blame him; cactuar statues did seem cooler.

“So, how long have Noct and Lunafreya been back?” It was a soft question, quiet because you were afraid of where it would lead the conversation.

“A couple days,” he said as you pocketed the totem and returned your attention to his nails. “I went to see Noct and Gladio yesterday.”

“Cool.” You didn’t have to ask if Gladio still hated you. That was something you already knew. Ready to let that line of thought drop, you nodded at the envelopes. “What are the other things?”

“The lumpy one’s from Luna and the small one is from Dulcis.”

Oh. He’d visited Ignis, too, then. You eyed the envelope, wondering what she’d sent. Letting go of
his finished hand, you went on to the other. “So. Everybody knows I’m leaving the country.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, gaze dropping. “Yeah.” He made to rub at his neck, but you stopped him, putting his hand on his knee.

“Dude, let it dry,” you reprimanded softly. You hadn’t received any farewells, but that was to be expected. Ignis was probably celebrating the fact that you were going so far away. He’d seemed just fine on tv. Hell, if you could gather the energy, you would celebrate.

“Promise me you’ll keep in touch,” Prompto said quietly. “I totally get that you’re gonna be busy, but you can’t forget about me.”

Finished with his nails, you blew on them. He was going to have them looking so cracked and rough by tomorrow, you thought. “Of course I will, you dork.”

You’d try. You weren’t good at doing that, but Prompto was your only friend now. You didn’t really have a choice.

He looked at his nails, humming a little before rolling off your bed to finally check out that poster. Even though he laughed at that like he had the painting, you didn’t think you’d ever choose anyone else, anyway.

—

Stretching in the car lot of Galdin Quay, your head ached. You walked down the long pier with your suitcase and ordered the strongest drink as soon as you could grab the attention of a server. Halfway through it, you checked your schedule, paying close attention to the time. This boat ride was going to be longer than the one to Accordo. Then, it’d be a train ride before you even arrived to Fenestala Manor. Yikes, what a name.

Downing the second half of the drink in one go, you asked for another and saw someone approach you out of the corner of your eye. Turning with your new drink, you were met with the man you’d seen at the port the last time you’d been through.

“Hey, sweetheart, glad I didn’t miss you,” he said, leaning on the rounded bar. The chef rolled her eyes, and you vaguely wondered how often she had to deal with this guy flirting with her patrons.

“Actually,” you said, raising a brow. “You did. I’m on my way out again.”

An easy smirk crossed his face. “World traveler, huh? That’s fascinating. How’s about we—”

You stopped him with a finger poking at his chest. “Dino, right?” When he nodded, you downed the second drink, inviting the familiar buzz into your mind. “I only have an hour before my boat leaves port for Tenebrae. Take me to wherever you’re staying and fuck me, or leave me alone.”

It felt strange coming out of your mouth, but when he took your hand with a casual and eager “right this way”, you fell into step behind him and felt more like your old self than you had in months.

—

His room was smaller than the one you’d stayed in during spring break. Only one bed, but it served its purpose. You sprawled back on it, pulling Dino down by his tie. He tasted like cigarettes and the way his hands grasped at you sent an unpleasant feeling down to your gut.

A burning sensation pricked at your eyes, but you let him slip a hand under your shirt anyway. He
spent no time admiring your body —why would he even do that?— before going right for your chest. You tensed, and that made him tense. When he drew away, looking down at you, his confused expression became slight alarm.

“Hey, wait, why ya cryin’?”

You pushed him away, sitting up and getting off the bed. Sniffling, you wiped at your eyes. This was humiliating. You sat on the edge of the bed and slid your shoes back on. Dino made a small, confused protest that went on deaf ears.

You couldn’t do it. You wanted to, felt that you needed to, but it was impossible.

He didn’t follow you out of the room, and you returned to the bar to spend the rest of your wait washing the taste of him out of your mouth.

By the time you were on the ferry, sailing away from Galdin Quay, your veins were liquor and your stomach was a twisting, sloshing knot. Hands on the railing, you leaned over the edge of the boat and threw up an abundance of liquid. As you looked up, watching the resort grow more distant, you saw a tall blur of black standing at the port that you hadn’t seen just moments ago.

Blinking your tearfilled eyes, you tried to make out any features but they were too far away. Sucks for them, you thought. Should’ve been here on time. Now they had to wait until the next ferry came. Wiping your mouth, you sent them a pity wave.

You were a little surprised to see them wave back.

—

Tenebrae was incredible. It was all bridges and rocky cliffs, magic as thick in the air as the mist from the waterfalls you passed. You followed an usher from the train to the manor in awe.

Being received at a castle was completely bizarre. You wished you could capture the entire experience on film to re-live because you spent much of it totally mystified by everything around you. Queen Sylva, the Oracle herself, welcomed you with a kind expression and a nod as you were shown through by various castle staff.

It was almost a relief when you saw Ravus’ familiar face. He gave you a no-nonsense rundown of where your bedchambers were located, where you were allowed to go, where you should absolutely never go, and where you had to go for food.

Standing at attention near him at all times was a young woman no older than Iris. When it became apparent that you were staring, Ravus said, “She’s my squire. She’s very dependable. Should you need anything, she will help you.”

She nodded, not saying anything as she picked up your suitcase with a lot more ease than you had.

To say you were baffled at how you found yourself here now that it was actually happening would’ve been an understatement.

—

Laying in your new bed in your new home that first night, you reread the letters Prompto had delivered to you. The one from Dulcis warmed your heart, a well written thank you for saving her even though you hadn’t come to her rescue so much as fallen into the bad situation with someone who happened to conveniently hide guns under her skirt.
You poured over Lunafreya’s letter with the dim light from your phone, taking in the elegant script with extreme attention. This was the strangest of all, that she would gift you something when you had nearly ruined her wedding. The letter encouraged you to relish this change, to grasp this opportunity for what it was—a relief from this admittedly dire period of your life.

Beyond that, it had general advice about living in the manor. *Every Saturday is a day of silence, to inspire communion with the gods. It gets very cold at night because it’s in the mountains. Be sure to ask for more blankets or a bigger fire in your hearth, if necessary. Don’t let Ravus fool you with his attitude. He hates to be alone.*

It had come with a small key. She said it opened a door to a quiet space that she tended to go to when she needed time to cope or relax. She didn’t say where to find it so you walked around the manor the next day—a Saturday—and tried to find this quiet room.

After a few mishaps with guards catching you trying to unlock rooms you definitely weren’t supposed to be in, you finally found the right place, surprisingly close to your bedchambers.

The old fashioned key clicked as you turned it in the lock, and you slowly creaked the door open. It was a small library. No wonder she called it a quiet place. There were no chairs, but pillows of various sizes littered most of the floor, and you paused just beyond the doorway when you realized Ravus was sitting among them with a book in his lap, glaring up at you.

Knowing that the only reason he wasn’t yelling at you was because it was a silent day, you held up the key and motioned it to him. You hoped he understood that Lunafreya had given you permission to be there. He seemed to calm at the sight of it, though he looked confused.

You perused the books, picking one and finding a place among the pillows to sit and read. Every so often, the sound of a page being turned caught your attention. When you looked at Ravus, he looked at you. Eventually, he pointed at his mouth and your brows furrowed in confusion. With a roll of his eyes, he pointed at his wrist so you checked the time.

Oh, it was dinnertime.

So when he tilted his head toward the door, you nodded and joined him on his walk to the dining area. You considered yourself extremely lucky because the place was huge. It was no Citadel, but you weren’t sure you would’ve found where to get food so easily if you hadn’t had someone lead you there.

You felt extremely lucky to be there at all.

—

The film studio sat outside the mountains in a small city just in the edge of the country —Tenebrae, you realized, was adorably small compared to your home state— so you had to board the train to go down the mountain when you headed there Monday morning. It bustled ceaselessly. From the moment you walked in, the Producer didn’t so much as introduce you to the rest of the crew before you were placed on camera duty.

“That’s just what we need right now, my sweet,” he explained, setting you up and putting you to work immediately. It was like that every day. Zero room for niceties. You loved it.

Everyone spoke Tenebraen which was hard to follow at first, but film sets were universal. Plus, the word “action” was still “action” even in Tenebraen, and that was really the only command you needed.
The artist whose music video you were shooting was only mildly famous, but you were still starstruck meeting her. The Producer had given everyone a list of every artist you were going to work with that season, and there were some pretty major names on there. You couldn’t wait to tell Prompto.

It took three weeks to finish after planning, shooting, and editing. Then, on the last night, you were shoved into a car with much of the crew and little explanation, arriving at a nightclub still dressed in your day clothes.

It was such constant work, going back to the manor at nights just to sleep, that you hadn’t had a moment to enjoy your vices. So you joined in the celebration and drank to your heart’s content.

With everyone loosening up and three entire weeks of work together behind you, the crew was a lot more vocal about their curiosity over you. It became a silent drinking game for yourself over how many times you were asked about your experience at the royal wedding. Which was a lot.

You weren’t even sure how you got back to the manor.

—

The familiar pounding in your head, the dry mouth, the stickiness of spilled alcohol on your cheek. You rolled over in your bed, groaning at the aftereffects of partying.

“Tell me, what are you doing here?”

You sat up quickly at the voice, doing no favors for your roiling stomach. Ravus stood at the foot of your bed, arms crossed and face serious.

With a look around, you said, “What are you doing here? This is my room.”

He sighed. “What are you doing in Tenebrae?”

You blinked the sleep from your eyes, wishing for something to get rid of the dryness of your mouth. As if she read your mind, his squire came into the room with a small plate and a glass. Toast and water. You gave her a grateful look, taking a bite of the food and drinking half of the glass before addressing Ravus.

“I’m working. You know that.” Your chewing slowed when you realized something. “You’re talking on a Saturday. Is something wrong?”

His eyes were hard. “Saturday has passed. It’s Sunday. And, yes, something is wrong.”

You looked down at the toast, trying to figure out how you could’ve missed an entire day. Again. The last thing you remembered was daring someone on the crew to make out with the club’s dj. Had they? You tried to remember, but Ravus snapping his fingers regained your attention.

“You killed all the fish in the fountain of my gardens by expelling an unimaginable amount of alcoholic waste into it.” His gaze grew even harder somehow. “Then you declared that the gods weren’t real and tried to suplex me. Three times.”

Next to him, his squire nodded. You groaned again, covering your face with your hands. “I’m so sorry. I go a little crazy when I’m drunk. I don’t even know what my coworkers were giving me at that club because everyone spoke Tenebraen.”
The squire gave you an understanding look, but Ravus was having none of it. “I think, for the time being, you need to examine yourself and your choices. Tenebrae has some of the world’s best healers and doctors right here in the manor. Consider meeting with one.”

Falling back and scowling, you said, “I don’t think this is really any of your business.”

“It most certainly is. As your sponsor, I’d like to know I’m not throwing money and support into a worthless waste of my time.”

You huffed, glaring up at the ceiling. So fucking rude. All you did was… kill all his fish and attack him both spiritually and physically.

He sounded less angry, but that didn’t lessen the effect of his words. “Know that your behavior isn’t only letting yourself down. The Oracle took you in, knowing that you were the leading cause of unwarranted stress at Luna’s wedding. I told my mother that you were a confused and troubled artist with a lot of promise.”

You were quick to bite back. “I didn’t tell you to lie to your mom.”

“It wasn’t a lie.” His voice grew distant, footsteps resounding off the floor as he left the room.

A few minutes passed, and you rolled over into the blankets, no plans of getting out of bed if you didn’t have to.

—

Prompto’s voice was a salve on your frayed nerves. You hadn’t spoken to him since your departure because your phone didn’t get international service. It was only once you’d gotten a solid internet connection to the device that you’d been able to make the call.

“So, what’s it like?”

“What do you mean?”


You shrugged but no one saw it. “Uh, cool, I guess.”

“Dude, don’t hold out on me,” he whined. “You wanna know what I did yesterday? I served coffee and stacked boxes of produce all day. And I’m gonna do that today and tomorrow, too. So give me something.”

“Well,” you moved the phone from one ear to the other. “The castle is cold all the time, everyone at work thinks Ravus is my sugar daddy, I’m pretty sure I only got hired because I shot a guy at a wedding, and I think I’m the only one on the film crew that doesn’t have a coke addiction.”

The line was quiet for a while, then you heard him snicker. “Yeah, I’ve been dying to know if you made any moves on the scary prince yet.”

You scoffed, unsurprised at that being what he got out of your long answer. “I would never.”

“Because…?”

“He’s the least sexual being on the face of Eos. At least, as far as I can tell. I bet if I tried to flirt with him, his junk would shrivel up into itself.”
“Gross.”

“Actually…” You laughed a little, thinking about one of the first nights of your stay. “I did hit on him once, and he told me he’d sooner become a eunuch so… yeah. That’s a pursuit I’m not gonna try.”

“Harsh,” he laughed. “And people think he’s your sugar daddy?”

“Oh, yeah,” you kept going, letting out your frustration. You hadn’t gotten the chance to ramble about this with anyone. “The Producer told everybody about me shooting the duke and breaking up with Ignis at the royal wedding so now everybody thinks I’m some ruthless, expert slut, hellbent on clawing my way into positions of power.”

“Uh-huh?”

“Yeah, dude! So I’m untouchable, which is whatever since I don’t have time to mess around with people anyway, but they think I’m something I’m not. They think—”

“You walk into a room and Kanye’s Gold Digger comes on in the background.”

You sighed. “Exactly.” You really missed him and these conversations. Anyone else wouldn’t have understood you so quickly. “Y’know, I wish he was my sugar daddy. Life would be easy. But everyone’s assumptions are so far from the truth. I’m more like his pity project that he has to complete so he can pass oracle school or something.”

“What?” He laughed again, and you heard water running in the background.

Instead of answering, you asked, “Are you taking a shower right now?”

“Uh… no.”

“You so are!”

“I gotta get ready for work,” he defended in a whine. “It’s not my fault you called me first thing in the morning.”

The conversation lasted up until he had to clock in at the cafe. It warmed your heart, and left you in a good mood. He caught you up on his life and complained that he never got to see either of his best friends anymore so he’d been spending more time alone or with Gladio. He was particularly vague about the last thing.

The lighthearted feeling didn’t last. When you crawled out of bed and caught sight of your reflection, your stomach lurched.

Large bags under your eyes, mysterious red scratches on your face that didn’t hurt but looked pretty bad, and extremely bloodshot eyes. You looked like the after photo in an anti drug public announcement.

—

Not comfortable with your appearance, you stuck around in your bedchambers until night fell. Then you snuck to the kitchens where the staff fussed at you in Tenebraen while simultaneously offering you plate after plate of food.

Escaping from them after a meal, you went to the gardens. Ravus’ were only a small part of the
overall grounds, and you had to walk through the dimly lit flowers and shrubbery to find the fountain you’d apparently desecrated.

It was empty of anything, even water. A tarp covered part of it, and that made you sigh. So he hadn’t been lying.

Then, garnering looks from guards as you passed, you wandered around to the general area where Ravus had said there were stables. Because you really, really needed to see a chocobo as soon as possible.

—

Numerous and colorful, chocobos resided in stalls just tall enough that you had to get on your tiptoes to look at them as they slept. The only one still awake and *kwehing* softly was at the very end. You walked toward it leisurely, and it eyed you, tilting its head curiously to look at you with one eye, then the other.

“Hey, beautiful,” you cooed at it. Silver feathers and dark eyes, it looked pretty rare. The name tag at its collar read *Petit Argent*. You’d have to look that up later to figure out what it meant, if anything. You hadn’t yet picked up much Tenebraen so far other than film terms spoken on set. Maybe you just needed to visit the cooking staff more often, and at least you’d learn how to berate people in the language.

The chocobo rejected the hand you reached out to it, backing away and circling its stall. It didn’t nip at you, but it kept ruffling the feathers at its neck in annoyance.

“She’s rather shy.”

You couldn’t even be surprised. It was like Ravus had your number. You knew he had his squire follow you around sometimes when you were at the manor, but he always seemed to show up at random times in your day if he wasn’t already sharing the library with you.

Not turning to look at him, you saw his arm reach over your shoulder, hand holding a bit of greens. Enticed, the chocobo finally came over. You were able to pet her enough that when the greens were gone, she pushed her head into your palm, asking for more attention.

“I used to have a chocobo,” you said quietly.

Ravus drew his arm back, and you saw him lean against the railing of the stall in your peripheral. “Is that so?”

“She was awesome. Bright yellow. She lived for a long time.”

He didn’t respond, so you looked at him. His attention was on Petit Argent, watching the chocobo peck at bits of straw on the ground.

“Can I take her out?”

He turned his gaze to you carefully, scrutinizing. You hated that. You didn’t want anyone looking at you when you were so rough and busted.

“No.”

You didn’t know what else you were expecting. Giving the bird one last pet, you made the trek back to your bedchambers. If you stuck around any longer he might suggest you see a doctor again, and it
would be a pointless effort. Things like that didn’t work for you.

—

You thought about Ignis every single day. Small things reminded you of him—your morning coffee. Big things did, too, with the added effect of ruining your day.

Even at the busiest times when you spent nights in the studio, you found your mind wandering to thoughts of him. You wondered if he was happy. Had he found someone new yet or was he like you, throwing himself into his work?

The thought hurt that he might’ve moved on so quickly, but it hurt even more that you no longer had the option to even find out. Not without being a creep. You missed him, and you missed his friendship. Even though you didn’t deserve it.

—

You didn’t have to sneak into the stables, but getting out was a little tricky. Petit Argent, or Little Silver, was Ravus’ personal chocobo, so when you led her outside, it caught the attention of a few guards.

“I’m allowed to take her out,” you lied, holding up a hand. You didn’t have work today because the artist was a day off on their tour schedule and wouldn’t be in Tenebrae until tomorrow. Worked out for you because you hadn’t ridden a chocobo in so long and couldn’t wait for the rush.

Because of Tenebrae’s terrain, you shouldn’t have went as fast as you wanted over the craggy rocks and low hanging tree limbs, but it was most freeing that way. You loved the burn at your eyes and the whip of the wind.

So much so that you took a corner just a bit too quickly. You were unseated by a tree limb you didn’t see in time, falling onto a bed of rocks at an odd angle. Pain sprang from a foot, shooting up your leg in hot ripples as you began to roll over earth and craggy stones. Gravity pulled at you until the earth ended, and you were falling. The air around you was wet, and you could hear one of the waterfalls rushing nearby.

Closing your eyes, you welcomed the feeling as you fell through the air to an indiscernible forest below.

—

Having awareness and being in control were two separate things. You had a lot of awareness of your actions and choices, but never felt as if you’d had control. You were always insisting on control and all but demanding that people know that you were your own boss. Especially Ignis. He’d never so much as implied he could control you, but because of your past, your infatuation with him, and his naturally mothering nature, you’d always felt the need to make it clear who was in charge.

You wished you could do that now as you blearily woke to the sound of Ravus speaking far too loudly.

With more effort than you felt was necessary, you cracked your eyes open. You couldn’t make out anything beyond vague shapes and a soft light with an undefinable source.

“You’re sorely mistaken,” Ravus said, voice taught. “I believe she tried to end herself.”

“Your highness, we found several alarming things in her system when she was brought here.”
Another voice, unrecognizable but firm. “She couldn’t have been of sound mind at the—”

A loud clack of something hitting marble made them both pause. The blurry whites and greys of Ravus grew closer. The other person followed, and you were suddenly being brought into harsh clarity as something small and smooth was slid back into your hand.

“You’re awake,” Ravus said, face beginning to morph into something real.

You tried to sit up, but it wasn’t happening. Bringing up the hand that held the smooth object, you found the carbuncle totem. The spark of it was gone. It sat in your palm plainly, albeit solidly, nary a sign of magic left. You stared at it blankly before looking at Ravus again.

This was a just another moment in which you wish you had control, but all you had was a deep awareness of how badly things could go.

You closed your eyes, squeezing the totem tightly. You couldn’t pretend things weren’t happening anymore. You couldn’t pretend this wasn’t happening.

This was your life, and you needed to find some semblance of control before you actually did fall off a cliff on purpose.

—

Your ankle was broken. That was something they didn’t have to tell you because the pain that tore at your leg was a son of a bitch. You winced, laying back in the bed, carbuncle in hand, and half-listened to Ravus’ ultimatum between getting help or him severing the sponsorship.

When you opened your mouth to answer, he was already glaring. “The amount of self pity you’re able to have for yourself is astounding. I’ve never met a more pathetic creature.”

You glared back, knowing it wasn’t as affective because you were weak and tired. “I’ll fucking do it, but I’m not doing it for you or anybody but myself.”

He left you alone after that, thankfully.

You looked at the carbuncle in your hand, wishing it hadn’t lost its spirit or whatever it had been that made it spark at your touch. It felt hollow in your hand, but you’d never felt so grateful to be alive.

—

Therapy was bullshit. You were determined and willing, but everything they said disturbed you. Almost like it had been during the height of your time with Ignis, without the added sexual frustration and with a deeper understanding of what could possibly be happening in your head as they patiently coerced information about of you.

They seemed to think you would be shy about your past. You weren’t, at all, not about the parts they seemed to expect. You didn’t care if they thought you were a slut or an idiot. You were both, you knew it, and you liked it that way.

What you didn’t want to talk about was the Mom who had passed away or your disgusting ex boyfriend. What you avoided most was Ignis. Like everything else, they drew it out of you, because it hurt more than most. The pain was fresher than any other, and it left you feeling raw.

The hardest part of therapy was the direct way they had you bring your issues forward. You despised this about them. They forced you, through introspection, to realize how Prompto was the only person
you accepted love from because you weren’t sexually attracted to him. At first, you thought that was just a lucky guess.

Then, they made you face your projection onto Gladio and the disregard you had for Noctis since he had a mess full of social anxieties himself. You hadn’t realized your perception of everyone was so skewed until it was thrown in your face. You also hated the therapist for that. They were good at their job, and you wanted to spit at them each time they made you realize something new.

The worst was when you realized that Ignis’ kindness only drove you away because it reminded you of how unkind you were to yourself.

You hated the therapy; it was actually working.

—

Rather than passing in a blur, your days became routine. Work all day, spend Saturdays reading in the library with Ravus, and talk to the healer on Sundays.

When withdrawal symptoms set in, leaving you restless and anxious, you went to the stables even though you were banned from riding any chocobos. Not that you were even able to with your physical state. Not that you even wanted to with the accident still fresh in your memory. The stables became the most comforting, the awful smells that reminded you of the barn at Mom’s house making you spend hours there at a time.

Ravus was there sometimes. He rarely spoke, but when he did, it was the mean type of encouraging that seemed to work. You knew from everything that he did, the things he read, and the passing conversations he had with his mother, that he was training to be an Oracle if she ever passed.

You’d always thought Oracles were only women, but what did you know. Seemed strange that he’d do so much for a job and title he may never have to undertake. It was the only reason you could find that he’d ever waste so much time on helping you.

Everywhere you went in the manor, you were always accompanied by his squire because of your broken ankle. It would’ve been annoying, being treated like a child by a child, but she was pretty great in her own small ways.

“Lord Ravus says you are too erotic,” she said as she helped you back to your room.

“Erotic? Ravus said I was erotic?”

“Oui! He says you are erotic and unpredictable.”

You snickered. “I think you mean erratic.”

“Oh.”

Yeah, things were shitty, but it was the little moments like this that stuck with you.

—

Bedridden, or at least manor-ridden, for a few weeks, you were stuck doing editing work from home until your ankle healed. The routine was so boring, especially since all of it was spent stark sober. Ravus was busy most of the time, his squire wandered in and out, and the few times you came across the Oracle, you seemed to bungle the interaction in some way.
You wanted to be back in the studio. It really wasn’t fair. It was only a broken ankle. Stupid Ravus for making you stay off your feet. Stupid squire for being so helpful that you couldn’t even get mad at her. Stupid Prompto for being so far away because if there ever was a perfect time to play a complete run through of your favorite video game together, this was it.

You had to shut down these outwardly directed frustrations. According to your therapy, they reflected some of your narcissistic tendencies. You almost didn’t like knowing the right words for what was wrong with you. Before, you could just say “I’m a bad mess” and now you had an entire grocery list of names for what you were dealing with.

Since you couldn’t do much work from home while the crew filmed—you dreaded when they’d send you the data to edit—your therapist decided it would be good to spend that week writing letters to people. It was supposed to help you address your tendency to self-sabotage relationships.

This kind of asinine assignment was something you expected, but when you actually went to write, you were forced to truly think about it. The doctor seemed to like pressing that, bringing things forward even if it made you uncomfortable. Especially if it made you uncomfortable.

They stressed that you didn’t have to share them with anyone. They were meant to be a chance for you to delve into your deeper thoughts and feelings, to try and understand why you didn’t think you deserved happiness. It all sounded very patronizing and moot.

Still, you spent that week in your room, drained and writing out poorly worded maps of your emotions onto tearstained papers that were eventually wadded up and tossed aside.

—

You told yourself it was immersion therapy, but you knew you were just being a creep. Ignis would never know. No one would have to know. Using the somewhat spotty internet connection in the manor, you searched his name and waited for the usual delayed loading screen.

Scrolling past a page of just informational links giving the most basic facts about him, you looked for dirt. It made a sick rush of adrenaline pool in your stomach. You shouldn’t be doing this, you told yourself. This was a Bad Idea.

You opened a link to a nobility-focused newspaper, finding something that hurt you just the way you’d expected. Just the way you seemed to want to be hurt. The headline was simply Scientia. You scanned the article, stomach sinking as you read.

_The royal advisor announces his eligibility and interest…_

You closed the page when you reached the point where it began to describe his valuable prospects. He really was just like a prized chocobo. None of what you had done with him mattered. He’d chosen to open himself up to courtship anyway.

Whether or not he was with someone else didn’t matter —though, you longed to know— because he wasn’t yours anymore. It was for the best; you wouldn’t have gotten better if you had stayed with him, and he wouldn’t have owned up to his responsibilities.

—

Having the library to yourself was rare. You spent entire Saturdays there, reading and lounging among the pillows, sometimes with the grumpy prince. But he was doing some Oracle thing, probably. And it was a Tuesday so you could talk all you wanted. So you threw yourself into the depths of the pillows and called Prompto. You liked how his laugh would bounce off the marble
“Have you been doing exercises to keep your muscles strong while you recover? But not too much exercise!” He hummed for a second as he seemed to think. “Oh! And don’t forget to ice it after long periods of walking.”

You snorted, putting your phone on speaker while you went through the books you’d chosen to try reading. They were all in Tenebraen. Luckily, you’d found a Lucian-Tenebraen dictionary. So with a bit of luck and patience, you could hopefully learn a new language by the time you healed.

“Since when do you know so much about broken ankles, Prom?”

He snickered, but it sounded forced. Then he was a mess of “uh” and “umm” that stretched for a good half a minute.

“What’s up with you?” Opening a book to look for any pictures to gauge what the plot could be about, you moved the phone closer to hear it better. Maybe it was cutting in and out and it only sounded like Prompto was sputtering for so long because of a bad connection.


Dropping the book to your lap, you picked up the phone and turned off the speaker. “What, really?”

“Yeah, dude,” Prompto snickered again, genuinely this time. You hadn’t meant to sound so interested, but it was too late now. “I told him about your ankle, and he began throwing all these remedies and facts at me, and told me I had to make sure you were doing the right things to get better.”


Prompto hummed a little in disagreement. “I don’t think it’s that weird. I mean, nobody expects you to just get over each other like nothing ever happened.”

You chewed on your lip and stacked the books into a neat pile. The dictionary was the largest. “It’s been almost two months. I’m already over him. I’ve even been on a date.”

Prompto scoffed. “What, you mean that guy you took a selfie with right before you broke your ankle?”

“Yeah,” you said curtly, pouting and knocking over the stack of books. “He was sweet.”

“Dude, he’s the hype man for a terrible rap group. He’s the guy who says yeah and swaggy in every song.”

Blushing in embarrassment because he was totally right, you said, “Hey, he says more than that. There’s that one song where he says bend over and spread ‘em right before the bass drops.”

Prompto laughed as you’d expected, and you were okay with that. You weren’t going to tell him that the guy had been refreshingly dumb, had called you lil mama, and you’d said yes to going on a pretty innocent date with him only because he had been the opposite of Ignis in every conceivable way.

The door to the library creaked, and you knew it was Ravus before he even came in because there
were only two keys to the place.

“Prom, I might have to go.”

Ravus scoffed lightly. “Don’t end your call on my account.”

On the line, Prompto’s voice quieted. “Is that Prince Ravus?”

“Yeah, it’s the grumpy prince.” You grinned at Ravus but he ignored it. With a sudden idea, you flipped through the dictionary. “But I like to call him papa-gâteau.”

Ravus’ gaze snapped to you. “Excuse me?”

Ignoring him, you read from the dictionary. “The literal translation is dad-cake. It means sugar daddy.”

“I like dad-cake,” Prompto said while Ravus sighed.

The heavy feeling in your chest waned a little. You weren’t over Ignis yet, and you knew it. But you had Prompto, and in a weird way, you had Ravus.

You were still working on your therapy letter to Ravus, but you’d already mailed what you needed to tell Prompto. You let him know he was the best, that he made you laugh, that you were so grateful he was your friend. And you’d known exactly how to word it so well that all you’d needed was a postcard.

—

Fingers curling inside, hot breaths into the crook of your elbow. Oh. You couldn’t. Not him, of all people. There were still rough feelings, stinging edges of your heart. That almost made the lust more palpable and just wrong.

The cold mug of coffee on the nightstand is what had started it, then thoughts of his lean back, his high cheekbones, and those eyes as he took you. Every time, even when things were broken, he’d always looked at you with such fire.

Someone rushed into your room, the door banging open. You froze in mortification at the sight of the squire standing near the bed with a concerned expression on her face.

“Get out!” you screamed, pulling your blankets over you tightly.

Instead of listening, she asked, “Are you okay?”

“Out!” You hit her with a pillow, throwing more until she left.

You covered your face with your hands, yelling. That was so fucking embarrassing. Why would she think it was okay to walk in on someone like that? She was young, but not too young to know what masturbation was.

Because you were cursed, truly, Ravus came into your room next, looking around before his gaze fell on you. He stopped at the foot of your bed, and you scowled at him.

“I was told you were writhing in pain and crying out angus,” he said. “What seems to be the problem? Are you unwell?”

“No! Go away!” You were completely nude under the blankets, and felt incredibly uncomfortable
that he was in the same room while you were still wet. “It wasn’t in pain, okay? Now, get the hell out!”

Ravus’ eyes widened slightly, and he backed away a step, then two. Turning and striding out, he said to the squire standing in the doorway to your room, “You are no longer allowed to enter her bedchambers under any circumstances.”

Falling onto your side, careful of the cast on your leg, you groaned. You never had privacy anymore, not since you’d gotten hurt. Maybe it was for the best that you were stopped. Touching yourself to thoughts of Ignis was pretty low, right? Even if he was the best you’d ever had.

—

You’d written and rewritten the letter to Ignis, none of them covering exactly how you felt. Ravus had accepted his letter with a nod earlier that day, disappearing into his duties with it in his pocket. It covered all the important things. You begrudgingly admired him for his no-nonsense way of pushing you forward. He was the only person in Eos who you could spend an entire day with in total silence and be comfortable. You wanted to braid his hair because it looked soft. Y’know, the important stuff.

Crumpling another sheet of stationary, you threw it across the library and stifled a quiet sob. You weren’t even sure where it was coming from. Writing everything down wasn’t helping you figure anything out. Not for this one. Every other letter had been easy. Even the one to the Mom who’d passed away years ago. Although long, it hadn’t been hard to write at all. This letter seemed impossible.

You still didn’t understand how you felt about Ignis. How could you understand something you’d never felt before?

Ravus found you in the library half an hour later, catching you with puffy eyes and a splotchy face. Wiping at the constant flow of tears, you sniffled and pretended everything was fine. It was Saturday, anyway, so you couldn’t complain even if you wanted to.

He snapped his fingers, nodding toward the door. You shook your head, not understanding. With a quiet sigh, he offered a hand and helped you up. You followed him though the manor, hobbling past the gardens and into the stables. You were confused, but the distraction from the letter was welcome.

Petit Argent had an egg in her stall. Protective and alert, she stared at you as Ravus led you into her space to see it better. You could barely make it out, but it was there, resting underneath her feathers. Covering your mouth with a hand, you let out a tiny, surprised laugh. You grabbed Ravus’ sleeve, shaking his arm in excitement. You wanted to say something. This was exciting!

He pried your hand off, motioning for you to follow him again. When you were back in the library, he let you braid his hair, though he shook it out before leaving. He’d read your letter and indulged you. Knowing that gave you more confidence to think of the positive outcomes that could come from your letter to Ignis.

Your heart was lighter when you made another attempt at writing the letter, and the words finally came, rough and holding remnants of uncertainty. You were getting somewhere, at least.

—

You were doing final edits on the video you didn’t get to help shoot when the Producer called. He rarely called. You answered immediately, happy to be away from the bullshit you had to look at on your computer screen. You were so sick of hearing the song for the video, and your opinion
remained that editing was the worst job on any project.

“We need you, my dear! You’ll be in the studio on Monday.”

“Why?” Not that you were complaining. You missed the studio.

“I have good news and more good news!” He was in a loud setting like he’d been the very first time he’d called. You knew now that it was the nightclub that the crew liked to go to after finishing a video. “The next artist we’re shooting with would like you to direct!”

Blinking, you took a moment to let that sink in before you grinned. “Yes! Why, though?”

“He saw your little, what was it? Your blog! He wants to use a screenplay or some such that you’ve written for a concept of his video. I’ll be buying that from you on Monday so that we may use it.”

“Y-you’ll do what?”

He laughed loudly, hanging up. You stared at the bits of footage on the laptop screen, not sure if you’d be able to keep working that day. Someone wanted you to direct. A performer requested you because they’d seen your work.

You’d have to thank Prompto for convincing you to make that stupid blog the next time you spoke to him.

—

It was the first time Prompto was the one to call you. Usually he waited until you had the time to call first. You should’ve known this particular phone call was different immediately by that fact alone.

“I love you, too!” he said before you could even finish your hello.

A slow grin crossed your face. “You got the postcard.” It was late and you were tired after a day spent trudging around the studio with crutches. But you were willing to forgo sleep to hear his cheerful voice.

“Yeah! I can’t believe you’re such a wimp that you couldn’t just tell me over the phone.”

You rolled your eyes, crawling onto your bed to get comfy. Something told you this was going to be one of the longer conversations. “You have to admit the postcard was a good idea. Now every postal worker across Eos knows.”

“True. How’s your job and your foot?” He snickered. “And dad-cake?”

Your ankle was recovering well; you only had days left before the cast was off, Ravus was becoming something like a friend, and your job was a complete stress in the best way. When you asked about his life, he became awkward and hesitant.

“Well, uh, hey.” His voice grew quieter. “You meant what you said on the postcard, right?”

Not sure where he was going with this, you responded equally as softly. “Uh, yes?”

“Great! Then I think you’ll forgive me for this.” He grew louder this time, yelling away from the phone. “Iggy! She wants to talk to you.”

Jolting up in your bed, your mind caught up with what he was saying. “Wait, what? Prompto, what are you—”
“Hello?”

Your breath stilled, heart feeling like it was in your throat. The deep voice in that refined accent had you melting, and you knew you were screwed. Months apart and a broken heart hadn’t been enough to quell how much you cared about him.

You looked at your phone, at the seconds ticking by on the screen. Then you pressed the red button to hang up, frowning as the screen went blank. Anger at Prompto bubbled within you, but you tampered it because you understood his good intentions.

You just weren’t ready.

—

You celebrated when your cast was finally sawed off by going for a long walk around the manor with the squire. She kept acting like you were going to collapse any moment, and when you took off in a run, she scrambled to keep after you.

Banners were being placed up everywhere, hanging from balustrades and tower windows. The Oracle held an autumnal equinox festival this time every year, and all of Zoldara Henge’s population gathered within the castle to celebrate for several days.

You were granted a week off from work because it was a kingdom-wide celebration. Needless to say, you were ecstatic.

The squire stopped you outside the dining room just a day before the festival, placing a hand on your arm as she peeked through the doorway.

“There’s a woman from Insomnia in there,” she said, looking over her shoulder at you. “A courtesan, I think.”

“A— a what? Are you sure?” You didn’t think courtesans were still a thing, at least not in the Crown City.

She nodded. “She came especially for Prince Ravus.”

A sly grin coming to your face at the thought of Ravus entertaining a courtesan, you looked past the squire into the dining room. At the grand table sat Ravus, talking amicably with a woman you were very familiar with. Though not Lucian, she was definitely from Insomnia so the squire had been half right.

You looked away from Aranea, giving the squire a serious nod. “Definitely a fancy prostitute. Good eye.”

When a kitchen staff member needed to get through the doorway, you followed them in, beelining for a seat next to your previous landlady. Biggs and Wedge were seated nearby, and you waved at them, too, using both hands and being sure you were embarrassing Ravus in front of his guests as much as possible.

“What’s up, slut?” You grinned at Aranea, and she met you with a sardonic look.

“I’ve missed you, kid,” she laughed a little. “The apartment’s boring these days. My new tenant is never around and has terrible taste in food.”

You smirked at her, readying a response before it fell from your lips completely. With a thrill of
unelicited excitement, you looked past her as other guests walked through the entrance. Ravus stood to greet Lunafreya. Behind her, Noctis waved your way as he found a seat further down the table. Gladio and Ignis came through the doorway after him, both seemingly absorbed into their own conversation.

The cup of water you’d been holding spilled a little as you tried to take in this surprise. “Oh, damn.”

You’d been annoyed with Prompto because of what he’d done, trying to surprise you with that phone call. Now you saw it for the warning that it was meant to be. When Ignis’ eyes met yours, you quickly looked away.

“Papa-gâteau,” you said quietly to Ravus, earning an irritated look. “What the fuck?”

He wasn’t even slightly sympathetic as he returned to his seat. “You’re the one who argued your case for staying here beyond your recovery. I think you can withstand a few days of Scientia.”

You shook your head. As if this was your own fault. You hadn’t known Lunafreya would return home for the festival. No one had even told you about the festival until just days before.

You tried not to look at Ignis as you began to eat, wondering how long he’d been in the castle and how you hadn't sensed his presence. When you did look his way, you found him busy examining the food on his plate. He had a hand to his chin, finger curled over his mouth, a thoughtful look on his face.

Then, his eyes lit up, his hand drawing away as he snapped his fingers and smiled, and with a thud, a gentle but heavy thud thud, your heart bloomed with an unbearable warmth.

Taken by sudden and perfect clarity, you knew exactly how you felt about Ignis. The depths of your awareness hadn’t been as deep as you’d thought, apparently. All this time spent recovering and ruminating, and the answer was there all along, revealing itself when you’d finally found a place of comfort.

How unfair.

Chapter End Notes

This fic wasn’t supposed to be this kind of ~welcome to my twisted mind~ angst fest, but it also wasn’t supposed to be this long. Going into the fluff right after the wedding didn’t feel natural, even though I’m so READY to get to that. Sorry to delay it another chapter, guys.

I can’t thank you enough for reading. <3

Ps I am seriously deadass tired posting this and I can’t stop giggling at the idea of Ignis with a cockney accent?? lmao goodnight
I like how mean you are.

Chapter Summary

Cheap puns, dubious flirting, simple magic, and one spider (ingredients for a love potion).

Chapter Notes

My workplace invoked mandatory overtime (should be illegal? someone pls arrest my boss??) so I don’t know how I got this out.

No sleep... (✧ ≖ ʖ ≖)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first day of the autumnal equinox celebration was about meditation. Ravus explained that the entire event was to reap what you’ve sewn and celebrate balance. The first day was to help you find that balance. It could be within yourself, it could be found in an object blah blah blah, you ditched Ravus in the middle of his explanation to go outside after breakfast because you weren’t sure you could be in the same room as Ignis for very long.

He was ignoring you. Just like Gladio, he must’ve hated you. The sting of him not even acknowledging your greeting at breakfast had dampened your mood the entire meal. To be fair, it was a small greeting. Barely a wave… but still. You had to get away; you needed a clear head if you had any hope of finding your balance.

To you, meditation was laying flat in the field of sylleblossoms near the manor and staring blankly at the sky. Noctis and Lunafreya were nearby. You could almost make out their quiet conversation, her occasional gentle laugh keeping you from eavesdropping. You didn’t want to intrude, even if you had been there first. You also didn’t want anyone to know you were out here.

You weren’t avoiding Ignis. You were trying to find your balance. Whatever that was meant to mean.

Something tickled at your arm, and you lifted it to find a tiny bug. Alarm was your first reaction, but you stopped yourself from getting up. It had been a while since Noct and Lunafreya had come outside… It would be beyond weird if you just popped up now.

A little tense, you watched the bug walk down your forearm and over your wrist. As it crossed your hand, you held a finger out as a bridge for it to step onto a petal of a nearby flower. You relaxed when it continued its journey elsewhere. There. That was nice. You were so one with nature, you were Eos itself. Meditation was easy.

As you took out the carbuncle doll, rubbing it with your thumbs like some kind of lucky charm, you heard Gladio’s gruff voice from somewhere near the other two. When he asked them if they knew where you were, you tensed all over again.
Gladio was looking for you. But why? You couldn’t talk to him. He hated you. You didn’t exactly hate him, but you’d been mad for a long time until it had weakened into a sad little sore spot on your conscious. The letter you’d written to him for therapy sat on the desk in your bedchambers. You didn’t plan to ever give it to him.

Noctis answered with, “She’s laying over there.”

Springing up, you looked around to find Noctis and Lunafreya sitting a few yards away. Behind them stood Gladio, who looked at you with arched brows. You looked between each face, landing on the prince. “You knew I was here?”

He nodded, chuckling. He had a flower tucked behind an ear, another held gently in Lunafreya’s hand. You hated that this was the first time you’d spoken to him since he’d gotten married. You wanted to apologize for making a mess of their wedding, but so much time had gone by, it was almost best to just leave it in the past.

Gladio walked through the flowers toward you. “Feel like talking, juicy?”

Hearing that old, stupid nickname made you start. He was frowning at you, but it wasn’t hostile. A realization overcame you that you’d built up an inaccurate image of him from being apart for so long; all you’d imagined was the furious face he’d made when he told you he hated you. That wasn’t the person in front of you now.

Standing up, you dusted yourself off, loose blue petals floating through the air. “Sure, juicy.”

—

Stopping with you on a bridge so high that it gave you vertigo, Gladio said, “You’re a brat, y’know that?”

Hands holding the stone railing tightly, you looked at him with a little confusion. He was leading off in an odd way, but he’d certainly said worse things. “Yeah, I know.”

He sighed, leaning back against the railing and crossing his arms. “How’s life out here?”

Is this really the conversation he’d pulled you up here for? Unimpressed, you rolled your eyes. “Magical. The Oracle is slowly kissing all my booboos and ouchies away so hopefully I’ll be a better human by the time I get home.”

That made him chuckle. “You do look better.”

You peeled your fingers from the railing, kicking the toe of your shoe against the smooth stone. “Gladio, did you have a point?”

He sighed. “I think you know what I wanna talk about.”

Chewing on the inside of your cheek, you mulled over how to move forward. You did have some idea, and hearing him out wouldn’t kill you. “Okay, hit me with it.”

“I missed you.” The tattoo that stretched along his arms moved with his muscles as he unfolded them. “I didn’t miss how you worried Prompto or the way you’d string Iggy along, but things changed a lot after the wedding.”

You bit harder on your cheek, taking in everything he said with no reply forthcoming. The day was overcast, and the sun peeked through the clouds for a moment, lighting up the bits of forest that
patched the mountainside in yellows and oranges. The mist from the waterfalls sparkled in the air.

“I got so sick of Iggy talking about how vexing you were,” he said. “When you suddenly left and that stopped, it was like I had to miss you. It felt wrong seeing Iggy beat himself up over everything.”

You stared at him. “He… what? I thought he would be happy without me.”

Gladio stared back. “Happy?”

You forced your gaze away. “Not happy, but I thought he’d be okay. I knew he’d be happier without me eventually, but—”

“You thought he’d be okay when you didn’t talk to him for weeks after what happened?” Gladio was incredulous. “When we found out you were leaving, I thought for sure you guys were gonna talk it out first, but no, you fucked off without even saying goodbye.”

“You didn’t say goodbye to me either.”

“I was still pissed, but Iggy convinced himself you’d at least call before you left.”

That required a moment to digest. Had he been waiting for you to approach him first? That wasn’t fair. You’d broken it off with him to save him from a bad relationship. The last thing you’d wanted back then was to have second thoughts. Which you would’ve had in bounds had you decided to meet with him before leaving Insomnia.

Eyes following the sunlight that kissed the mountainside, you sighed. “I didn’t realize you brought me up here to make me feel shittier than I already do.”

It was his turn to sigh, and he rested elbows on the railing, facing the same sunlit scene. “No, damn it. Look, did you really have to leave the country and shack up with a prince right after dumping him? Who the hell does that? Of course he wasn’t okay.”

You hadn’t thought of it that way. You weren’t “shacking up” with anyone, but your decision to run away now seemed more than just selfish. All you’d been thinking about was how far and fast could you get away from him. To keep him safe from you. “I’m sorry.”

Gladio grunted. “I don’t care. It’s not me you should say it to. I got over it when I realized you were just being a coward.”

“I wasn’t being a coward.” You felt defensive even if part of you agreed. He wasn't giving you any breaks here, and you were tired of letting him walk over you with his words. “It’s not like I get job opportunities like this every day. I had to come.”

“If you're not a coward, why haven’t you talked to him yet?”

“What would I even say? I’d just end up bothering him,” you reasoned. “If he wants to talk, he can talk to me first.”

“Hey, I never said he wasn’t a coward, too.” Gladio looked at you, scratching the scruff on his jaw idly. “He’s more like you than you think. Took me a while, but I got it figured out.”

That made you smile weakly, a dash of pain mixed with something else. Ignis was ignoring you for the same reasons you couldn’t talk to him. The idea that you were both thinking the same thing gave you a bit of hope that you quickly squashed down. “Oh really?”
He chuckled. “Yeah, you both have a weakness for people who treat you like shit. That’s why he wanted you so bad, and why you ran away.”

What he said made your smile disappear, but you didn’t think he was wrong. You only knew how to respond to negative treatment. Part of you thought that might’ve been why Ravus’ intolerant attitude worked better to push you into sobriety than Ignis’ soft love had. Hearing it from Gladio surprised you, though.

“Y’know, juicy,” you said, watching as the sunlight was eaten by the clouds again. “I missed you, too.”

—

Fenestala Manor was much smaller than the Citadel, even given its almost spiraling form sitting on the mountain and various annexed properties. So you weren’t very surprised when you kept coming across Ignis.

Outside the sylleblossom fields, as you crossed through the gardens, you saw him approaching. Eyes growing wide, you ducked behind a bush and waited until his footsteps were distant before letting out a sigh of relief.

In one of the manor’s parlors, while you listened to something on a gramophone —the manor was totally lost in time— he followed Noctis into the room. The prince was there to point at a painting, saying something you couldn’t hear over the music. When Ignis looked back at you over his shoulder, you lifted the record sleeve you were holding up to cover your face. You could see through the hole in the center that he was still looking at you curiously, and that only served to make you more nervous.

Even in the training room, where you’d thought you might try meditation through physical means, Ignis appeared. While you were in a yoga pose, he stepped into the entrance, peering around the room before his eyes landed on you. Your eyes met, and he leaned on the doorway, tilting his head as he watched you move into another stance.

Losing your focus, you toppled to the mat on the floor. The squire came to help you, already asking about your ankle, but you brushed her off, hiding your blushing face by pretending to dry off with a towel. What was he doing and couldn’t he just stop?

You brushed past him on your way out, the muscles in your shoulder sore from being pulled the wrong way when you’d fallen. What made him think it was okay to watch you? Now you were sore, and you weren’t any closer to finding your balance. A part of you liked that he’d stopped to watch, but you were mostly disquieted by how he seemed more and more interested in approaching you with each occurrence.

Luckily, you’d been able to avoid speaking to him every time. No, wait. You weren’t avoiding him. You were expertly maneuvering yourself away from him for a tactical advantage regarding the old but new-to-you feelings that you hadn’t quite unpacked yet. You needed time, or more than one day, at least, to come to terms with yourself and how you felt about him.

So you kept maneuvering yourself out of his way.

Just before dinner, you saw him round a corner in a hallway. Thinking quickly, you stood in a pose before he noticed you, keeping perfectly still next to a statue as he walked past. You began to consider this just another part of your meditation. The sight of him was a contradiction; it both calmed you and made you nervous.
Not one to be a romantic, because you’d sooner die than admit to such a low quality of thought, but when he let out a quiet chuckle before leaving the corridor, you considered the notion that maybe Ignis was what you were looking for.

You didn’t need to find your balance. He was right there, and the way you seemed to keep coming across each other all day only made your belief in it stronger.

The squire poked her head into the doorway of your bedchambers the next morning. She was still forbidden from coming in, but she seemed to take everything Ravus said about you with a grain of salt these days. Or maybe you were a bad influence.

“Not coming to breakfast?”

You mumbled, rolling over and pulling the blankets around you tighter. The festivities for the second day of the festival didn’t begin until after lunch. You didn’t see the point in getting up before then. Plus, your shoulder still ached. No point in stressing it further with things like… getting out of bed.

“Are you sure you don’t want to see Angus?”

Grumbling, you halfheartedly threw a pillow in her direction. She needed to go the hell away.

“I asked the courtesan about him. She said he has four eyes. I wonder… do you think he will show me where the other two are hidden?”

You sat up, sending her a bleary look. “What are you talking about?”

She nodded, walking farther into the room. “Angus. Prince Noctis’ advice man.”

Right. You lay back again, still not sure if you wanted to get up. Advice man. You liked that. You wouldn’t correct her on that part. You wouldn’t correct her at all, actually. “There’s no G. It’s Anus, not Angus.”

The usual quiet “Oh” of understanding followed, and you began to curl back into the blankets for a bit more sleep. As much as you wanted to face Ignis, you weren’t sure you could get the words right. You had them all written down — your apology and desire to be in his life again — but it would seem so insincere if you stood in front of him with the papers and read them off like a primary school assignment. So you were going to sulk for a bit and maybe roll out of bed by the time the day’s celebrations began in the afternoon.

“But you called him Angus before,” the squire said, bringing you out of your thoughts.

You tilted your head to look at her with a frown. “When did I—?”

Oh. Oh, yeah! You didn’t know how she’d made the connection, but you were immediately annoyed. It wouldn’t kill them to give you some privacy in this blasted castle. You were somehow both always and never alone in this place. Couldn’t find someone to give you a hug to the point that you became almost touch starved; couldn’t find a moment of peace to even love yourself to make up for the lack of intimacy.

You glared at her and threw the blankets off, climbing out of bed. She laughed, running from the room. With a sigh, you looked at the papers littering the desk that sat in a corner of your room. Maybe today was the day. You’d make things right with Ignis, and you could make up and see where you stood with each other.
Since you were already out of bed —that had probably been the squire’s plan all along— you stretched your aching shoulder and tried to find the cutest clothes you owned. Not that you were trying to impress anyone.

—

You passed by tables of fruits and vegetables placed in elaborate displays. Aranea picked up an apple, smiling at the man behind that particular display in such a way that he swallowed, keeping quiet as she took a bite out of the fruit.

“Good job, big boy,” she told him in Tenebraen as she tossed the bitten apple his way. He caught it, clearly intimidated, and nodded quickly as if she were doing him a favor.

“We’re supposed to try the food?” you asked, seeing the man visibly ease as Aranea walked toward a different area of the festival grounds.

She chuckled, tapping fingertips against bright, colorful lanterns as you passed. “No. They’re honor tables. I just wanted to see the look on his face. Tenebrae is full of so many bleeding hearts. It’s always fun to see if I can get a rise out of a local when I visit.”

“We do so appreciate it,” Ravus intoned from behind, startling you.

Aranea sent a smirk his way as you turned to him. He had piece of woven jewelry in his hand, probably given to him by a festival goer. Taking it from him because he obviously had no intention of wearing it by the awkward way he held it, you looked at its simple design with admiration. When you didn’t get it on your wrist on your first attempt, he sighed, helping you tie the ends together.

You turned to Aranea when it was secured on your wrist. “Master has given me a gift. I think that means I’m free?”

Aranea pretended to appreciate it as you showed it off. “Nice to see you’re getting along. I thought for sure he’d send you back long before now.”

“He tried,” you said, dropping your hand. “He’s usually pretty bitchy.”

That made him take a deep breath, and you knew you were in for some kind of catty comment or an irritated sigh. Perfect timing had Noctis calling your name, though, and you gave them a couple of finger guns as you backed away. “Hold that thought, papa-gâteau.”

The nickname made him scowl, and you walked through the crowds to Noctis with a grin that only waned slightly when you realized Ignis was with him. Of course he was with him; that was kind of his job. Fighting a blush because he was looking right at you, you gave the two very small fishing poles in Noct’s hands a curious look.

“You up for the challenge?” he asked, tilting his head at the tank of fish behind him. They swarmed in droves, little black and golden fish that you assumed you were supposed to keep once caught.

The fishing rods seemed very simplistic, and the game looked pretty easy so you shrugged. “Sure, Noct. I’ve been waiting for this opportunity to humiliate you.”

He scoffed as you took one of the fishing rods from him, your attempt at a pun going unnoticed or at least unappreciated. “We’ll see about that.”

Chancing a look at Ignis, you caught him giving the prince major side eye. “I wouldn’t treat her skills so trevally, Noct.”
That one was pretty bad. So bad and so sudden you snorted hard, bringing up a hand to cover your mouth.

Ignis looked at you, green eyes meeting yours as a corner of his mouth curled a little with a smile. Oh. That was nice. “Find something amusing, do you?”

Dropping your hand in surprise at his direct question, you nodded. “That was the worst. Without a trout.”

Noctis groaned, and you shared a small smile with Ignis before joining the prince between a mass of children—you were both way too old to be doing this—awash with a warm excitement that made your heart race. Ignis had finally spoken to you, and you felt absurdly giddy over such a small thing. The lingering feelings of doubt ebbed, and you promised yourself you would give him the letter before he and the others left.

Puns were a good beginning, a good foothold for you to get comfortable with him again, but he needed to know how sorry you were. For hurting him. For making a mess of everything. For not realizing how you felt until things were already ruined.

—

The squire was really pushing her luck today. She elbowed you occasionally during dinner, giving you smiles. Usually you were able to forget that she was just a teenager because she’d always been professional and courteous, but there must’ve been something about this celebratory atmosphere that was making her act her age.

“Want to know how I figured it out?” she whispered.

You shot her a side glance. “What?”

Her eyes widened as if she were distressed that you didn’t remember what she was talking about. “That he is the one you like.” She held a hand up to point at Ignis, but you grabbed it quickly and pushed it down.

“Astrals,” you sighed. “Could you not?”

She giggled, and you couldn’t wait for her regular, serious self to return. Hopefully soon. “I knew it was him because of the staring.”

You blinked, replaying the last day or so in your mind. You’d done your best to be casual and polite so far. “I haven’t been staring.”

“You shot her a side glance. “What?”

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“Not you. Him.”

You hesitated at her words, chancing a look over to Ignis who wasn’t staring your way at all. He was saying something that had Wedge nodding several seats down the table. Looking down at your food, you picked at it for a moment. Even if he had stared at you, it wasn’t like you could blame him. There was an unspoken tenseness between you that you were taking a long time addressing.

But it wasn’t like he was approaching you, either. Puns only got you so far…

Lunafreya tore you from your thoughts when she leaned toward you, asking quietly, “Was my gift of any use?”

Hand subconsciously going to the library key tucked in your pocket next to the carbuncle, you
nodded. “It’s helped me so much. Thank you.”

She smiled at you gently. “I’m happy to hear that.”

You wished you had something specific to say about it, but the only thing you really did was go there to read in total silence with Ravus. It was your favorite place, followed by the stables.

Perking up at the thought, you pulled your phone out and said, “Did Ravus tell you Petit Argent has an egg?”

Gladio, who sat next to the princess, looked at your phone with her when you held it out to show off the pictures of the bird and her egg. You were a little obsessed and couldn’t wait until it hatched.

“He hasn’t mentioned it,” she said, face lighting up at the photos. “That’s very exciting.”

Taking your phone without even asking, Gladio leaned toward Ignis. “Does your lady friend have a silver one like this?”

Ignis appeared startled for a moment by the sudden question, then looked at the picture on the screen. “How am I to know?”

“Hey!” you called across the table, probably earning a look from Ravus. You didn’t care, holding out your hand. You frowned at the soreness of your shoulder muscles that came with the movement. “My phone?”

Gladio chuckled, handing it back to you. “Right, sorry, juicy.”

You shoved it back into your pocket, returning your attention to Lunafreya. “Anyway, I’m super excited. I have a tracker for when it’s supposed to hatch and everything. If it does before I go back to Insomnia, I get to name it.”

She laughed lightly at this, and you couldn’t help but wish Prompto was there. He would’ve appreciated this more than anyone.

—

Wine was served around the table, and you held a hand over your glass when the staff came by. Aranea watched this with a tilt of her head.

“I noticed you haven’t drank once since we’ve been here. Tell me you’re not making bad choices again, kid.” She was saying it in good humor, but you choked a little on your water all the same. As you put down the glass and wiped at your mouth, she laughed and continued, “You’re not pregnant, are you? Remember you said you’d name your kid after me.”

You rolled your eyes, but there was a small sting at the joke. There had been a very brief scare while you’d been recovering from your broken ankle. The doctors told you that the vitamins you’d been taking had negated the birth control you were on. If it hadn’t been for your out of control lifestyle at the time making your body a complete nightmare for any form of life to grow, you probably would’ve been three months along with a tiny Scientia by now.

And you thought it was hard enough working up the nerve to talk to him without some dreadful secret like that.

Seats away, Ravus spoke up, “You haven’t told them? I visited your bedchambers to assist you for weeks, and you’ve frequently met with a doctor over this. You can’t place all the knowledge upon us
alone.”

The table had become quiet. Great. Just what you needed when Ravus was being so careless with his words. An audience.

“Are you doing this on purpose?” you asked him, pulling at the bracelet on your wrist. He was making this unnecessarily weird. You felt so many eyes on you, and with a quick glance at Ignis, you found his expression unreadable.

Aranea put a hand on the table, a frown forming. “Wait, is he serious?”

Ravus crossed his arms. “I’m entirely serious. It took some effort, but she’s several weeks along now.”

You felt like smashing your head into the table. Preparing to say something because this was becoming painful, you were surprised by Aranea sending a look to Ravus, her frown becoming a glare.

“Are you saying I trusted you, put her in your care, and you—”

“I’m sober!” you cut her off, and her hand lowered, her face freezing.

Tearing your eyes from her, your gaze went to the others, giving Ignis a quick pass because you couldn’t look at him while you said it. You hadn’t told them anything because you were ashamed. Admitting you’d ever had a problem was hard, especially to all the people who’d tried helping you in the past.

“I’m totally sober,” you repeated, lowering your voice and scratching your neck a little with one hand while the other squeezed the carbuncle in your pocket. “That’s why I’m not drinking, and I wanna keep it that way. Ravus has been helping me.”

The room was quiet for a moment. Surprisingly, Noctis was the first to break the silence by clearing his throat.

“That’s great.” He pushed food around on his plate. “It’s overrated, anyway.”

You forced a small laugh, uncomfortable with the admittance. Opening the tracker you had on your phone —conveniently located next to the Very Important Egg Hatching Countdown— you thought seeing the number of days that had passed would make you feel better. It was something to be proud of, you told yourself.

“Yeah, it’s nice that I can actually remember things now and wake up without a headache,” you said, staring at the number. “And if my math is right, in a couple of weeks, I’ll be sober for sixty nine days.”

“There’s a goal,” Gladio chimed in, making you blush in embarrassment. It was uncomfortable how nice they were being. But therapy had taught you to get used to the discomfort because people who cared about you were going to be nice whether you liked it or not.

Making light of it with jokes, you were able to get through the rest of dinner without any more awkward confessions. When the squire returned to jabbing her elbow into your side, you turned to her with a frown but paused when you realized Ignis was looking at you.

The squire’s soft giggle faded into the background as you took in the slight frown on Ignis’ face. You smiled, wanting that look to go away. He started and quickly looked away, as if he’d simply
been staring into space in your direction.

You pushed the remainder of your food around your plate. Did he think less of you for needing a literal Oracle to convince you to get better? It wasn’t like you cared much what he thought. Except you kind of did. You’d done this for yourself, but… a large part of you wanted to feel like you were good enough for him.

Looking down the table again, you met his eyes. You couldn’t muster up a reaction until he offered you one of his barest smiles. Warmth flooded you like vines crawling upward from your stomach to your heart.

—

**You:** I miss you, Prompto.[Message unable to send]

Typical. Your phone was so finicky in Tenebrae, the SIM card and unreliable internet only going so far. Was it the magic in the air or was it just that low tech?

With a sigh, you paced around your room. If only he could’ve come with the others to visit. You could try to call him, but it was late enough at night for you that he was definitely already at work and wouldn’t pick up.

The floor was cold against your feet as you left your room. You’d learned enough Tenebraen to know you could sweet talk the head chef into making your favorite food. They would be the only one in the kitchens at this hour, if anyone. You needed something to comfort you. What you really wanted was a smoke, but you’d settle for an ice cream if nothing else.

Halfway down a corridor, you stopped when you heard voices. Oh, hell yes, you thought. It had been so long since you’d gotten the chance to snoop. Ravus wasn’t prone to keeping his discussions all that private anyway so eavesdropping on him was never exciting.

The sound of Ignis’ voice bid you toward the doors to one of the training rooms. One door was cracked open at an angle to where you could partially see inside. You sent a silent thanks to the gods for this blessing.

Standing by a training dummy, Ignis had his arms crossed as he watched the squire and Gladio do some weird body movements, the squire following the much larger man’s direction.

“Just hold your ground,” Gladio said, bending his legs a little. “You’ll be fine.” You recognized that tone; he’d used it on you during your self defense lessons.

Her legs shook a little, and she dropped the stance with a sigh. “Why are you called juicy? You seem more… meaty.”

Gladio chuckled, and the squire didn’t seem to appreciate it.

“I don’t know why she says you are juicy. Your name doesn’t fit, and you refuse to spar with me,” the squire continued, pointing a training sword at him before she turned to Ignis. “You will fight me, oui?”

Ignis uncrossed his arms, something materializing in his hands. Daggers? Your eyes lit up at the magic of it. Fuck. This was your lucky night if they were really going to fight. You wished you could stop by the kitchens for popcorn, but didn’t want to move in case you missed anything.

“As Ravus’ disciple, are you receiving the proper training?” Ignis asked, casually rolling a wrist, the
dagger twisting in his hand as if cutting through the dim lamplight in smooth movements.

Before you could hear her response or see what, probably super fucking cool, things Ignis was about to do with those knives, a loud chime rang off the walls of the corridor. Eyes going wide as the people inside the training room paused, you backed away from the door and scampere down the hall and around a corner as you reached for the still ringing phone in your pocket.

It was the Producer. Of course it was the Producer. If he called, it was rarely at decent hours. You heard the door to the training room shut from around the corner and answered your phone with a sigh. So much for seeing some action.

“What is it, boss?”

“That screenplay of yours, dearest,” he said, wasting no time. “The artist would like you to give the affirmative that his interpretation of its meaning has been fully realized before we begin filming next week. I’ve sent the outline and blocking for the video. I know it’s everyone’s time off, but I do hope you’ve at least listened to the song.”

He hung up, as always, before you could get a word in. It was an unfortunate habit because you had listened to the song and were a little confused about how the artist thought he could use your open-ended screenplay as some kind of political statement.

The production company had bought it from you for a large sum of gil that you were still reeling over so it wasn’t like you were complaining. You were just trying to figure out if the politically charged theme the artist wanted to take would be considered treasonous if you helped him.

Because the artist was a Lucian and his song was a judgement on how poorly King Regis handled the economic disparity between classes, some of the lyrics were literally *fuck Reggie and the prince who thinks he’s edgy*. You were a little torn for obvious reasons.

“Pretending to be a statue again?”

The voice made you jump, your phone falling from your hands and clattering to the floor. Picking it up quickly, you faced Ignis with a sheepish look. “Oh, uh, no. Just out to get a snack and got distracted.”

The grey moonlight spilling through the windows lit him perfectly as he shifted in place, a hand coming to a hip. “Is that all? You seem rather alarmed.”

Did you? You were a bit worried about directing the video, but you hadn’t thought it would be that obvious. Then again, you were feeling the pressure now that the Producer had specifically reached out to you about it.

“Actually, I have a question,” you said, looking from his face to his chest, to the gloves on his hands, then back up when you realized what you were doing. “Wanna come with me to the kitchens?”

He rose a brow over his glasses. “Is that your question?”

“Uh, no,” you said, fighting the feeling that you were fucking this up already. “But it needs a little explaining, I think?”

To your surprise, he nodded, a small smile crossing his face. “I’ve no other obligations. Lead the way.”

Just moments ago, it seemed like he did have obligations. Wasn’t he going to spar with the squire?
Nope, you told yourself, never question a good thing. He’s open to going on a stroll with you. This was as good a start as any.

“So,” you said, drawing it out a little. “I was just wondering for no particular reason what could be considered treasonous.”

Ignis gave you a side glance. “It’s simple, really. Treason is when you declare war against or when you aid an enemy of your kingdom.” There was a pause. “Should I be concerned?”

You laughed a little. “No. It’s nothing like that.” So treason wasn’t the right word, but you felt bad about your big part in making a video for a song that was so harsh on the royal family. You gave him the details as you walked through the castle, the moonlight glinting off his glasses, a giddy warmth in you over how easy this conversation actually was.

“It’s well within your freedom of speech,” he said, looking a little amused. He held the door for you as you entered the empty kitchens. “I believe you feel some guilt because Noct is your friend.”

Huffing a quiet laugh, you said, “Yeah, that’s probably it. I just needed to settle my nerves. Thanks for listening.”

“Anytime.”

Things grew quiet. You opened one of the large freezer doors, hoping Ignis would stand at the door to keep you from getting locked in. The squire usually conspired with you in getting treats this way. Okay, yeah, you were definitely a bad influence on her.

Your mind searched for something to say to keep the conversation going, to keep Ignis next to you. Going into the freezer, you went directly to where the sweets were. Ignis seemed to understand what to do, a hand on the door, red-soled shoe blocking it from shutting on you.

You could talk about learning Tenebraen, you thought. Then again, you weren’t fluent enough yet to have a full conversation. Oh! Maybe you could tell him about the huge payment you received for the screenplay. But that would be kind of crass, bragging like that, even if you were proud.

“Tenebrae is beautiful, isn’t it?”

Chewing on your lip, you grinned down at the frozen treat you were able to swipe. Ignis wanted to keep talking, too. Heart thudding heavily in your chest, you walked out, offering him the ice cream out of politeness while he let the door close.

“It is,” you agreed. “Barely any sunlight reaches the ground thanks to all the trees and mountainsides unless you go out on the bridges. I can see why all the royals here are so pale.”

He let out a small laugh, turning down the treat with a small wave of his hand. “I hadn’t considered that, but I suppose you make a good point.”

You peeled off the wrapper and tossed it into a bin. You didn’t want to leave the kitchens because this was as far as he had agreed to go. If you left, you thought, he might not stay with you. And you really needed to tell him now otherwise you would chicken out. If only you had your letter with you to get your thoughts on track. Maybe you could invite him to your room so you could grab it… no, that would give off the wrong idea.

With him so close, you were painfully aware of how you felt about him. You were letting your treat melt, standing in the kitchens with him quietly. You leaned back against a counter, trying to play it cool. “Can I say something?”
His careful brows arched above his glasses. “I must say you’ve changed. Since when do you ask before saying whatever nonsense comes to mind?”

Jaw slacking a little, you scoffed. “This is serious, Ignis. I’m trying to—” Part of your ice cream began to slide apart and you had to catch it, eating it quickly. He gave you an amused look that made you frown. You were trying to apologize; he shouldn’t be smiling at you right now!

“I, uh, fuck.” You held out the food, slightly surprised when he took it for you as you wiped at your mouth with the sleeve of your shirt. Looking at him, you made yourself go for it despite the less than ideal situation you found yourself in. “Ignis, listen. I just wanna say that— that even though we didn’t work out, you were always there for me. I'm sorry for pushing you away.”

His smile waned, his eyes raking over your face.

You could hear your heart pounding in your ears as you continued, “You’ll always be one of the best friends I’ve ever had. There isn’t a day that passes that I don’t regret what I did to ruin everything between us.”

At first, he did nothing, his glove becoming sticky with your melted sugary mess as he gazed down at you. Then, your heart sank a little as he shook his head, a frown crossing his face. He turned away from you, tossing the dessert into a bin —hey!— and you just knew this was it. He wasn’t going to accept your apology.

Your stomach hit a hard bottom as he removed the glove and walked to a sink to wash his hand. Maybe you should leave. You’d made things awkward. Ignis didn’t want to talk it out. He couldn’t have made it clearer when he so rudely threw out your ice cream. It surprised you that he was happy pretending nothing happened, but you’d hurt him so maybe you should’ve seen it coming.

“Please, don’t leave,” he said as you passed him for the door. He turned off the tap, shaking water from his hand with quick flicks of his wrist. “I needed a moment to think.”

You faltered, turning toward him. Looks like you had yet another line of negative thinking to work on. You’d been so ready to bail, assuming so much based on so little. Therapy was helping, but you really hated how obvious all your poorly constructed thought processes were now that you could recognize them.

Ignis gripped the glove in a hand, frown still there. “I should be the one apologizing. I’d allowed a misunderstanding to remain and let myself see something that wasn’t there because of petty jealousy.”

He paused for several beats, bringing the glove to his other hand, twisting it slightly. You took that as a moment to speak up because none of it had been his fault. This was ridiculous. He’d done what a normal, good boyfriend would do, and you’d shoved him away because you were the problem.

“Ignis, it wasn’t about them. It was us, and I fucked it up so badly. I was never in a good place with myself, and I kept taking that out on you.”

His frown deepened. “And I was at fault for expecting you to care for me in the same way I did for you when you weren’t in a mental state to do so.”

That caught you off guard. His eyes searched yours while you searched for the right words to say. Taking too long, it seemed, your racing thoughts were interrupted by his continuation.

“The way I felt was so new to me, I was nearly consumed with the thought of being with you.” He was shaking his head again, looking away. “It blinded me to the fact that a lover wasn’t what you
needed of me at the time, much less the commitment of courtship.”

You stared at him. Even his apologies were better than yours. It somehow only upset you that he was trying to take this plea for forgiveness away from you. It annoyed you that he’d ask for it, that he’d speak in such a thought out manner that you wanted nothing more than to give it to him.

Frowning yourself, you held out a hand. You wanted a reset to dispel those negative thoughts. He was allowed to apologize, to want your forgiveness. You still felt like it was all your fault, but Ignis was a sensible person. He wouldn’t take any blame unless he really felt it was due. So maybe he’d accept this, and you could move forward toward something less painful. You’d shaken hands when you first met; this felt just the right amount of awkward in the moment as it had the first time.

He looked down at your hand, then slowly took it in his gloveless one. His skin was smooth, palm warm against yours. You didn’t let go for several beats, even when the shaking had stopped. You felt it, that familiar old thrill that sprang forth at his touch. Now you had a name for it, though you weren’t sure you’d be able to tell him.

He let go first, and you had to fight the fall of your expression. Adjusting his glasses, he said, “I’m relieved to finally talk with you. I only wish we hadn’t wasted two days being avoidant and feeling sorry for ourselves when we could’ve been working this out.”

Feeling a little brave at his sudden admittance, you laughed softly. “Calling the pity party, table for two.”

“I’ll have the sympathy with a side of reluctant forbearance,” he played along, looking just as uncertain as you felt.

“I recommend the commiseration special.” Your fingers tugged nervously on the bracelet you weren’t yet used to wearing.

This time he laughed gently, and it made you weak. “If you’ve a mind—” He took a small breath, eyes looking down at your hands, his face falling a little. “I’d love to... be friends again.”

Delayed excitement hit you. Despite the tangle of yarn that was your heart, you nodded, unable to find your voice. It wasn’t exactly the fresh start you wanted, but things were broken. You should’ve known not to expect something to be rekindled.

A friend, though, you could never have enough of those. You would take whatever Ignis was willing to give. Even if it was only a few dorky puns and the occasional smile.

Wasn’t that how it began between you, anyway? There were worse things than finding yourself at square one.

—

You were out of your bedchambers long before Ravus could send the squire to bother you. It was a New Day, and holy shit, were you ready for it. To the extent that you’d kind of rushed out of your room still wearing your pajamas. The dining room was mostly empty, morning sunlight casting soft colors over the grand table through the stained windows.

“Morning,” you yawned as you sat down, smiling at Lunafreya and Ignis. It seemed like you’d found the Morning Crew™ and they were in full form, breakfast and coffee all around. Next to you, Ravus read from a book silently, occasionally sipping from a mug. You picked it up, blowing on the steam that rose above it.
Ravus didn’t even look up. “That’s my coffee.”

“I’m just checking it for poison,” you said and took a sip. It was awfully sweet, making you grimace. “Well, I’m probably gonna die from all the sugar you put in there. So thanks for that.”

“If you kept your hands to yourself instead of feeding off of my plate like a stray cat, that wouldn’t be a problem.”

Shaking your head, you reached for a piece of fruit on his plate, your eyes flicking to Ignis. His head was turned downward at a newspaper, but his eyes were on you. Chewing slowly on the fruit, you licked juice from your lip and looked away. This wasn’t going to be easy, was it? You’d woken up in a positive mood, but you were already being swayed by doubt.

Ravus took a sip of his disgusting coffee, asking, “Why aren’t you dressed properly?”

“Well, y’see,” you muttered between bites, beginning to regret your decision to leave your room in your pajamas. Ignis was staring, and you felt ugly. “There’s a huge spider in my bathroom.”

Alright, so you’d had two reasons to rush out of your bedchambers so early. Ravus sighed, standing from his seat as you pulled his plate toward you. He had a lot left and none of the staff had come by to offer you food yet.

“I’ll take care of the pest,” he said, and you could feel how hard he was rolling his eyes. “But when I return, I expect an explanation for the abundance of fish that seemed to have populated the fountain in my gardens overnight.”

You watched him leave with slow realization. Shit. You’d forgotten about all the fish you and Noctis had caught during that festival game. Noctis had said he’d take care of it, but you hadn’t known what he’d meant; you’d been too distracted by trying to come up with more puns to give Ignis a reason to keep talking to you.

 Stuffing a piece of toast into your mouth, you got up unceremoniously. Mumbling incoherently through the food to Lunafreya and Ignis, you pointed in the direction of the gardens and left the dining room. You wanted to see this for yourself.

—

You sat on the edge of the fountain, arm over your knees as you drew them up. Scattering food for the fish over the surface of the water, you watched them race about for it. It was a flurry of black and gold, way too many for one small pond.

“So,” you spoke up, startling the fish away. “What do you wanna do?”

Ignis sat with you, back facing the fountain and legs crossed casually as if this wasn’t about to be the first talk you’d had since making up. He’d come out to the gardens after you lied to Ravus, telling him that the fish were to make up for the ones you’d accidentally killed during the early days of your stay.

Having Ignis so close was pulling the strings of your heart taut. You wanted to reach out and touch him but resisted the urge for the sake of keeping things normal. As normal as they could be. He looked content, as if he’d flourished in your time apart. It contradicted what Gladio had said. Was it really such a good idea to be friends with him if he was better off without you?

He rested an arm on his knee, turning to you. “Shouldn’t the host decide how to entertain her guest?”
You shrugged, dusting the remaining fish food from your hand. “Well, I kinda wanted to leave the manor, but everything’s closed so… I dunno.” When you looked up from your hand, he had a slight smile.

“What would you normally be doing a this hour?”

Taking in his words, you looked around the gardens, then at the fields of sylleblossoms that bordered the more organized area where you rested. “Working.”

“Is that all you do?”

Another shrug. Wind sent ripples through the field of blue, and your eyes followed the waves. “Pretty much.”

You didn’t want to bore him, but you also hadn’t expected to find yourself out here alone with him so soon. You were beyond grateful for this second chance at friendship, but just looking at Ignis made you feel things that you were enormously conscious of. You needed a buffer, otherwise you were going to feel nervous during his entire visit.

Eyes roaming to him, you met his curious look with one of your own. Being friends with him was okay, you decided, because it kept a polite distance between you and held a solid definition. You couldn’t hurt him if you maintained that distance.

Only you weren’t sure how long you could make that last.

—

You made him wait outside your bedchambers. He didn’t seem all that bothered, standing idly and looking at his phone. You bet he had international service on his special phone. Fucking rich, political figures and their encrypted devices with super good service.

Clambering around your room and stretching your sore shoulder, you tried to move quickly. No sense in making him wait forever. But when you got to the bathroom, you hesitated. What if Ravus had been lying and the spider was still there? That did seem like something he might do, just to be mean. His inclination to fill this implicit big brotherly role had to be some kind of double edged sword.

The spider had been, easily, the size of your hand. If you stretched out your fingers… and said fingers grew several inches longer. If it had been smaller, you would’ve thought it was cute! You could coexist with spiders all day long. Just not ones that looked like alien facehuggers…

Embarrassment biting at you despite the trepidation, you poked your head out of your room. “Hey, could you check the bathroom for me?”

Ignis blinked, slowly pocketing his phone to look at you strangely. “Pardon?”

“Spider,” you said, opening the door wider and hooking a finger over your shoulder. “Could you…?”

He looked past you into your room, and you realized how stupid this was. But you didn’t retract the request because you also realized you wanted to be stupid. Come into my parlor, you thought as you opened your door fully, stepping back to let him in. At this rate, you only had two full days with Ignis before everyone left. You had to make the most of them.

The urge to flirt with him was strong, though it was twinged with a nervousness because of your
feelings. Flirting had never meant something until now. Would it even be right to do it when things were still uncertain between you?

With hesitance, he stepped through the threshold, sending a subtle glance around your bedchambers.

“Just check if it’s still there,” you said, motioning to where he needed to go. As he walked through toward the bathroom, you quickly walked after him, picking up a pair of discarded panties off the floor and throwing them somewhere out of sight.

He looked over his shoulder, stopping in the doorway. “Didn’t Ravus take care of this?”

You almost bumped into him, catching yourself at the last moment. “I don’t know if I can trust him. He could’ve brought more in for all I know.” You picked up a small, empty vase—it had held get well flowers from your crew—and handed it to him. “If it’s there, use this to catch it. We can set it free in the gardens.”

Taking the vase, he smiled slightly and stepped into the bathroom. “How benevolent of you.”

You followed him inside, peeking over his shoulder for any sign of the little spidery fiend. “Yeah, yeah. Is it there?”

You felt another wave of embarrassment when his eyes fell to his old Crownsguard sweats that sat in a pile on the floor. Was it weird that you’d kept them? They were practical, and the castle was always cold. And… they reminded you of him. Some days, all you needed to fight withdrawal pangs was that plush feeling surrounding you to remind you of the first night you’d spent together.

Your first taste of an Ignis who’d never wanted you to be alone.

His thoughts seemed to have went in the same direction. “I still have your dress,” he said, quiet voice bouncing off the walls of the small room. He looked away from you to the vase in his hands, eyes widening for a moment as if he were surprised by his own admittance.

You smiled despite yourself. “Well, if you’ve been wearing it, I hope you haven’t stretched it out too much.”

He cleared his throat—oh, that smile of his—and handed you the vase. “The area appears safe. I’ll wait outside.”

—

Alone in the bathroom, you considered putting on the sweats. It wasn’t like you wanted to imply anything by wearing them… They were just comfy and warm. You didn’t want to show Ignis around feeling uncomfortable and cold, did you? Pulling your pajama top over your head, you tossed it away and picked up the sweatshirt.

You were immediately greeted by a large eight-legged friend, who quickly crawled across the shirt toward you. Throwing it away with a quick jerk, you rushed out of the bathroom and through your bedroom. “Ignis! Get it!”

Eyes wide, Ignis looked away when you rushed out of your bedroom door. “What do you mean?”

“The spider!” Your thoughts were racing, anxiety prickling at your skin. Even if it wasn’t on you, you could feel it somewhere—everywhere! And Ignis was being useless. Why wouldn’t he even look at you? Rubbing your arms, a shiver going down your spine, you gave Ignis a look of frustrated confusion. “Will you help me?”
He nodded once, gaze avoiding you completely as he walked past you and back into your room. You were fully aware that you’d burst out of your room in just your bra and pajama bottoms, but he’d seen it all before so you hadn’t thought to let it bother you. It hadn’t occurred to you that it might bother him, though.

Going back into your room, you put on clothes while he caught the spider. When he emerged, vase in hand, he looked a little relieved to see you dressed.

“Shall we take it to the gardens?” His expression was stoic, but the faint blush that still dusted his cheeks spoke volumes.

You nodded, slipping on your shoes. Maybe you were okay with nudity, but you’d forgotten about all of Ignis’ reservations. You’d forgotten about a lot of things.

Looking both ways down the corridor as you turned the key over in the door to the library, you grabbed Ignis’ sleeve and pulled him in after you. There weren’t any rules that you knew of saying only you and Ravus were allowed inside, but you had the feeling that it was an “invitation only” kind of deal where you needed a key. And there just happened to only be two keys so not even the squire could get in if she wanted to. It was a private space of comfort made for the Nox Fleuret kids, and you hoped Ignis thought it was as neat as you did.

He gave the pillows everywhere a curious glance as you let go of his sleeve. A thoughtful frown on his face, he walked toward a bookcase. You made sure you heard the click of the door as you closed it. Ravus probably wouldn’t care about you bringing Ignis here, but you were still a little paranoid.

“This is where I spent a lot of my down time when my ankle was wrecked,” you said, walking past him to pull out a book you were still working on. It was in Tenebraen, and you had an untenable amount of little slips of paper between the pages. “What do you think?”

Ignis peered at the books, one hand on his hip while the other touched his chin. You fought a smile, trying to be subtle in admiring his form. Gods, he was… something.

“It’s quaint.”

Starting a little at his response, you huffed a small laugh and took a seat atop a few large pillows. “I think it’s nice.”

He didn’t touch any of the books, but sat down with you, tentative and distant enough that you could maybe touch him with your fingertips if you stretched your arm fully. “What are you reading?”

You held up the book. “Tenebraen Fairytales.” It was a children’s book, but you had to start somewhere.

He nodded, growing quiet and shifting against the pillows as if trying to adjust. It was bad for posture, but he didn’t seem to mind, stretching out a leg and resting an elbow on a raised knee.

“Your sobriety…” he said suddenly, voice soft. “It’s an achievement. I’m happy for you.”

Closing the book, you met his gaze. The statement gave you an odd feeling. It seemed out of place. “Thanks. I think it’s my longest streak of actually taking care of myself.”

You couldn’t keep the eye contact for long, eyes tearing away to the bookmarked pages in your lap. He was being sincere, and it was making you uncomfortable and excited and hopeful all at once.
You kicked at a small pillow, wanting to change the subject. Your current situation lended you to an odd mix of pride and shame that you couldn’t shake if people kept bringing it up.

“Excited for the ball tonight?”

He chuckled, and you could feel his gaze on you. “As excited as one could be for such an event. I’ve never attended a Tenebraen ball so I suspect a few cultural faux pas will come to pass. Unless you have any advice to offer… knowing your experience with such things.”

You had to look at him at that, a smile growing on your face. Such sass. You’d missed that. “I dunno,” you said, amused. “I might know my way around balls, but I think I’m gonna give this one a pass.”

He rose a brow. “You’re not going to attend?”

Rolling a shrug over your shoulders, you said, “My mom sent my old gameboy while my ankle was recovering so I’ve got more important things to do. Like catching Pokémon.” Getting elbow deep into the game seemed a lot more fun than dealing with Tenebraen nobility gossiping over petit fours about how you’re only there because you’re sleeping with their prince.

Ignis shared your gaze, not saying anything. Feeling your nerves building up again, you tacked on, “You should ditch, too. I mean, if you want.” Astrals, you sounded so dumb.

He gave you a long look, green eyes analyzing you. Then, he chuckled again. “Tempting offer. Though, I might be more enticed should you let me choose what we do.”

You gaped at him. “What’s better than pocket monsters?”

—

His knees brushed yours as you sat cross legged in front of each other on the soft but firm mat that covered the floor of a training room. Though the touch was small, it had your heart racing. When he took one of your hands into his, you may as well have melted.

“Show me the one where you make daggers appear,” you said, voice unintentionally breathy.

Green eyes flicked from your hand to your face, and he tilted his head a little. “You mean summoning?”

“Do that one first.” You nodded, a list of plans already in mind. First, daggers. Then, some kind of healing magic that would ease the sore muscles of your shoulder. Then… who knew. Something that could devastate.

He let out a small laugh before controlling it, the sight of his smile warming you. How were you able to go so long without him? He was as beautiful as ever, and you couldn’t believe he was here with you right now.

“I’m afraid that isn’t…” he looked down at your hands again, his smile becoming soft. “Perhaps another time. I’ve something in mind for your first magic lesson.”

First? That made you grin inwardly. Like him, you looked at his gloveless hand underneath yours, half expecting him to arch his hand around and slap your palm as if this were all just a joke.

“This isn’t really— I mean, I can’t do magic,” you said, feeling the need to confess even though you knew he was fully aware.
His hand curled around yours a little, giving it a light squeeze before he placed the back of it flat against his palm. “Worry not. It’s more a lesson for myself. A test of my precision and focus.”

You waited for something to happen, but all you saw was your hand trembling slightly in his, the thrill of his touch everpresent.

“This takes a great deal of trust,” he said quietly. “I want you to know I won’t hurt you, so don’t be afraid.”

His words touched at something sore within you, mangled emotions that had aged but never fully dissipated. You kept your eyes on your hand. “I know you won’t. I’m not afraid.”

He let go of a soft breath, and a few moments passed as nothing happened. Then warmth spread from his palm, over the back of your hand. You could feel it move through your hand. It felt strange, making you squirm a little. The feeling suddenly stopped, your hand left with a tingling feeling as he let go.

He looked up at you with a small frown. “Are you—”

“I’m okay.” You had to fight a laugh. It was weird, but not painful. He was being so overly caring right now.

He nodded once, taking your hand again. “I may be approaching it incorrectly. I’ll try again.”

You kind of wished he would tell you what he was trying to do, but you were grateful not to be bogged down by an overflow of information you probably had no hope of understanding without any frame of reference. It wasn’t like you’d be able to focus on whatever explanation he had since his touch was too distracting as it was.

Like before, the warmth from his palm burned ever so slightly against the back of your hand. Different this time was the lack of that strange feeling. Then, suddenly a small flame erupted in your palm.

You gasped, instincts making you jerk your hand away. Bad idea. The flame felt like a match being put out against your skin. It left a quick, scorching sensation, then went out in a small puff of smoke. As you hissed and shook your hand, Ignis took it in both of his own.

“I’m terribly sorry,” he said. “I hadn’t anticipated your reaction.” He blew on it lightly as he inspected it. Other than a little singed, reddened skin on the center of your palm, you were perfectly fine.

The way he pouted his lips to blow softly had you swallowing. “Show me again.”

He paused, looking up. “I’m not certain that’s wise.”

You rolled your eyes. “I’m fine. Please, Iggy. I won’t freak out this time. I trust you.”

He gently brushed a thumb over the red spot on your hand. It didn’t even hurt now. Making up his mind, he brought his hand to the back of yours again, palm up. With a quick flick of his eyes up to your face, he let his mouth form a small frown as he concentrated.

Again, the warmth came, and the small flame came to life in your palm. You made yourself stay still, anchoring to the feeling of Ignis’ larger hand cradling yours. It was harding fighting the instinct to pull away, but with him holding your hand in place so gently, you let the anxiety melt away.
“So,” you said in a near whisper. “This is amazing, but… why?”

Ignis shifted your hand, tilting it one way and the other, and the flame moved along with it, the tip trailing upward no matter the angle. “This could very well be the difference between life and death.”

You looked up, watching as the light of the fire flickered off his glasses as he focused. “That’s heavy.”

A corner of his mouth drew upward into a smirk. “The ability to control what is and isn’t touched by the magic I harness would be astounding if ever mastered. I could save Noctis from harm without unintentionally harming him myself.”

That… seemed more than fair. You curled your fingers a little, drawing them close to the flame. It bent away from your fingertips as you moved them, a fluid avoidance, and you laughed a little before laying them flat again. This was incredible. You’d never expected him to share this.

When you looked up again, you caught him staring at you. The way his eyes took in your features, searching your face, made you blush. “What?”

He blinked slowly, looking down at your hands. His frown had returned, deeper this time. The flame went out, thin plumes of smoke floating upward and disappearing. He withdrew his hand and stood, stretching as if he’d been doing something strenuous with his arms. He seemed tense, and you couldn’t figure out why.

“I believe I will turn in early. Thank you for showing me around today.”

You hadn’t shown him much at all, though, and he was definitely cutting the lesson short. The music from the ballroom was only just starting to float through the halls of the manor, and you knew it would be hours before anyone else went to bed.

Not wanting to seem eager, you curled your hand, warmth still there—from his touch or the magic, you weren’t sure—and nodded. “Thanks for showing me your uh, magic skills. See you in the morning.”

“Good night.” He avoided meeting your eyes, leaving you in the training room with that faint, burnt smell of magic and a feeling that you’d done something wrong.

—

Wandering toward the music that emanated from the ballroom, you passed masked guests, uncaring of your drab state of dress. When you entered, you looked around for anyone you knew. Gladio was a beacon of black, larger than anyone else, and you weaved through people to find him in the middle of a conversation with Aranea. They both looked at you when you stopped next to them.

“Where’s Iggy?”

You checked behind yourself as if Ignis were supposed to still be with you. Turning back to them, you shrugged. “Went to bed.”

Gladio furrowed his brows as he scratched at his jaw. He’d let his hair grow out a little, and the oncomings of a beard were showing. You thought it made him look a lot older than he was. That might’ve been why Aranea was resting a hand on his arm.

You weren’t sure you wanted to touch whatever that situation might be. You were just a little relieved when Aranea dropped her hand from him to wrap an arm around yours instead. This kind of
hold was unusual for her, but she was in a ball gown and sported, much like Gladio, an intricately woven black mask over her eyes so maybe her actions were all just situational.

“I like your style, kid.” She smirked and it made you feel silly for walking right into the ball in your simple T-shirt and jeans. And you weren’t even wearing a mask like everyone else— for shame!

The orchestral music waned into silence before a piano melody began from another part of the room. Ravus was playing from a small platform. He’d mentioned he was going to perform something, but you’d hoped for a sax solo or to see him shred on a lute.

The music silenced the chatter throughout the room and brought you out of the slump from Ignis’ sudden departure. Aranea danced with you, garnering looks from people nearby. It wasn’t enough to make you uncomfortable, a bit of happiness shining through the discomfort left from the abrupt magic lesson.

—

“Bend a little this way and spank that ass,” you said, demonstrating for Lunafreya. She copied you, her white mask glittering as she shook a little with laughter. You were trying to show her some of the choreography of a video you had helped make. It had been all kinds of trashy, and you’d loved it.

“What are you doing?”

You weren’t sure if Ravus was talking to you or Lunafreya, but you gave him a serious look. “Why? Want me to show you how to dance, too?”

“I wouldn’t call that dancing.”

Lunafreya righted herself and touched your arm gently. “I’m going to find Noctis.”

You nodded, smiling at her. She wasn’t going to use any of the moves you showed her, but it was cute how she kept humoring you. It was nice to know that when you returned to Insomnia, you had another friend that you couldn’t wait to get to know.

When she disappeared into the crowd, you looked at Ravus, who’d crossed his arms. Classic Ravus.

“Papa-gâteau,” you said, fighting a grin at the irritated lines forming on his face. “Want me to show you a move that says I’m looking for someone to lay pipe? Because I think you could have every guy here ripping their masks off to get a better look.”

You were only guessing at what he was into. If there ever was a person you just couldn’t pin down on the sexual spectrum, it was him. Sometimes he could be so blatantly ace, and other times you thought his rare frustrations with other people just had to be sexual in nature. But you’d told yourself you’d never assume anyone’s sexuality again after your misunderstanding with Ignis so you didn’t think about it too much.

A sharp frown came to his face. “Could you at least pretend to hold any form of social graces? Coercing Luna into joining you doesn’t make your behavior any less objectionable.”

You rolled your eyes. It wasn’t your fault she was the more fun sibling. A large form of black appeared behind his blindingly white robes, and you looked past him to see Gladio talking with Aranea. They were leaned in close to one another, her whispering something against his jaw.

“Let me know if you change your mind about that dance. I think you need it more than anybody,” you said before walking past the prince. You were still annoyed at Ravus over the spider, and you
really needed to stop whatever was happening between Gladio and Aranea.

“Hey,” you said, looking from one of them to the other. “Aranea, could you do a favor for me?”

She drew away from Gladio, her hands caressing long lines down his biceps before letting go. She seemed a little drunk, her breath smelling like wine when she asked, “What do you need?”

You looked over your shoulder at Ravus, then faced her with a smile. “Could you start a rumor that Ravus really wants to get laid tonight? Something about how he’s really nasty, and his kink is playing hard to get so the more aggressive interest, the better. I’d do it myself, but I don’t know Tenebraen well enough.”

She smirked. “You know that’s not going to bother him.”

“No, but being propositioned all night will keep him from bothering me. And it’ll make me laugh. It’s win-win.”

With a small chuckle, she nodded and walked past, thankfully away from your best friend’s boyfriend. “I’ll just assume he deserves it.”

—

Gladio was smooth. You hadn’t gotten the chance to dance with him at Noct’s wedding so you hadn’t known what to expect out of the large man. Taking you on a trip through the ballroom in steady, rhythmic movements hadn’t been it.

It wasn’t near the level of smoothness you bet Ignis held, but you didn’t come to him to be wooed. You had questions.

“How’s Prompto?”

The muscle in his shoulder tensed for a moment. You weren’t trying to give him a hard time for the flirty way he was behaving with Aranea. But maybe you kind of were. Last you knew, he and Prompto were something. You loved Aranea, but you weren’t about to let something happen between these two without Prompto knowing about it. His time with Gladio wasn’t brought up often or in detail, and you’d thought it was because Gladio hated you. But maybe they weren’t all that serious.

“I don’t see him much,” Gladio said. “He works a lot these days. School and work, not much else.”

You’d known he’d taken more hours and side jobs. He was still saving money for the road trip he wanted to take across Lucis after he graduated. To take pictures of nature and historical sights and that greasemonkey goddess in Hammerhead. You’d forgotten about her, to be honest, but apparently she’d been plaguing Prompto’s dreams recently.

His time with Gladio wasn’t brought up often or in detail, and you’d thought it was because Gladio hated you. But maybe they weren’t all that serious.

“Are you guys not together?”

He shrugged. “I dunno, juicy.”

You slowed in pace with him as the song changed, sending him a frown. “Does he know you apparently plan to rail Aranea tonight?”
With a chuckle, he said, “If anything, she thinks she’s gonna rail me.”

That wasn’t an answer, but when you opened your mouth to press further, he changed the subject.

“What about you and Iggy?” he asked as he spun you in a small circle. “He show you some magic?”

The way he said magic implied a lot, as if the brief time you’d spent together in the training room wasn’t spent with him literally showing you magic. You frowned at the suggestion; if he was trying to get your hopes up, it was working, and you hated it.

“What about me and Iggy?”

Another roll of his shoulders. You sighed a little. His shoulders were already too high and broad for you as it was; his shrugging wasn’t helping the soreness in your own shoulders. You had half a mind to put your feet on his so you could remain balanced at least. You doubted he would even feel your weight.

“It’s inevitable, right?”

You halted in your adjustments, hand sliding down his shoulder to grip his upper arm. “What?”

“You and Iggy.” He said it like it was common sense.

Shaking your head, you traced the lines of his black mask with your eyes, surprised he hadn’t taken it off already. “It’s not like that this time.”

“That’s exactly what he said.” Looking over your shoulder, he chuckled. “I bet things got weird already, and that’s why you’re here instead of the training room.”

Things had gotten weird, but you didn’t know why. You chewed on your lip, letting it go to say, “I’m here because he went to bed early.”

“Is that right?” Gladio spun you in a slow circle. “So why’s he over there watching us?”

Stopping suddenly in the spin, you caught sight of Ignis leaning against one of the columns on the edge of the ballroom. He pushed himself off when he realized you were looking at him.

You sent Gladio an annoyed look for not telling you Ignis had been there until now, you poked him hard in the chest. “If you fuck Aranea, I’m gonna tell Prompto.”

He pushed your hand away, grinning. “Don’t you know vacation rules, juicy? Doesn’t count.”

You didn’t like the sound of that at all. Sending Ignis a quick look, you decided you’d deal with Gladio later. It wasn’t your business, but you were never really good at minding your own.

—

Outside the ballroom, music wafted around you in gentle tones. Ignis held your slightly singed hand in one of his own, wasting no time in opening the salve he’d brought.

“I couldn’t quell my worry over your burn,” he said simply and quietly.

Either he thought your threshold for pain was nonexistent or this was a very poor excuse to come back and see you. Despite it all, you let yourself get hopeful, a soft smile coming to your face as he rubbed the salve on the spot gently. It was an odd medicine you didn’t recognize, drying quickly and easing the very slight sting that had remained on your hand.
“Want to come in and dance?”

His touch became softer, slowing as he considered your request. “I’m not dressed appropriately.”

You wished he would look at you. “Neither am I.” He didn’t say anything for long enough that you kept going, an idea taking form. “Tomorrow’s a silent day. I dunno if you knew.”

“To commune with the gods. I’m aware.”

“Cool.” You shifted your weight from one foot to the other. “I’m staying in the library most of the day. If you— if you want to join me, let me know at breakfast. I’d love to just… hang out like we used to.”

He stopped his movements, looking up from your hand.

The direct look made you falter, and you added, “Tell Gladio, too. I know of a few books he’d like.” Besides, you thought, he might need something to keep himself occupied on a day where you couldn’t speak without getting The Look of Disappointment from the Oracle.

Ignis didn’t let go of your hand, eyes scrutinizing. When a soft smile of his own appeared, you could feel the air being pulled out of you.

“I’d love to join you, but…” he trailed off, thumb brushing over the back of your hand before he finally let go. “I’d rather not share our time with Gladio.”

You took a step toward him as he pocketed the salve. Say it, just say you want to be together again.

You didn’t know if your thoughts were aimed at Ignis or yourself. If Gladio wasn’t just being a gigantic asshole, you were reluctantly building hope based on everything he’d said since arrival.

You touched his collar, feeling the fine fabric between your fingers, using this as an excuse to stand so close. Ignis lifted a hand, touching your cheek lightly, making you look up. Oh. Damn. Maybe if you said something, it might inspire some kind of—

All thoughts halted as his head lowered, tilting toward you. You could smell the magic on the hand he pressed to your cheek and slid down your jaw to gently urge you upward. The unpleasant scent of it gave you the oddest sense of excitement at being so close. You lifted on your toes. His nose brushed yours.

“Non, non,” non.

You jerked back from each other, hands falling. Ignis tensed at the sight of Ravus leaving the ballroom. Three nobles followed him out. He walked past you, striding down the corridor away from them, a long string of irritated Tenebraen weaving out of him too quickly for you to understand.

Ignis, though, seemed a bit startled at whatever was being said. He looked at you when they had all disappeared around a corner. “Does Lord Ravus always have such a filthy mouth?”

You shrugged. “I dunno what he said, but probably.” As curious as you were about how Ravus was handling the unwanted propositions, you really wanted to get back to what you were doing before.

Unfortunately, Ignis didn’t seem to agree. “Aren’t you going after him?”

You looked from Ignis to the corner where you’d last seen the prince. “Why should I? That’s his problem.”
Expression suddenly confounded, Ignis looked away. Feeling confused yourself, you reached for his hand, but stopped yourself when he faced you. The look was long and lingering and made you think he just might try to kiss you again. It seemed like he’d lost the nerve, or maybe his interest had only been brief.

He bid you a quiet good night. Again, he was leaving you a little confused. But your hopes were slowly floating higher, getting caught in the entanglement of musical notes that filled the air. You watched him disappear down another hallway, frozen in place before you were pulled forward by something. Gladio was right, you were both cowards.

The first steps were slow and unthinking, then you were urged to go after Ignis, taking off into a run. Gladio better have been right about everything he said. That Ignis’ life wasn’t happier without you. That he was as conflicted as you were. That it just might be inevitable.

Passing a few partygoers, you nearly stumbled over the tails of dramatic ball gowns and endured the pointy elbows of people who didn’t care to move. Rounding a corner you found Ignis walking down a corridor of guests. Cutting through the small groups of people, a gauntlet of Tenebraen nobility, you grabbed his sleeve. It was enough purchase to make him stop, allowing you the chance to get a grip on his arm.

Your name fell softly from his mouth as he turned to you. Letting go of him, you cupped his face, fingertips brushing his hair, thumbs caressing his cheeks. His lips parted at your sudden gesture, eyes widening. Gentle surprise was a good look on him.

The therapist would’ve told you to use your words. Communication! But your heart was in your throat. You’d been choking on your feelings from the moment you’d realized them, a thick, mawkish string of words both begging and refusing to be released.

So you did the next best thing. Action spoke louder than word, anyway. Rising to the tips of your toes, you pressed a kiss to his mouth. You kept it chaste and easily breakable on the chance that you were wrong. You were only a day into your new friendship, prepared to ruin it by making a move, but you wouldn’t force yourself on him. You already knew how he handled overly aggressive women.

The whispers of everyone around you muted when he kissed back. It was a slow movement, first of his lips against yours, followed by his hands touching your waist. You pressed harder, encouraged by his attention. Hesitance gone, strong arms wrapped around you and a tilt of his head brought you closer, his tongue invading your mouth.

Fingers tangling in his hair, you wanted to stay like that, to remain under the teasing direction of lips as they brought back every searing memory you had of your time with him. Your heart beat rapidly, a ringing song in your ears.

He pulled away first, and you opened your eyes to see that his were still closed. Soft breaths against your face—he laughed quietly. “You are as contrary as ever.”

“Me?” You smiled, dropping back on the flats of your feet. “You’re the one who said we should be friends, but I don’t think friends use that much tongue.”

His eyes opened as his expression began to fall. The sight of it made you pause. “I merely suggested that because—” A sigh escaped him, and he let go of you.

The loss of his hold made you very aware of all the people around you. You tried to ignore the chatter of the nobles watching the show you were putting on. You doubted most of them even
understood Lucian.

Ignis didn’t seem to even notice, a hand coming to his neck in a motion you didn’t recognize in him. He straightened his back, giving you an uncertain look. “I realize I have… personal matters remaining that I’m not so sure I will be able to overcome at the present.”

Not understanding what he was trying to say, you shook your head.

“It would be best, I believe, if we remain friends,” he said, dropping his hand to cross his arms.

“Oh.” Along with your expression, your stomach sank into a cavity, heavy but hollow.

He looked down and away, tapping a foot slightly. The muffled chatter of everyone around you quieted. “That isn’t to say I don’t have feelings for you. I do, almost regretfully so. I simply have much to think over.”

That didn’t make you feel better. You felt like you’d blown it by making a move so soon. No wonder he’d stopped himself earlier. He wasn’t ready. You couldn’t help but want to be close to him, and your lack of self control was ruining everything. That and all of the budding hope that still welled in your heart.

“I’m gonna go.” You pulled at the bracelet on your wrist, the tie coming undone. No patience to fix it, you shoved it into a pocket. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head, eyes meeting yours. “Please. I’ve taken no offense.”


“If your offer remains,” he said, his arms slacking to his sides. “I’ll see you in the library tomorrow.”

Pausing in your steps, you arched your brows. “You’re still coming?”

He nodded, another bare smile crossing his face that made your chest ache. “It’s my last day in the manor. I couldn’t imagine spending it any other way.”

Chapter End Notes

I think Noctis would be down for a song that made fun of him.

I say this a lot, and I mean it every time... ;_; Thank you for reading, having so much patience, and being the best. <3 Everything is going According to Plan, but I never know how the tone will feel once it’s written. I’ve lost control of my hands and heart.
Chapter Summary

You’re the only man that’s ever touched me.

You’re depraved because you’re deprived.

Chapter Notes

Get ready for some sudden, vague, poorly executed smut that I think you guys are used to from me by now. This chapter is embarrassing in too many ways. There is a general abuse of sign language, a lot of repetition, and a dream sequence that I can barely justify. Please accept this trash from your humble author.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ignis joined you, just as he’d said he would, in the private library directly after breakfast. You were wearing elegant white robes given to you by the Oracle because you were considered a part of the household, and this holiday was apparently a bigger deal than you realized. You thought the purity that the garment suggested was hilarious when worn by you. You liked it for that and how it kept you warm in the cold manor.

The air was stale with the scent of old books, which you’d never thought of as an issue until you noticed the way Ignis frowned after taking a deep breath. Adjusting yourself in the pile of pillows you’d made, you watched him slowly turn pages in the book he’d taken off a shelf. It was in Tenebraen, and he didn’t need a dictionary to help him read it.

Showoff.

Biting your lip, you wished you could say something. Something about his nice hands. The way his long fingers flicked one page after the next between coming up to touch his mouth was making you all kinds of bothered. The tip of his index finger tapped against his lips idly, then he turned another page.

He wasn’t wearing gloves today.

You inhaled a deep breath, letting out a silent sigh. When he looked your way, you quickly looked down at your own book. Slips of paper covered in notes wedged between pages, it was kind of a mess, but you tried to focus on the fairytale. The pictures helped. Movement in your peripheral had you looking at him again. Ignis was signing something, book dropping to his lap and hands moving fluidly.

What are you reading?

Oh. You couldn’t believe you’d forgotten be could sign. Sweet. A loophole around the silence. You were glad to find you could communicate, but you weren’t about to say I want those long fingers of yours on me and in me right now even though the past hour of reading quietly with him had made you hyper aware of just how long it had been since you’d had someone touch you in any sexual
You’d known you were starved for intimacy living in the manor when you’d found yourself sending the occasional lingering look to Ravus on the more pleasant days spent together. Thank gods he never noticed. It was one thing to think things you’d never actually do, but acting on them would be cause for disaster. Following through on anything like that seemed impossible anyway. Sex had come to tie in with specific feelings now. Ones that you’d ignored and fought against. Ones that you were feeling deeply right now as you watched him give you a long look. Shit. You’d gotten lost in thought.

_A story about a wizard_, you told him, fighting a blush.

He nodded, and before he could return to his book, you kept going. You wanted his attention for as long as he’d give it to you. _What are you reading? Give details._

He explained that it was an interesting mystery novel, but he was caught on a piece of vernacular that he didn’t understand. He felt that the turn of phrase was important to help him, as the reader, solve the mystery, but because of his unfamiliarity, he was a little lost. Seeing the perturbed look on his face as he signed this made you smile.

You opened the Lucian-Tenebraen dictionary that you used as a crutch in most of you reading. _Let’s translate._

He was hesitant to sit closer so you placed the text between you. But that only made it hard for both of you to see. Sitting shoulder to shoulder, elbows touching every time you flipped through the book, you looked for the words he was having trouble with. It wasn’t likely to actually help him. A direct translation wouldn’t explain the cultural context needed to understand whatever the expression was trying to convey in his book, but it gave you an excuse to get closer to him.

—

He seemed ready to give up a quarter of an hour in, and you were surprised by that. Ignis giving up on an intellectual endeavor?

_Just keep reading_, you told him. _You’ll find out who the murderer is in the end._

He pursed his lips, looking at the cover of the book in his lap. _I wanted to solve it myself._

You smiled, making yourself look away. The touch of his arm against yours kept sending waves of warmth over you. It wasn't what you were craving, but it was enough. Having him back in your life was so preferable to all this wasted time spent apart, hoping, wishing, and waiting for something to happen.

He stayed by your side when he flipped his book open again. With a small smile, you returned to trudging through the fairytales, the occasional interlude of dipping into the dictionary helping you along. When you became stuck on a word you didn’t understand and couldn’t, for the life of you, find in the dictionary, you turned to him with a frown. All it took was you pointing at the word for him to understand your frustration. He took the book from you, careful of your notes, and read the passage.

He smiled slightly when he handed it back. _It’s a verb. Outdated conjugation. It means to sing._

You nodded slowly, adding that note. It blew your mind how knowledgeable and fluent Ignis was at this moment. How could he know something that even a dictionary couldn’t? And he’d translated it from a foreign language to sign language like it was nothing. There was no end to how impressed
you were by him.

—

He caught your attention with a small touch on your arm. *How is your mother?*

You hadn’t expected him to ask something like that. Was it even appropriate after only seeing her once, months ago? It didn’t matter; you warmed to the question, positive thoughts overpowering the negative. Of course it was appropriate. He was your friend — just your friend — one of the few who’d actually gotten close enough in your life to ever meet her.

*She’s doing okay,* you signed, shrugging at the end. There wasn’t much to say. You sent her links to the videos you helped produce, most of which she disapproved of because of the sexual nature that came with pretty much every pop song these days. The fact that she couldn’t actually hear the songs didn’t matter when captions were a thing. There was nothing better than a long, disapproving email from her to let you know how proud she was.

Peering at Ignis, you thought about the one time you’d been able to talk to her over a video call. She’d asked about him. You hated that she still did that. As if it wasn’t obvious that you’d severed your ties to him when you’d left. The name sign she used for him persisted.

He used a finger to push his glasses up the arch of his nose as he shared your gaze, tilting his head a little in confusion. The name really was appropriate, but you could think of a few more that would suit him more. Of course, those were fueled by the same feelings that made you squirm every time he looked your way.

*My mom has a name sign for you.* Not sure why you were telling him this, you continued anyway, finishing the thought because his confusion had shifted into curiosity. You turned toward him, elbow knocking against his as you moved. Touching his chin with your index finger, you rolled it a little, as if getting your fingerprint recorded in ink. *Serious.* Then you mimed glasses on him, gently touching the ones on his face. *Glasses.*

He smiled as you dropped your hands. *I’m flattered.*

With a roll of your eyes, you returned the smile. *Don’t be. Mom likes everyone.*

He slowly closed his book, giving you another long look. What were you supposed to do when he was like this? He wasn’t so easy to read anymore. You understood that he’d be guarded around you now, but that didn’t mean you liked it.

*I bet she calls you “trouble”,* he signed, catching you off guard as his smile grew.

You shook your head, surprised at the sudden guess. Mom’s name for you was far too embarrassing to tell anyone. Sweet pea. It was a double blow because that vegetable was the most heinous of all.

*What would you call me?* you asked, unwilling to divulge such stupid information.

Ignis’ smile weakened a little, his eyes going from your eyes to your hand that still rested over your chest after the last word of your question. Then, slowly and lightly, he brushed a finger over your nose. *Silly.*

You rolled your eyes, but then he touched the crown of your head, making you pause. *Brilliant.* He brushed a thumb over your cheek, resting his hand at your jaw. That wasn’t a continuation of the conversation. He was just touching you now.
If the manor wasn’t so cold, you could melt. You licked your lips, resisting the urge to throw him down on the pillows. Not that you were strong enough to do that anyway. The movement of your tongue brought his attention to your mouth, and a burning warmth tore at your chest.

He didn’t make a move, his breath hitting your collar as he kept his gaze downcast, focused on your lips. He understood what you were doing, his smile slowly dropping. His adam’s apple bobbed with a swallow. Drawing his hand away, he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and picked up the book in his lap. Without another glance, he was flipping it open again, back to reading as if the conversation had dropped naturally.

You bit down on the disappointment that grew within. You knew what he was about; he’d made his stance clear. He wasn’t ready to go beyond friendship. There was an understanding between you, a distance you needed to respect, but you had a feeling it wasn’t going to get its due diligence. Not on your part, at least.

—

Lunch was light fare taken in a parlor with tea, a standard Saturday for you. Ignis had followed you there from the library and sat next to you on the sette that you usually reclined on. It was weird to see the others there with you. Gladio and Noctis shared a separate sofa, the larger man sitting back with his arms tossed over the backrest as if he owned the place.

Ravus bit into a pastry as he gazed from one face to another, seated in his usual place across the coffee table from you. He usually had a book with him or some sort of paperwork, but he chewed slowly, attention unsettled on any one thing.

Everything was quiet, another mark of a usual Saturday, but the sudden influx of people made the silence seem uncomfortable. You met Noct’s eyes, and he looked away, hand scratching his nose. Lunafreya smiled, and you returned the gesture before biting into a cookie.

Something you and Ravus had in common was a sweet tooth, though his was much worse than yours. Even though the castle staff set out a number of things to eat on the large coffee table that all of the seating surrounded, you both went straight for the sweets first. Because why wait?

As you ate the cookie, melting in all of its saccharine goodness —gotta visit the head chef, that talented bastard— you felt Ignis’ eyes on you. Peeking over at him, you found a small frown pulling at his lips. He offered you the pâté-covered vegetable in his hand.

Ew.

What did he think you were, a child? You knew exactly what horrors lived in that meat paste. And taking food from him would be weird. Apparently, boundaries had stopped existing suddenly now that you were out of the library. Was he only uncomfortable with gestures of familiarity when you were alone? You shook your head, scrunching your face in distaste. Looking for another dessert from the small tower of options on the table, you noticed one that you hadn’t seen before. There was only one and it looked like a palmier, but with filling between the flaky dough.

One questioning look at Ravus, and he nodded, something almost but not really like a smile crossing his face. Oh, this one was going to be good. Might be too sweet for you if he liked it, but you had the bitterness of tea to help you get through. Leaning forward to pick it up, your arm knocked against Ignis’ as he leaned forward to pick up a piece of asparagus wrapped in prosciutto.

Gross.
Noctis picked one up, too, shocking you with this move until he unwrapped the asparagus and tossed it back, eating only the meat. Ignis sighed, and you shook with breathy laughter. He gave you an unamused look, signing, *Will you eat something healthy, at least?*

Your amusement faded. Where did he come off trying to treat you like he used to? He seemed to only want to do it while the others were around, as if falsifying a level of comfort so they wouldn’t know just how uncertain you were around each other. You’d suppressed the lingering sting of his rejection from the night before so you could enjoy this last day with him —as friends — but this was annoying. It drew out that petty side of you like nothing else.

You gave him your own serious look, staring him dead in the eye as you slid a finger under one of his suspenders and let it go with a snap. His expression abated, careful brows arching slightly over his glasses.

*You’re not my boss,* you signed, fighting the rush of warmth you felt at his gaze. The last sign had your hand touching your shoulder, the sore muscles pulling and tightening. You grimaced, confused at how it could still hurt even now. Considering a visit to one of the resident doctors soon, you rubbed at your shoulder a little and reached for the palmier again.

Ravus seemed to have the same idea, hand frozen over it when he realized you were about to pick it up. Meeting your eyes, he snatched it, but you were quick in grabbing his wrist, stopping him from pulling back. You narrowed your eyes. How impolite that he’d take it when he knew you wanted it.

Snapping the fingers of your free hand repeatedly, you gained the attention of Aranea sitting away from the rest of you, reading in another part of the parlor.

“What is it?”

Hearing her speak was a little jarring, even though this wasn’t the first time you’d heard her today. She didn’t hesitate or look even slightly remorseful about talking aloud.

You pointed at Ravus with your free hand, then pointed at your arm. She didn’t understand your gestures, closing her book and leaning forward in her seat to watch you. “Just spit it out, kid.”

You rolled your eyes, shaking Ravus’ wrist until he let go of the pastry. He sighed through his nose, pursing his lips as he stood. The others watched as you walked with him to where Aranea sat. You urged Biggs and Wedge to get up from where they were on opposite ends of a chess table. When they moved, you swept all of their chess pieces off of the checkered tabletop and into a drawer built into its side.

It was pretty rude, but this was, you and Ravus had decided early on, how you settled both bets and disputes, no matter how small. Because of your shoulder, you’d hoped Aranea could fill in for you. She’d probably be more likely to win, too. You sat in one of the chairs and rested your elbow on the table first, hand open and waiting. Ravus was oddly hesitant, sitting and very slowly placing his own elbow on the tabletop.

You were going to arm wrestle for a pastry.

—

Knocking your chair back as you stood, you used both hands to attempt to force Ravus’ down. He wasn’t even trying, the fingers on his free hand tapping along the tabletop impatiently. The others had gotten up to watch, and Gladio was laughing at your struggle. You glared at him, letting go of Ravus’ immovable hand. It wasn’t like you didn’t already know that the prince was immensely
stronger than you. Realistically, you had no hope in hell. This was just something he did to amuse you. When he was feeling generous, he’d let you win. He must really want the stupid palmier, you thought.

You pointed at Gladio, motioning for him to take your place. He quieted, considering it with a grin and a raised brow. When he turned your chair upright and sat, loudly landing his elbow on the tabletop, you couldn’t contain your excitement. The only option you had for a stand in was the squire, usually, so this was a much better bet at winning than you were used to.

Gladio’s grip made Ravus start, the muscles in his forearm tensing as they began. You felt a touch on your arm, looking over your shoulder to see Noctis holding out the palmier. Gazing between the armwrestling men and the pastry, you gave Noctis a shit eating grin and took the offer with a nod.

Shoving the dessert into your mouth, you stretched your tense shoulder and enjoyed the show. Ravus was struggling, and the way Aranea rested hands on the edge of the table and leaned down to trash talk them both had you laughing. You liked that she didn’t care to talk on a silent day. It wasn’t that you were particularly religious. Like, not at all, actually. You just liked that little ounce of respect you seemed to have earned in the prince’s eyes, and if it meant shutting up for one day a week, you were okay with that.

It made you feel more human and less like a pet project.

—

Ravus wasn’t amused when the ordeal was over, everyone having returned to their seats. He sighed as he ate a different treat, acting as though it were the most laborious task given to him. As if he’d known Noctis had been the one who’d helped you dishonorably obtain the pastry, Ravus’ narrowed eyes landed on the other prince’s bored expression. Picking up your lukewarm tea, you watched them stare each other down. You couldn’t find the point of contention between them other than a general dislike for each other. Ravus had said something about Noctis being spoiled once, but you thought he was being extremely hypocritical.

If anything, you thought he should’ve held himself to a higher standard. He was older and aspired to be not only a fair leader but someone most holy. The man childishly glaring daggers at Noctis was the same one you’d sometimes hear giving coldly articulated tirades around the manor, and you didn’t think either one was Oracle material.

You suddenly flinched, pulled out of your thoughts by a hand unexpectedly touching your face. Jerking away slightly, the teacup rattling against its saucer in your hands, you glanced at Ignis, his hand held an inch or so from your face. He didn’t hesitate, brushing crumbs from your cheek just off the corner of your mouth. You met his eyes as he dropped his hand away. His expression was earnest and searching. For what, you didn’t know.

A blush burned at your face, a mix of embarrassment at the food on your cheek and affection for him. He still wasn’t respecting personal boundaries very well. It was markedly different than the way he’d behaved in the library, and you didn’t understand why. Turning away from him, you sipped your tea and tried not to overthink it. He still liked you but had personal matters. He was leaving, and you were just friends.

—

Having returned to the library, you were a little surprised to find Ignis resuming his close seat next to you. Back to tapping his mouth with his fingertips as he read, he distracted you all over again. When he caught your stare, he arched a brow in question.
There was no use in pretending you weren’t staring so you smiled and asked, *How is the book? Find the murderer?*

He nodded. *I think so. A scorned lover.*

You rolled your eyes. *Cliche.*

A soft chuckle spilled from him, another nod as he returned to the book. His thigh pressed against yours as he shifted in his spot, moving his legs around. You fought the strong wave of interest that burned at the simple touch. It meant nothing. He was growing comfortable with you again. That was all.

—

You grunted quietly as you stretched your arm, trying to work out that soreness in your shoulder. You knew you were out of shape, but this was ridiculous. Arm wrestling had probably been a bad idea. You peered down at the book in your lap as you stretched, the page opened to delicate artwork of a woman about to open a door to a room her husband told her not to enter. You already had a feeling this particular tale didn’t have a happy ending.

Ignis cleared his throat, making you pause. Slowly lowering your arm, you looked up from your book to see him ask, *Would you like me to help with that?*

He was referring to your shoulder, you could tell by the way he kept glancing between that painful place and your eyes. How exactly did he expect to help? Unless he did know some healing magic. That would’ve been incredible right now. You nodded, probably seeming more eager than you wanted him to know. When he motioned for you to sit in front of him, it didn’t seem weird at all until you were getting comfortable in the pillows and his legs appeared, bent low at the knee, on either side of you.

You worried your lower lip, undoing the top of your robe enough to slip the collar down over your shoulder. Moving your bra strap, too, just in case —you didn’t know how magic worked— you released your lip and tensed momentarily at the feel of his hand on your shoulder. It wasn’t magic in the literal sense, but he stabilized you with a hand on your good shoulder and kneaded at the sore place on your other with the heel of his hand. A thrill so solid and blazing at his touch had you dipping your head in pleasure.

It was such a small gesture, but you allowed yourself to enthralled. His breath hit your neck in little waves, fingers curling over the arch of your shoulder in firm movements. Gripping and pressing, he massaged your shoulder with a finesse that made you wilt. The soreness slowly waned, giving out to relief under his hand. You hadn’t realized just how starved for touch you were. Leaning back, you closed your eyes and relaxed against his chest. It halted his movements, his hands dropping to rest there on your shoulders. He was warm and just the right amount of sturdy that you melted against him. You felt his breath brush your hair, soft and even.

Tilting your head to look at him, your breath caught at the touch of his lips against your temple. You sat up, pulling away, eyes roaming the library because this wasn’t good. You wanted to go beyond the boundaries he’d placed, but you didn’t want to ruin your last day together with more confusion. In the quiet of the room, you could hear how his soft breathing had picked up. It matched the pace of your heart. This was not good. He slid his hands down your shoulders, gently resting them at your elbows.

Before you could reach up to slide your bra strap back into place, you felt another press of his mouth, this time against your shoulder, right on the curve where it met your arm. The kiss was slow, and you
felt his nose and lips brush along your skin as he placed one after another, trailing them softly along your shoulder on a deliberate and languid journey to your neck.

It made you shiver. His breath was hot against your skin, a warmth that offset the cold air. You turned your head to disrupt his attention to your neck, meeting his mouth with your own. It was fumbling, awkward in the way that you couldn’t quite meet him fully. Knocking his hand away, you lifted an arm to reach around his neck, your hand resting at his nape. Much better, you thought, drawing him closer that way. His mouth held the spice of tea. Gently pulling at his lip with your teeth, you caught the faint smell of his aftershave, an old memory hitting you of how incredible it felt to be in his arms.

Letting go of him, you pulled away, climbing over pillows to turn around. You had to face him, had to understand why he was suddenly changing his mind. His eyes were focused on you, mouth parted as he reached out a curled hand, brushing your jaw with a thumb. Your gaze dancing between the green gems of his eyes, you received no answer beyond his panting breaths and gently hopeful expression.

His hand at your jaw uncurled as he leaned forward to recapture your lips. Hands grabbing at his shirt, you invited him in wholly, tongue meeting his in a frenzy of tea and pastry. You gripped his button down tightly and ripped it open with a ferocity that made him draw back in surprise. You palmed his chest, the feel of his skin delightful against yours. You’d missed this. Not just intimacy. Not just Ignis. You’d missed having this level of familiarity with another person. Excitement and heat filled you to the brim at the feel of him under your hands.

Ignis slid his suspenders down, letting them hang as he undid the clasp of his trousers. He let you push him back onto the pillows, drawing himself out as you fumbled to slip your underwear down your legs and kick them away. You hit a bookshelf as you accidentally kicked one of the pillows, ignoring when a few books fell out of place. Trousers pulled down just enough to show you everything he had, the way he readily stroked himself to the sight of you had you swallowing thickly. All you’d shown him was a shoulder.

You straddled his lap, licking a wet, jagged line across his chest and collar as you slowly lowered yourself onto him. He felt bigger than you remembered. You were a tight fit around him, and you relished the feel of having him inside after so many months of only imagining it with your fingers, a pittance in comparison. Slow movements as you adjusted became hard rocking against him, disrupting the cold, quiet air of the library. He held you close, sitting up in the pillows to give attention to every bit of your exposed skin. Your fingers curled in his hair as you slowed with a grind of your hips, an attempt to take him as deeply as possible, and he let out a shuttered moan into your collar.

“Astrals preserve me.” It was a whisper falling softly from his lips, and it almost gave you pause. You hushed him, reminded him that talking wasn’t allowed today, thumb brushing and moving his lips as you rode out a wave of pleasure. He chuckled, nipping at your thumb. “I should think speaking is the least of our concerns, darling.”

That did make you slow to a stop, the pet name tearing through something deep in your chest. You hushed him again, body trembling, skin made of gooseflesh. If he was trying to enchant you with sweet nothings, it was going work. It had always worked; you merely hadn’t known how to appreciate it until now.

Another heady chuckle out of him, and he was kissing you, hands gripping your hips, urging you to keep moving. You followed the motion, letting him fill you again, the friction slow and measured. His head fell back from the kiss, another low moan escaping. You rose and fell again, watching him
Close his eyes, mouth parted slightly as he shuddered. Your name filled the room in low purrs. You put a hand over his mouth, but he pried it away gently. Lidded eyes meeting yours, he brushed hair away from your eyes, his hands coming up to frame your face.

“Forgive me for speaking,” he panted, eyes dark and dilated behind his glasses. “For I’m communing with a goddess and want for nothing more than to worship.”

Coursing through you with an aching desire to be released, love had you laughing gently as you rested your forehead against his. You wanted to tell him but feared ruining the intimate moment, not knowing how many you had left with him.

During sex, always, once you’d finished, there was that moment of clarity that hit you so soundly, you find it no wonder why the act could be such a controlled addiction. You used that moment to kiss the life out of Ignis, fighting back the dread of what could come of what just happened. As you slipped on your panties, bringing everything with your robes to rights, Ignis realized a button on his shirt had snapped off in your haste to see him exposed. You didn’t even feel sorry, a smile growing on your face when he looked your way.

“Never one for being gentle, were you?” It was a teasing reprimand, coming out as he pulled his suspenders back into place.

You took a deep breath and shrugged, looking away. The air wasn’t as stale anymore, a musky scent permeating the place now. Windowless and locked tight, it was probably the best choice for your brazen actions as far as privacy was concerned, but the smell would surely linger for a short while. You fixed the books that had fallen out of place, your flushed skin finally cooling, worries of the smell falling to the back of your mind at the lingering euphoria you felt.

When he requested to read together, you sat in front of him again, back resting against his chest, book in hand. He propped his chin on your shoulder, arms wrapping around you in a snug hold. You could hardly focus on the book over the quickfire beating of your heart. This was perfect, and you never wanted to leave. Every soft caress, every idle, subconscious admiration of you by his hands made you warm to him ever deeper.

You kissed him when he chuckled softly at a passage in the book, leading to another fumbling entanglement in the pillows. If this was him giving you one last chance to be selfish with him, you were going to take him for everything he had.

At dinner, you were disturbed to see Queen Sylva at the table. It wasn’t that you didn’t like seeing her. Anytime you could catch a glimpse of or spend any amount of time with the Oracle, you were all kinds of excited. The uncomfortable little thing that had you feeling like you should crawl back into the hole from whence you came was the look she sent your way from across the grand table. She knew what you did.

You didn’t know how or why, but she definitely knew you’d done something dirty within the sanctity of her blessed palace. You worried that, somehow, she knew you’d gotten Ignis to sing aloud your name. In her private library. The one made for her children. The memory of Ignis bending you over as you braced against a bookshelf, shaking it enough to cause a few more tomes to fall, came unbidden to the forefront of your mind. You shook your head, feeling so strangely exposed. Totally unaffected, Ignis sat next to you, eating dinner quietly as if he hadn’t held you
against him less than an hour before.

You picked at your food, the prickle of paranoia weakening your appetite. A glance sent to Gladio sitting directly across the table, you frowned at the growing smile on his face. Unlike the Oracle, he didn’t know a damn thing, you thought, but gods, could his assumptions be so accurate. He could probably read it on your face and see it in the subtle glances you sent Ignis throughout the meal.

You were grateful that silence was requested and required today. If you had to hear so much as a peep out of Gladio about how he’d been right in the inevitability of you and Ignis returning to each other, however temporary this situation was, you’d have a meltdown. He’d probably tell you it was okay because “vacation rules” or whatever. What you and Ignis had done didn’t count, Gladio would say. You shoved a hand into your pocket, rubbing the carbuncle doll for some hope of luck that you would get over these intrusive thoughts.

Aranea sent you a little wave when you looked her way next. You smiled, letting go of the doll to raise your hand in return. She was being quiet out of respect for the Oracle, you guessed. You didn’t blame her. There was no way the queen actually knew what you’d done, but the power she yielded had that kind of effect. When you lowered your arm to your side, you felt Ignis’ hand brush yours underneath the table. His fingers curled between yours, fitting into place. Nothing about him changed in the way he conducted himself above the table, but the soft brush of his thumb over your knuckles sent a thrill directly through you, making you slow in your actions.

Sliding the fork from your mouth, chewing carefully on the bite of food, you ducked your head to hide a smile. You didn’t care what weird little paranoid thoughts your mind kept trying to dredge up. You really didn’t care that you and Ignis had regressed to your basest desires. You never wanted this day to end.

—

As you left the dining room with Ignis and Noctis at your sides, your eyes bulged when you realized that Ravus was headed toward the library. Leaving the others, you quickened your pace to catch up to him. A touch on his arm, and you were pointing your thumb over your shoulder, then miming an egg shape with your hands. Diverting him to the stables was suddenly priority. The smell of sex was probably going to be stuck on the pillows and in the air of the library for the remainder of the day, at least.

He stopped in his tracks, considering you for a moment. With a nod, he slowly changed course, walking toward the stables. You actually did want to check on the chocobo and her precious egg, following after him with barely contained enthusiasm. You passed Ignis, slowing to sign, Going to the stables. Want to come?

His eyes moved between you and the prince, the curt shake of his head dampening your elation just the slightest. That was fine. He didn’t have to share all of your interests. He didn’t have to share any of your interests. You’d always been different and at odds. All you had, in the end, were your displaced moments of passion.

—

The visit with Petit Argent was brief compared to the usual. You ruffled her silver feathers, careful to avoid the egg even though you wanted to touch it so badly. Thoughts on how to get Ravus to stay here or to just have him inadvertently avoid the library in general went through your mind, but you weren’t entirely sure how you were going to make anything work. Especially since you had no actual way of communicating today. Small gestures meant a lot between you on days like this, the rise of his brow a question and the roll of your eyes an answer, but this was too complex to
orchestrate based on looks alone.

You fingered at the carbuncle in your pocket, eyes widening as you felt the braided bracelet next to it. You’d completely forgotten about it. Pulling it out, you motioned it at him, tapping your wrist. As he tied it into place, you thought about how he probably would’ve thrown it away if you hadn’t taken it from him. It looked like a friendship bracelet of some kind, and you wondered who’d made and given it to him. He could be so callous and unaware, you thought.

Twisting it around until it felt comfortable, you admired the care that had clearly been put into it, kind of hating Ravus for not seeing that. If you made him a friendship bracelet, would he wear it or would he reject it like he had with this? Your mind lulled at this, and you lifted on your toes, raising a hand to touch his hair.

He grabbed your wrist, face impassive as he held you at bay. Arching your brows, you sent him a pleading look. *Let me braid your hair.* You knew he liked it on the rare occasion he let you do it. It was similar to how he humored you with arm wrestling. You pretended that braiding his hair was for you, a gesture that comforted you, but you only ever asked when he seemed at his worst. Not that he seemed upset now. You just needed to distract him.

He sighed through his nose before nodding. Deciding to take a chance at never getting to touch his silky hair again, you tried a new braid and deliberately knotted it in several places so badly that he hissed in pain when trying to undo it. His look of irritation didn’t sting as badly as you’d expected, but he did storm out of the stables in a huff. Hopefully that would be enough of a distraction to keep him out of the library all day. Though, you weren’t sure why he wasn’t trying to spent more time with his sister while she was there.

Lunafreya had said he hated to be alone, and while you found that to be fairly true, you also thought his tendency to keep everyone at arm’s length was counter to what he seemed to actually want. These thoughts followed you when you left him and the stables for the comfort of your room. The silence, as always on these days, made you introspective, and you couldn’t help but compare yourself to Ravus in the apathetic way he dealt with everything that wasn’t his direct duty. You didn’t think you had been much different when you’d been with Ignis. You’d had a craving for something real and substantial, but a fear of true intimacy made you callous and constantly wavering.

You touched the bracelet softly and hoped you were leaving that part of you behind.

—

Quick paces in your room, bare feet against cold marble, your thoughts were disturbed by a knock on your door. It had to be Ravus, you thought immediately. He went to the library, and he smelled the smelly smell of your dirty deeds. He couldn’t yell at you, not today, but he’d give you his Disappointed Look, the one you were growing immune to based on sheer overexposure.

Opening your door with a fierce look prepared, you slackened a little in surprise at Ignis standing in the corridor. His hair was a little tousled, you noticed, and his posture was oddly guarded, arms crossed, back straight.

You took a step back, inviting him in with a wave of your hand. His eyes caught on the bracelet at your wrist, and a small frown you didn’t like pulled at the corners of his mouth. You closed the door after he walked inside, wishing you could lock it for good measure. But they didn’t trust you enough here, not yet. They still thought you’d fallen off the cliff on purpose. In want of privacy, you dragged the chair from your desk and used it to jam the door, the top of the chair caught just under the handle.

Ignis, as if he knew the pattern of your own usual pace about your room, walked in the same back
and forth manner you had just been circling. You sat on your bed and watched him as he touched his chin with a hand, looking at nothing in particular. Then he stopped to gaze at you, mouth opening slightly as if to speak, only to close it and continue his pacing. He almost sat in an armchair, deciding not to before fully sitting. You felt a smile coming on when he touched at a few of the papers on your desk, peeking at you over his shoulder before letting out a small sigh.

What was up with him?

He turned to you with arms crossed again, his expression a sudden mask of neutrality. He’d changed shirts before dinner. The missing button on the last one had been halfway down his shirt, exposing a little sliver of his middle that you’d tried to convince him was totally appropriate for dinner with the Oracle. This one fit just as nicely, and you wondered how long it would take for you to have it on your floor. Would you be so lucky for another taste of him?

Distracted with these thoughts, you weren’t prepared for the way he closed the distance between you. He uncrossed his arms to gently grasp your chin, lifting your head to meet eyes. Again, he opened his mouth only to close it.

Attention taken by these odd gestures, you were amenable when he let go of you to meet you in a kiss. The malleable softness of his lips drew you in, and your countenance flushed as his fingers worked open your robes, pushing them down your shoulders. Slowly, you unraveled together, all soft sighs and broken whines from the barest of touches.

Lying above you, he propped himself on an arm, appreciating every curve of your body in the dim light of your room. His free hand trailed across your stomach and over your hip, fingers caressing you gently. Your breath hitched when he slid them smoothly between your thighs.

“The answer to every question I've never thought to ask,” he said, voice low against your ear. “The perfection that erupts a volcanic response in my heart. That is you.”

Fingertips softly parting and teasing, he played in your growing wetness. You didn’t tell him not to speak, writhing under the attention. His words burned against you as hotly as his skin against yours. He couldn’t mean them. You couldn’t let yourself believe them. This was all you had with Ignis, you told yourself. Friendship and physical attraction. This was all you ever had, and it was okay to let it go after today. You weren’t a person bound to physical touch anymore; you’d grown.

You brought a hand to his cheek, intent to pull him down, to feel him against you fully. He paused, his heated gaze falling on the bracelet. You’d noticed his disturbance with it but failed to understand. His hand left you, taking hold of yours. With a single, hard tug of the strings holding it together, he untied and tossed it away. The soft brush of his lips on your wrist ignited something deeper, burning hotter in your chest than what you felt throbbing at your core.

“I wanted to be the one to heal you.” It was a whisper, softer than what was said before. Another kiss to your wrist, his piercing eyes meeting yours as he let go of your hand. “I wanted to do that for you so badly.”

“Ignis…” You gazed up at him in the lamplight. He had no idea, did he? Damning the silence, you needed him to know. “You came into my life so unexpectedly, I was terrified by how perfect you were. You kissed me and held me and touched me like I was worth something. Like I was worth everything.” You brushed knuckles across his cheek, a slow caress from jaw to temple. “The more deeply you moved me, the harder I pressed back in fear. No one else has ever been this close. No one.”

A breath between you, the feel of your heart working overtime at this admittance, you trembled...
beneath him. His lips were sudden and searing against yours, pulling you apart with every lick, every
graze of his teeth. It wasn’t fair to have said what you did because you had a feeling this was meant
to be a farewell, to your past relationship or to each other, you couldn’t be certain.

—

Gloved fingers curled around yours as you reached for a potato, a larger hand ensconcing your own.
Your eyes trailed up the arm to a face half obscured by dark shades. The handsome, angular shape of
it gave you pause. Whoever he was had a scar on his nose that hadn’t quite healed yet.

“This doesn’t feel quite right,” he said softly, squeezing your hand.

You let out a small laugh. “That’s because it’s my hand, dude.”

“Ah.” Quickly dropping his hand to his side, he faced your direction vaguely. “Apologies.”

He had another scar on his lip, one that pulled slightly as he spoke. You followed it as he pursed
them for a moment before he went back to inspecting potatoes.

Mom was waiting for you at the Leville so you picked up a potato and moved on. She was afraid of
the ensuing darkness, and you were trying to stay strong. The lights above you flickered, the din of
Lestallum becoming louder for a moment until everything settled again. A collective breath of relief.

The blind stranger appeared everywhere like a ghoul following you around the market. You didn’t
know how he kept running into you. The place was dark, busy, and sweltering.

And not because he

was repeatedly touching your hand at every stall, even if you did think his legs went on for days and
the soft, polite “oh, I’m terribly sorry” every time his hand accidentally met yours was cute as hell.

Gods, it had been months since you’d gotten laid, and that leatherbound hand was testing your
veneer of contentment. Being a refugee with Mom didn’t really accommodate the kind of life you’d
left behind in Insomnia. You were debating with yourself over whether or not you should spend the
last of your gil on a large bottle of whiskey when he answered his phone.

“Thank you, Iris. Let me know when they arrive.” His voice was so charming, you found yourself
listening in as your eyes traced the bottle’s label. “I think Prompto will survive a day or two away
from Hammerhead. Miss Cindy said she’d call to give him well wishes. I’d hate to have him in
hysterics on his own birthday. It’s the first chance for a celebration since—”

The balance of things he carried in his arm wobbled precariously, and he almost dropped his phone
as he tried to gather a better grasp on everything. You looked between him and the bottle before
putting it down and stepping toward him to help.

“Hey, grabby,” you said with a laugh. “If you wanted a hand, you could’ve just asked.”

—

It wasn’t abrupt, your break into reality. Eyes fluttering open slowly, you stared ahead, the memory
of the dream burning fresh in your mind. It had been so vivid compared to any other dreams you
could recall having. Was that what they called lucid dreaming? You had felt in control the entire
time, but hadn’t felt like yourself. Feeling tears coming on —why the hell?— you drew the blanket
up and wiped at them.

You rolled over, fully intent to find comfort in Ignis, a strong need for a cuddle after having such a
dark dream. It had been a meet cute. Should you write this down? It could’ve been the more creative
part of your mind trying to throw scenes at you, telling you to record this so you could create the
vision in film. But that didn’t seem right. That version of Ignis who didn’t exist, the underlying layer of true fear you’d felt, and Lestallum, a city you’d never been to, it all felt profoundly real.

The bed was empty next to you. Stretching out your limbs, you met cold sheets, a sign that Ignis had been gone for a while. So that was it. You touched the place where he’d been before you’d fallen asleep, eyes growing wet all over again. You hadn’t known what to expect come morning, but him leaving as you slept hadn’t been a thought to cross your mind. It made sense, though. What you’d done didn’t count, and that meant a clean break, back to the polite distance of friendship.

Sighing, you threw the blankets off and climbed out of bed. Loathe to wash away the last bit of proof you had that Ignis felt anything for you, it was a debate with yourself over whether or not to shower. The desire to feel new won out, and you doubled the use of your time to drown out the sounds of your soft sobs and wash away the streaks of tears on your pitiful face. This hurt much more than you ever thought it could, and you didn’t understand why.

You’d never found the appeal of being totally enraptured by another person for fear of this very feeling of sorrow overcoming you. It was with tired indifference that you got dressed. You could’ve done with more sleep, for it was too early to be up now, but you knew it would be futile.

The pain was too acute, your thoughts too overwhelming.

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Shoes brushing the blooming petals of white anemone that seemed to have sprouted against the plans of the manor’s groundskeeper, you sat in the gardens with your phone, a pencil, and a notebook. The early morning air was chilly, and the sky was painted with the darkest shades of blue, hinting at the sunrise that was on its way. Your back rested against one of the towering lamp posts that circled the gardens. The glow of it was dimmer than the rest, the bulb probably close to its end, though it gave you the perfect amount of light. You pulled your jacket around you a little tighter, shaky hands taking a break from scrawling all of your thoughts and worries across the lined paper.

It was an exercise you’d learned in therapy, to write everything down to bring yourself mental clarity. But the stream of consciousness, the jumble of words that filled up page after page wasn’t helping you get anything straightened out. With the past day you’d just had and Ignis’ quickly approaching departure from Tenebrae, getting a grip on things had become extremely urgent.

He and the others would be gone in just a few hours.

The tip of the pencil had blunted to a dull nub from how much you’d written out so far. You ripped out a blank page from the notebook and began a list. Your attention span could sometimes be less than impressive so quick firing your thoughts this way might help you get your mind sorted more easily.

The negative thoughts came forth first, of course, and you decided, after so much rumination, that you’d get those out immediately. If they were on paper and not inside you, maybe you could stomach the goodbye that was coming. So you scratched down a list of reasons why it would be the absolute worst idea for all parties involved if you pursued Ignis Scientia, each one fueled by memories both recent and distant. You were trying to talk yourself out of telling him how you felt. It was only going to make things worse.

Thoughts disrupted by the blinking of your phone, you looked at Prompto’s face flashing on the screen. Odd time for him to call, but you were suddenly awash in thankfulness, answering with a soft, “Hey.”
“Oh, I didn’t expect you to answer,” he said, laughing a little. “I was gonna leave a long voicemail, but I’m so glad I caught you, dude. Today has been one of the worst. I think every shitty person in Insomnia came into the coffee shop just to make my life hell.”

“What happened?”

He gave you details, and the pain within waned a little at the sound of his voice. You wished, more than anything, that he was here with you. It wasn’t until he spoke louder, repeating himself, that you realized you hadn’t been focusing on the words, but the simple comfort of his voice.

“Huh? Sorry, dozed off a little.”

He snickered. “I asked if you made up with Iggy yet. Gladio told me he talked to you, but he wasn’t sure about Ignis. I’m glad you guys aren’t mad at each other anymore.” Relief was heavy in his voice.

“When did you talk to Gladio?”

With a short hum, he said, “About a day ago, I guess. He called kinda randomly. He said he…” Prompto let out a sigh that made you want to hug him. “He’s been a total jerk about my plans to travel after graduation.”

You understood that, in a very small way. “Maybe he thinks you’ll forget all about him once you leave Insomnia since you’ll be having so many adventures.”

“More like he thinks I’ll fall for somebody else. I brought up one dream I had about Cindy ‘cause I thought he’d be into it, and I was so wrong. I dunno why I always mess everything up, but I guess I knew it would happen eventually.”

You loved that he was finally sharing his Gladio-related worries with you, but you hated that he was feeling this way. Before you could comfort him, he continued his slow tangent.

“I mean, stuff he says is kinda right. I do get crushes a lot. But I’m totally aware,” he let out a small self-deprecating laugh. “Especially since you moved across the world. It made me realize I couldn’t live through you anymore.”

That stilled you. Prompto had never told you things like this. Had he really experienced all of your stupid decisions vicariously?

“Gladio called to tell me he was thinking about sleeping with Aranea,” he sighed, seeming lost in his own thoughts over this. “I think he was trying to pick a fight, but we ended up talking about a lot.”

“I can’t believe he just told you,” you finally spoke up, a little incredulous. “I was gonna rat him out if he did it, but he just told you?”

Prompto actually laughed, a quiet, distant sound as if he’d moved his phone away to do it. “Yeah, it’s called communication, dude. It hurts sometimes, but it works. Gladio sucks at it. He’s either too harsh or too cheesy, but I know it’s coming from his heart so I listen. Even if it means we fight.”

You dropped your pencil, looking down at the messy list of words you’d written. “Prompto… when did you become so mature?”

“Uhh, I’ve always been this way?”

You huffed, rolling your eyes. If Gladio was, purposely or not, helping Prompto grow up
emotionally, you suddenly felt that whatever they had couldn’t be so terrible.

“You never answered my question,” he continued. “Did you and Iggy make up?”

Eyes reading the list over, mind not really comprehending the words, you said, “I… don’t know.” You’d both apologized and forgiven each other, but what was that worth when you’d thrown caution to the wind so heavily the day before? Things like that didn’t happen without consequences. Sex was always hindering rather than helping your relationship.

Prompto sighed over the line. “That really sucks.”

You sighed in return, ready to unload the news of all of your bad decisions.

“If…” he interrupted, sounding as if in thought. “If it helps, you’re always the first thing Iggy asks about. And, oh! And he has this picture of everybody on his desk in his office. It’s all of us around that sand castle we built during spring break. I dunno if you remember. He asked me to print a copy for him after you left. I know he wants to be friends again, and he misses you like everybody else.”

You took a deep breath, holding your face in your hand. He was trying to help, and although he was slightly off with his information because you weren’t being entirely forthcoming, his help was kind of working. “It’s a little more complicated than that.”

Silence sat on the line, stretching for several moments. Then, “Son of a bitch!”

The sky lightened into softer shades of blue. You started up at the slowly disappearing stars. “What?”

“You totally slept with him! You guys didn’t even make up, but you did it, didn’t you?” He was sighing in a way that sounded beleaguered, his reaction seeming a bit overplayed. “Who goes from not talking to getting it on in the span of a weekend? C’mon, dude!”

The gardens around you began to light in a soft glow with the promise of sunlight as the day grew ever brighter by the minute. “It wasn’t like we planned it,” you defended. “It just kind of happened. You know how it can be.”

“Trust me, I do.” He hummed, a near whine that you’d heard before. “But I bet Gladio that you wouldn’t. Now I owe him fifty gil and a blowjob.”

Blinking, you stuffed the paper between pages of your notebook. “You made a bet over whether Ignis and I would have sex or not?” Your voice was soft, not enough emotion in you to express just how annoyed you were. Well, how annoyed you probably should’ve been. You didn’t feel like much of anything.

“Yeah… I have one with Noct, too.”

You frowned at the flowers near your feet. “Don’t tell me. I don’t wanna know. I just hope you didn’t bet a blowjob with him, too. Wouldn’t want your jaw to be too sore when they get back.” Hearing about this bet was working a reaction out of you, a bud of emotion in your well of indifference. Now everything Gladio had said seemed even more irritating. It had all been an attempt to push you into Ignis’ arms just so he could get Prompto’s mouth around his dick once he got home.

“Gods, fine, I won’t tell you,” Prompto griped, letting the line grow silent for a few beats. “So… you and Iggy, huh?”
Turning your deadpan stare upward once again, you watched the last of the stars fade from view, swallowed by daylight. “Yep. Me and Iggy.”

“Wanna talk about it?”


Becoming flustered suddenly, Prompto scrambled for his next words. “Dad-cake isn’t—he’s not that strong… is he?”

“I dunno. They arm wrestled yesterday and it was pretty close. I thought Aranea was gonna choke on how much she was loving it.”

He groaned, and you heard shuffling. He was probably getting ready for bed. No, he was probably getting ready to play video games all night. “I need to start working out.”

Feeling lighter after all this talk, you laughed a little. “Yes, bitch. Work out, grow that goatee, and get a few tattoos. Then Aranea will swoon. You’re already halfway to Gladio with your refusal to wear sleeves.”

With a yawn, he said, “Hey, you can’t pay Gladio to put on a shirt. At least I have class.”

“Right.”

He scoffed. “I’m gonna go. You better tell me what happened with Iggy.”

You laughed again, picking up your things and slowly standing. “Don’t worry. You’ll get all the juicy details later.”

“Good!” He gave a tired snicker. “I love you, dude.”

You hesitated on the response. You’d never actually said these words aloud before. Not in recent memory. The morning sun finally began to peek over the mountains, lighting up the misty air and autumn foliage like a wildfire. “I love you, too.”

—

On the walk back to your room, intent to skip breakfast and facing Ignis altogether until it was time to see them off, you were halted by the sound of Aranea’s deep laughter. Following that out of curiosity, you found her in a training room with Ravus. It looked like they had been doing something for a while now, heavy breathing coming from her while Ravus inspected his sword. You must’ve caught them at a break.

She noticed you first, smirking in your direction. “Come to join us, kid? I could use a human shield.”

You looked between them, stopping just beyond the doorway. A snarky comment or rude gesture would’ve been more your line of response, but you couldn’t dredge anything up. Rolling a shrug over your shoulders, you crossed your arms and said nothing.

She walked toward you as Ravus kept his attention on his weapon. How interesting could a sword be? Aranea scrutinized you, wiping sweat from her brow.

“What’s up?” She looked you up and down. “Is it Four Eyes?”

Blinking slowly, you frowned. “Why is that the automatic assumption? Maybe it’s someone else
bothering me, or maybe I just have a bad attitude.”

Her expression flattened, fingers tangling in her bangs to push them off her forehead. “You guys disappeared after dinner last night. I just assumed you had a few months of fun to make up for.”

Frown growing weak, you looked away. Was it that obvious? You’d wondered why no one tried coming into your room all evening like they usually did. Not even a knock from the squire. You covered your face with your hands, groaning into a sigh.

“I hate this, Aranea. I hate everything,” you whined, voice muddled by your palms. “Can you take me home so I can live with you again and just admire him from afar? We can let it all go back to normal.”

“Is that what you consider normal?”

Ravus’ voice startled you with how close it was. You dropped your hands to look at him. Sword at his side, he stared you down.

You met his gaze head on. “What?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Why long for a person who makes you feel so terrible?”

Aranea nodded, and you tore your gaze from him to stare at her next. Your frown deepened as she said, “I hate to agree, but he’s got a point. You have to think about yourself.”

It didn’t surprise you that they would so easily vilify him when all they knew was what little they had seen or heard from you. They had witnessed the tears and the aftermath. What they weren’t recognizing was how you only ever seemed to think about yourself. That’s how you found yourself in situations like this in the first place.

“It’s not him,” you defended. “It’s me. As soon as he reappears, I just have to drag him down to my level. Yesterday… after dinner, that was just us meeting at the bottom. I just want to go back to the way things used to be because coming here clearly hasn’t changed anything.”

Ravus frowned. “Is that what you believe?”

You threw up a hand. “Kinda! I came here for a lot of reasons, but the major one was to get over him.”

“Strange,” Ravus said, tilting his head. “I’d been under the impression you came here to get over yourself.”

The words stilled you, and you lowered your hand slowly. Before you could process that thought, Aranea put a hand on your shoulder, a supportive motion that you were familiar with.

“If you’ve got loose ends to tie up with the guy, you should probably do it soon.” She squeezed your shoulder lightly. “He seems like a holdout so you might have to speak up first.”

You weren’t receptive to Aranea’s encouragement because you felt drained. The limit of how much you were willing to assert yourself had been reached. You wanted, desperately, for Ignis to still be the man who never wanted you to be alone, but, regardless of any lingering feelings he may have for you, if he wasn’t that person anymore, there wasn’t anything you could do to change that. You weren’t even sure you had the right.

“Maybe you should get a bite to eat first,” Aranea said, mild concern at your lack of a response.
“You’re looking pale.”

You shrugged off her hand, shaking your head as you back toward the door. “It’s just from living here. It makes everyone look like vampires.” On your way out, you overheard a quiet exchange between the two.

Aranea chuckled. “Annoying, isn’t she?”

“Exhausting,” Ravus grumbled.

You sent one last irritated look at them before leaving. What next, you’d run into Noctis and Gladio, too? Then you’d have all of your friends passing their unwanted opinions and advice onto you about Ignis. Keeping your head on a swivel just in case your luck did end up being that terrible, you began to miss how empty the manor had been before everyone had arrived to disrupt your life.

—

Lost in thought, you returned to your bedchambers feeling weak and withered. Vulnerable. That was the word. You felt uncomfortable and vulnerable, preparing yourself to see Ignis off. You didn’t know if you could tell him. Saying it to Prompto had been a weight lifted from your chest, and it had given you a brief moment of confidence that had waned.

You weren’t ready for the astounding smell of food that wafted from your room as you opened the door. Slowing as you stepped inside, you found Ignis placing your vase down on your desk next to an array of food. The vase held simple daffodils, and you paused in the doorway to watch him adjust them gently.

“I hope you don’t think me presumptuous,” he said, startling you. He hadn’t made any indication that he’d noticed you.

You looked at the elaborate tray of food on the desk, eyes lingering on the vase of flowers that sat next to it. You closed the door and looked at him. “No, but… I’m confused.”

“Do you not remember?” He gave you an amused look. “I promised to give you breakfast the next time we shared your bed.”

Too many thoughts and emotions had run their course through you in the hours since you had left this room. You couldn’t quite figure out how you felt about this. A tepid sort of excitement overcame you, confusion drowning out almost everything else.

“First the magic lesson and now this.” You walked over to the desk, a small smile coming to your face. “You’re good at keeping old promises.” Tempering your smile, you met his eyes weakly. You still felt small, as if you could be felled by the slightest breeze. “I’m sorry I’m not as diligent at keeping mine.”

His amusement softened into curiosity. “What do you mean?”

“I promised that we’d always be in it together.” Your grip on the notebook in your hand tightened. “As friends, as whatever. But I cut ties and left.”

He shook his head lightly. “I’ve already forgiven you.”

“Do I deserve it?” you were quick to ask.

“Yes,” he retorted just as hastily, reaching for your free hand. His touch was as electric as always,
and you fought a recoil as his fingers squeezed yours. “You deserve happiness. I tire of these worries that stress you. I saw the letter addressed to me—”

“You read it?” Eyes tearing to the desk for any sign of the letter. Nothing but food and flowers. You pulled your hand from his and placed the notebook and pencil down with an anxious frown. “What did you do with it?”

“I didn’t read it,” he said, voice calming you. “I only saw the large number of letters you’ve accumulated, addressed to all of us. Were you ever going to send them?”

It was hard meeting his green eyes, hesitance making you shift your weight from one foot to another. “No.”

He grasped your hand again, not letting go when you tugged at it instinctively. “What does it say?”

Avoiding his gaze, you shrugged. “Stuff I’ve already told you.”

Hand coming to your chin, he made you face him. “There were several with my name. Would you share with me what sentiments they contained?”

“Why are you being so nosy?” You’d written multiple letters to him, each one a different draft growing closer to the same conclusion that you couldn’t quite get out.

His thumb, warm as his hand held yours, brushed your skin softly. “After last evening, I’ve realized that I was correct about you all along.”

You blinked. “And that means?”

He smirked, the slightest curl of his lip as he dropped his hand from your chin. “You are a romantic. What you said to me throughout the night we spent together belied all of your protests.”

Heat warmed your face and graced the skin of your neck, the warmth reaching your shoulders as you shrugged again. “So you were right about me. I’m a romantic, okay? I could say the reason is that you like your coffee the same way I like mine, or how you would always know when I needed you to hold my hand. But those are trivial; a lot of people could match that description.”

“You don’t need a reason to love someone.” This felt impossible to say. You’d had months to let it swell in you, to think about it, and you still weren’t convinced you’d get it right. Looking down at your joined hands, you thought that would make it easier. “I could say the reason is that you like your coffee the same way I like mine, or how you would always know when I needed you to hold my hand. But those are trivial; a lot of people could match that description.”

When you looked at him, he wasn’t smiling anymore. You couldn’t read his expression, but pushed on because you’d already begun. “I could also say it’s because my heart beats out of my chest when I see you, or the nights I’ve spent up wondering what you’re doing. But those are more like symptoms than causes, y’know?”

His hand squeezed yours a little tighter. “What are you saying?”

You frowned, face flushing a deeper, warmer red. “You’re gonna make me say it?”

Finally, you were able to gauge the honest look on his face. “You’ve made it expressly clear that I can’t make you do a damn thing.”
Ignoring the pit that had formed in your stomach, you met him with your own earnest expression. “I love you.”

Stunned, he stared at you for several beats before looking down at the breakfast he’d prepared for you, as if it held the answers to whatever questions plagued his thoughts. He met your eyes again in a daze, confusion and disbelief coloring his face. “Pardon?”

You scowled, not willing to entertain his hesitation. “You heard me.”

“I…” He swallowed, his smile soft, breaths coming out shakily. “I love you, too.”

It had been your hope, but not at all your expectation, that he felt the same. By the uncertainty that hadn't been there before, you knew he didn’t feel it as strongly as he had the last time he’d uttered those words to you. Still, you accepted the shaky admittance with a growing smile overtaking your sour expression.

Telling him hadn’t torn the universe asunder as you had expected. Instead, he brought your hand to his mouth in soft kisses against your knuckles. He let out a breathy chuckle, cupping your face with his free hand.

“I love you dearly.” He kissed you firmly without waiting for a response, an assured press of his lips over yours before drawing back to look at you as if still surprised. When he kissed you again, it was deeper, a hand brought to your neck to tilt your head just so. When he drew away, you followed him, lifting on your toes. This was the greatest moment of your short life. You were in love, and he actually, truly felt that same love for you. You didn’t want it to end just yet.

The sound of the door jerking open met your ears, yet you tried to persist in the kiss even as Ignis broke the contact with another quiet chuckle.

“Time to wake up. It is— oh!” The squire stopped in the doorway. You sent a glare her way, but it did nothing to lessen the impish smile on her face as she closed the door again.

Breathing heavily, heart racing at the recent events, you made yourself step back from Ignis, freeing your hand from his. You could kiss him all day but that wouldn't bring you any close to understanding what was going on. “We should talk.”

“I wholeheartedly agree, darling,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss you again softly.

Resisting the urge to return the kiss in full, you backed further away. “Ignis, listen. You’re about to leave. I respect that you have personal matters or whatever. I’m assuming they didn’t just disappear all because of— of what I said.”

He sobered at your words, his dreamlike daze waning. “Of course.” He let go of your hand and fingers reflexively adjust his gloves. “Though this revelation has made those matters seem entirely trivial.”

You wanted to know what they were. He knew what you’d been up to while apart all thanks to Prompto, but he hadn’t told you anything about his life after you’d left. It was an imbalance that had you wavering despite the shared feelings.

He took a deep breath, smile retuning. “I suppose the appearance of the squire means I should be preparing to leave.” Before you could react, he brushed hair from your face and leaned down to kiss your forehead. “Eat your breakfast. It’ll help you recover from our night of lovemaking.”

You touched your forehead and watched him go. Alone in the room, you looked around in
confusion. Did all of that just happen or were you still asleep?

—

Standing under the arching arbors of the train station, you hugged everyone goodbye. Even Gladio who didn’t deserve it. To distract yourself from throwing yourself at Ignis in hopes of somehow stopping him from leaving so soon, you gave Gladio a brief talk along the lines of Prompto’s my best friend, and I love him so please don’t hurt him only to receive a large grin, a heavy slap on your shoulder, and a reminder that he’d known Prompto for longer so don’t get a big head, juicy.

When the rounds had been made, and you stood with Ignis a short distance from the others, you couldn’t help blurt out the question that had been eating at you since he’d left your room.

“What exactly is this personal matter of yours?”

Ignis started, his weight shifting as he looked down at you. “It’s nothing of importance.”

Morning sunlight filtered through the espalier that climbed up the nearest archway. It glinted off his glasses and the tiny hint of gold shining from his breast pocket. You loved the sight of him and hated how it always tried to derail your thoughts.

“You said it was trivial so why not tell me?”

“If you must know,” he said, eyes flicking toward where Lunafreya and Ravus were standing. “For quite a long time, I was under the impression that you and Ravus were together… romantically. When you kissed me the other night, I was disconcerted to find myself so envious based on no evidence.”

“Ignis, what?” You couldn’t help the small laugh that tumbled out of your mouth. “You seriously thought— with Ravus?”

He crossed his arms, unamused. “You did tell me once that you slept with him.”

Trying and failing to hold back another laugh at the ridiculous notion, you ran a hand down your face. “But you knew it was a lie.” When you dropped your hand, your amusement died in the face of his furrowed brows and lowered eyes.

“Your act of moving here to live with him wasn’t a lie,” he said. He was guarded again, and you realized you weren’t being fair. His worries, though absurd to you, had been real to him. Ravus was your only friend in Tenebrae so he came up a lot in conversation with Prompto. It must’ve carried through to the others in everything Prompto told them. It was no wonder they thought you were something more than just two people who tolerated each other.

“I had to get away.” You took a step toward him, and he looked up, meeting your eyes. You needed him to know that it was the ridiculousness of it that amused you, not the confusion behind it. Your departure wasn’t something you looked upon fondly, and if he had laughed at you over it, you would’ve been annoyed, too. “If I had stayed, I would’ve ruined you, Ignis.”

He kept his gaze steady on you. Then, letting loose his arms, he rested a hand against your cheek. “You’ve already ruined me.”

With a soft huff, you leaned into his touch. He was, as always, unaware of how enchanting you found him. His palm was comforting and electric on your skin. “I’m relieved it was just a misunderstanding. I was worried your personal matters were gonna be something worse.”
The corners of his mouth curved slightly with a soft smile. “What could be worse than infantile jealousy? I know not to be so base, yet you bring it out in me.”

You swallowed, bringing forth the worry that you’d buried from the moment he had arrived. It should’ve been the first thing you asked him before anything ever happened between you, but you’d thought you could bear your actions in the library and your bedchambers on your conscious if you just didn’t know. Now that you were pressing forward, possibly together, you couldn’t stand the idea of not being certain. You didn’t want to walk into a messy situation when you yourself were a messy situation all on your own.

“Do you have anyone waiting for you back in the Crown City?”

He blinked, eyes searching your face before settling on yours. “I don’t.” He brushed his thumb along your cheek. “But when I return, you will.”

You felt a weightlessness at his words. This was the first hint at any intentions he might have toward a future with you, however small it might’ve been. It was hard to let yourself believe it. “No one ever means it when they say they’ll wait. I’ve seen the movies.”

His expression grew warm, a flash of teeth as he suddenly chuckled. You had to bite a lip to hide the smile you wanted to automatically return.

“Perhaps you’ve seen one too many,” he said, shaking his head a little, smile playing at his lips. “Life isn’t typically this complicated or confusing.”

You frowned, but it was affected, another attempt at hiding your amusement. “You’re blaming me?”

My life was totally bland before I met you.”

He leaned down, his nose brushing yours. “I have very serious doubts about that.”

Sincere affection curled in your chest, tight and burning. You conceded a smile, ignoring the loud whistle of the train. Wanting to close the distance, to be as near as possible before he had to leave, you rose a hand to his nape, urging him downward.

“Specs! Let’s go!”

Noct’s voice had Ignis drawing away. His hand remained on your cheek as he turned his head in the prince’s direction. “On my way!”

Before you could feel the disappointment of him pulling back, he was kissing you. Serene in manner, his lips brushed yours slowly as if he were in no hurry at all. You drew him to you further, hands finding their way to his hair. He chuckled again as he broke the kiss, his lips a wet pink.

“I’ll be waiting for you,” he whispered against your mouth. His eyes were alight, and you wanted for nothing more than another day with him. “Should we still feel this way upon your return, and Prompto not trample over me, I promise to be the first to welcome you home.”

Chapter End Notes

It’s all fluff and misunderstandings from here. I’ll get this thing finished, but life is slamming me so hard right now. And not in a good way. I’m pouring all of my love into this whenever I can. <3
I appreciate all of you for reading and sticking around for so long. I don't deserve you. 

_:;
The autumn air was crisp and windy as you stepped off the train. You were exhausted after the longest week of work yet, trudging from the station to the manor with your jacket pulled tight. You walked past the squire on your way in, waving at guards who ignored you. Your vision was blurry. Blinking against the dim light of the corridor, you frowned grumpily when Ravus appeared to block your path.

“What’s up, papa-gâteau?”

Instead of his usual sour expression, he rose a brow. “I’ve something for you, ma crevette.”

You blinked, looking over at the squire when she laughed at whatever Ravus was calling you. Frowning deeper, you asked, “What?”

Ravus uncrossed his arms, holding out a small parcel. “A gift from abroad.”

You didn’t take it from him. Shaking your head, you hiked up the strap of your bag on your shoulder. “No, what did you just call me?”

When he didn’t answer, his arm outstretched with the package, you looked to the squire again. She controlled her amusement, saying, “He called you a shrimp. Because you are a little child.”

“I’m older than you.” Gaze going back to Ravus, you took the parcel from him. It was neatly wrapped in plain brown paper. “Who’s this from? I wasn’t expecting anything.”

Free of the apparent burden, Ravus brushed past you. You imagined he didn’t like being an errand boy. “It’s from your paramour.”

You watched him disappear, the squire on his heel, and slowly looked at your name written in a scrawling script on the face of the package. Turning it over, you found the familiar sight of the Scientia crest. Fancy shmancy. A little less tired suddenly, you went straight to your room with a budding excitement.

Tossing all things aside, you crawled into bed with the little parcel in hand. Pulling loose the strings that held it together, you wondered what he could’ve sent. He hadn’t given you any warning.
My love,

As a preface for what I’ve decided to finally share with you, I do hope you read this first. I’ve withheld things from you for reasons that were shameful but now seem entirely ridiculous. I am wont to be perfectly candid in all that I give you. I send this to you in hopes that you don’t change your mind about how you feel.

You asked me once if I were made in a lab to be the perfect bachelor. That question stuck with me for quite a long time because I was unable to see how you could believe such a thing. Although flattered that you thought so highly of me as to have all of Lucis at my disposal, I found your lack of understanding the depth of my duties in all aspects quite a shame.

Upon first meeting you, based on the knowledge given to me through Prompto, I’d already determined that I wouldn’t like you. It disturbed me how you seemed to live your life from one moment to the next uncaring of your future beyond how utterly eviscerated you could get in a single evening.

My dislike of you and my distant behavior were entirely my own fault, for I didn’t much like myself at that time. Before Noctis had proposed to Lunafreya, I was no stranger to casual encounters with temporary partners. Life kept me busy; my duties to Noctis and the ruling of my county were all I had time for.

So my dealings with interested parties tended to be brief in nature, mere flashes in the pan. I became dependent on those fiery moments as my responsibilities grew. They helped me release parts of myself I felt great shame for harboring. Though I never indulged perfect strangers in the same way you seemed to enjoy, I did a fair amount of things of which I’m not proud.

When Noctis announced his proposal to Lunafreya, I put a hold on that behavior to help him in actualizing the future for which he wished. I tried, on two occasions before meeting you, to attempt something serious with people of my acquaintance in order to rid myself of the lingering disgust I had with my behavior.

I toured my county with a noblewoman of a lesser known family. She wanted to wait until I was ready to court so that we could begin a family. It flummoxed me as I knew a courtship with me would be less than ideal for a person who wasn’t fully devoted to their own profession. I thought I would enjoy the businesslike nature of her putting everything on the table in such a way, but the lack of heart she displayed plagued me with worry over my future.

Was I destined to fulfil this responsibility without question as I do in everything else? Aren’t I allowed a chance to find something real within another, and if so, shouldn’t my partner find that in me, as well? I didn’t want to merely be a step upon which she climbed on her trek up Insomnia’s social ladder.

The second instance, for which I am sorry that it gave you strife later on, was with Mirum. I respected her and her work so I tread more carefully about my approach. She’d never given any
indication of interest so I only sent her the most mild of flirtations in attempt to incite the slowest of courtships. I truly hadn’t known she fancied me until she came out to the public with her intentions, but by then, I had met you.

I’ve always thought of you as a person without restraint, but the disdain with which it gave me faded over time into an affection so strong, I’ve wondered how I could ever have thought badly of you. Before we were lovers, we were friends, and before that, I was a confused man trying to figure out a confusing woman. In many ways, this remains the case. I failed to understand how you could be so unbothered by your promiscuity when I felt nothing but shame over mine. Being near you was freeing in that way.

Beyond that, you taught me how to be comfortable with parts of myself I hadn’t known existed. I found it refreshing that you thought me boring. People are so drawn to wealth or to looks alone, but you were an outright bully to me at times. You didn’t care who I was, and you relished in making me take notice of that.

I’ll end this now before I digress into endless blather of how much I adore you. I only wanted to share this bit of truth so that we may begin with an entirely fresh and honest start.

I love you,

Ignis

Flipping open the journal, you were met with a few ruined pages, withered and brown. Then the words, written in elegant script, Who falls at the sight of a mere person? That strange balcony singer has caused me to have mud upon my suit.

There was no commentary, nothing between the pages to explain what you were looking at as you flicked from one to the next, eating at the words inside. Poetry, thoughts, observances. On one page, all he’d written was She’s a terrible mess. On the next, he’d said I feel as if I’m drowning, and she’s all I need to breathe. Forgetting sleep, you spent the rest of the evening pouring over the notebook from cover to cover, piecing together Ignis’ side of your entire relationship. Nothing was dated, but there were small clues of where each thing fit in the timeline.

By the time your alarm rang, the footsteps of the squire bounding down the hallway to get your ass out of bed, you were staring blankly into space, sprawled on your bed with the notebook pressed to your chest.

Ignis Scientia was so fucking extra.

—

Are her flirtations genuine? I’m inclined to believe they’re not. I never imagined to meet this woman or that she would be the same person of whom Prompto spoke so highly.

—

“I can’t say it would be any one interaction or experience in any specific place,” Ignis said, his voice low on the line. “But I do believe it will involve the most important part of my life, which I daresay is you. What do you suppose about your own?”

“I think mine will be less vague,” you began after a moment of hesitance, not shy but uncertain. You’d never talked about final fantasies before with anyone. It was an intimate kind of subject you
weren’t familiar with exploring. The sweet feelings Ignis had given you over what he thought his would be left you a little shaken. Clearing your throat, you continued, “You’re fucking me in your car. Just us, sweaty and sticky and ruining your leather interior.”

“Oh?” he breathed.

“Yeah. I fall apart at your touch. I’m in your lap, and your fingers are digging into my hips as you force me down on your cock.”

He inhaled sharply, but said nothing. You took that as a sign to continue. Phone sex was also something you’d never done before, but it was somehow more comfortable than trying to figure out what your actual final fantasy would be.

“I bite and lick that place you like just between your neck and shoulder, and your moan is the most delicious thing I’ve ever heard. I’m taking you raw because you’re begging for it. I’m so wet, it’s making your thighs slippery as I slap against them.”

You bent your legs, hugging a pillow as a warmth began to build somewhere inside. You thought you should probably take this to your bedroom before you actually said something truly dirty. But you were alone so it didn’t matter.

“You’re only wearing your gloves, and your glasses are all foggy just like the windows. Which is good because we’re parked in the middle of Insomnia on a busy street—”

The library door clicked and opened. Ravus walked in without ceremony, letting it shut behind him. If he noticed you were on the phone, he didn’t say anything.

“Anyway,” you breathed, voice higher than you intended. “That’s my final fantasy.”

That made him look at you, but still no comment out of him. Of course he would be inclined to talk about a subject like this. You really hoped he didn’t try to talk to you about your final fucking fantasy. You could barely talk about it with Ignis.

On the phone, Ignis cleared his throat. “Why the abrupt ending?”

At the same time, Ravus took a book from a shelf and asked, “What’s the matter?”

“Um.” You held the pillow closer, uncomfortable with all of this. Ravus looked at you expectantly as Ignis hummed on the line, as if in understanding.

“Ah, Ravus is present,” he said.

“Yeah.” You covered your face with your free hand.

Ignis let out a soft breath. “I suppose I should go now. I still have things to do before I get some rest.”

Disappointment seeped a little into the fair amount of discomfort you were feeling. “Okay. Don’t overdo it.”

“You’ve no room to talk,” he chuckled. “I love you.”

Dropping your hand from your face, you hugged the pillow even tighter. “I love you, too.”

When the line disconnected, you shoved your face into the pillow and sighed. It was getting easier to say every time, but it didn’t negate the rush you felt every time the words came out of your mouth.
Calmed a little, you glanced over at the large pillow beneath Ravus’ elbow, the same pillow that Ignis had rested on as you had violated the sanctity of this place.

Ravus looked your way, and your eyes shot downward, trying and failing to focus on the book you had left open nearby. Your face grew hot despite the ridiculousness of it all. You ignored his looks for the rest of the afternoon. If he wanted to pick on you about being caught in a flirty conversation, you weren’t going to give him the chance.

Not even when, hours later, he picked up and examined a small button he found on the library floor. He opened his mouth, a quiet breath almost becoming word. Then he grunted, flicking the button away with a shake of his head.

Good, you thought. He was better not knowing.

—

She has questionable practice in all that she does. Why did it bother me to see her on a date tonight? The guilt over the lie to my uncle continues to eat at me. She jests and wishes to befriend me, but I’ve made a misstep I’d rather not claim.

—

“I can’t wear these.” You pushed the glasses up your nose, then pulled them down, unable to stop messing with them.

Ravus, arms crossed and unamused, looked down at you. “They appear to fit just fine.”

Adjusting them until they were comfortable, you backed away from him. The corridor was quiet, the guards hardly paying any attention to you. They’d grown long used to your nonsense, but sometimes you could coax a laugh out of them if you were lucky.

You had to get to work, but you didn’t really want to go in with this new look. Glasses changed a person’s entire face, and you weren’t sure you could pull it off like certain other people.

“I’m ordering contacts with the credit card, like right now,” you warned him. “They’re crucial to my success both in my career and my love life. This is practically an anti-sex device on my face.”

“Do what you wish,” he sighed. “Though, you should consider not being such a tart.”

“Oh, well. Consider this.” You flipped him off, wondering if the gesture had the same meaning in Tenebrae. By the annoyed look on his face, it did.

It was at that moment someone rounded the corner of the corridor. Sparkling jewels hanging from her crown, high collar framing her soft, wizened face, the gods damned Oracle paused in her walk to look at you.

Eyes wide, you quickly dropped your hand and bowed. “Y-your majesty, uh, I was just—”

She smiled, the most gentle curve of her mouth. “My dear girl, aren’t you running late?”

“Oh, well. Consider this.” You flipped him off, wondering if the gesture had the same meaning in Tenebrae. By the annoyed look on his face, it did.

Righting yourself, you left the corridor as quickly as you could. The amount of times you embarrassed yourself in front of her was never ending. You got a laugh out of the guards that time, at
least.

—

I don’t know if she is the most foolish or the most brilliant person I’ve ever met.

—

Seeing an email from Ignis sitting in your inbox was a pleasant surprise. He only ever called, and even that was a somewhat rare occurrence given how busy you both were. You opened the message to find a video that took ten minutes for your laptop to download.

The footage was a little shaky at first, a bustle of voices going on but no one in the frame. When it settled, you saw the vaguely familiar face of a man look into the camera as he seemed to adjust things. Who was he?

“Lord Ignis,” he said, looking off screen. Suddenly, you realized it was that teacher from Ignis’ district. The one that you’d let down by bailing on his class.

“I think everything is ready,” he continued, going out of frame.

It took a moment for you to figure out what was going on, but as the view of a stage came into focus, the curtains drawing back, another realization hit you. This was some kind of performance. Children populated the stage, awkwardly but earnestly reciting Altissan lines that you recognized. They had turned your fairytale into a play.

Of no volition of your own, your eyes watered as they acted out the silly little love story you’d written for them. You had to pause it when Ignis stepped onto the stage, dressed like an eccentric mystic—the narrator. Laughing softly into your hand, you unpaeased it to listen to the lilting way he delivered the final lines.

His acting chops were as good as ever, it seemed. Why did you find all of this so endearing? He would be the kind of person who got involved with his district’s events if he could.

—

This is about infatuation. It’s about an inability to focus when I need such clarity the most. This is about not having a choice over where my heart is taking me. I don’t like this, and I don’t like her.

—

A magazine rattled your glasses as it hit you in the face. You caught it before it fell, sending a startled look to the Producer. Fucking rude. Did he really have to interrupt your work and call you into his office to do this?

You gripped the thin stack of pages with a frown. “What was that for?”

He waved a hand in a vague motion. “Look at it, my dear. I think you will find a certain article very interesting.”

Eying him warily, you looked at the cover and opened it up. Nothing but tabloids, you noticed, going through them with mild interest. This was the most recent issue, and you were wondering if this had something to do with Ravus. Were they claiming that he was an illegitimate heir again? Maybe he’s being exposed as the modern incarnation of Bahamut. Whatever they were saying, you were definitely interested.
Then you stopped on a page halfway through, jaw going slack on something you hadn’t expected. Two pictures, juxtaposed. Ignis and a woman you didn’t recognize were in both of them. The left photograph was slightly out of focus but unmistakable, an intimate moment caught in a single, poorly timed snapshot. They were kissing, and you could tell by the surroundings that they were outside his apartment. The right photo was much less risqué, the two of them walking together down a sidewalk someplace in the city.

The article was in Tenebraen, but you could pick out Ignis’ name and most of the words even if you didn’t understand them completely. Stomach plummeting, you sent a glare to the producer.

“Why did you show me this?”

He shrugged. “Because you needed to know.”

You looked down at the photos. It was entirely likely these were taken while you and Ignis had been separated. He’d thought you ran off to be with Ravus. He was allowed to have a rebound. Maybe the article even said as much, but you weren’t about to ask the Producer to translate it for you.

That knowledge didn’t stop you from feeling sick. He hadn’t told you anything about what he’d been up to after you left. A big part of you hadn’t wanted to know what or who he had been doing during that time. It was his business, and you were trying to get out of the practice of hurting yourself.

“You can’t believe these, boss,” you said, tearing your eyes away from that awful picture of them in a liplock. It was disgusting because their privacy was being invaded, and it felt like the press had taken it specifically for you. “Last week, there was an article about your baroness being pregnant.”

The Producer gasped, the back of his hand covering his eyes. “She is pregnant. It’s true. It’s all true!”

You blinked. Should you congratulate him on soon becoming a father? He was acting more than the usual amount of dramatic today. Before you could say anything, he walked across his office, opening a cabinet to reveal a large collection of liquors.

“She’s with child, and it’s not mine, but her husband’s,” he said, shaky hands forcing open a bottle. The cork stopper fell and bounced along the floor. “And they don’t care about me because I didn’t want to commit. I’ve been with them for years, sweetheart, and what do they do?” He turned around, a short but filled to the brim, glass of amber liquid in each hand. “They tell me I’m not to be involved with their child.”

You reluctantly took the glass he offered, holding it with both hands. The smell of it hit you sharply. The intensely sour scent sending a familiar old excitement through you. The Producer took a generous drink from his glass, and you wanted to follow suit. It was right there. You could forget about the article, forget about what Ignis wasn’t telling you.

“I’ve been with them for twenty years. I wasted my youth on them,” the Producer continued bitterly. It was becoming more and more obvious that he’d called you into his office to vent to you over this. “I loved them both before they were ever married. They asked me, you know. We could’ve had a beautiful marriage, the three of us. But what, I ask, is the point if the relationship we already have is perfect as it is? I’ve never wanted to be tied down to anyone, not even to those I love most.”

“You didn’t commit to them with marriage,” you spoke up. “I get that, I really do. But don’t you see how that might make them doubt your commitment to the baby? They’re just protecting themselves. It’s not—”
He looked at you sharply, and you stopped yourself from saying it wasn’t even his kid, he was the lucky one in this situation. His priorities completely baffled you.

Downing the rest of his drink, he sighed and walked across the room again for a refill. “I suggest you worry more about your own issues, dear. Your lover is spending his time with another while you work yourself to the bone. I think you deserve better, though I suppose I can hardly blame him; she’s quite the Insomnian delicacy, that one.”

You frowned at his honesty, peering at the pictures in the magazine again. The woman looked plain and wholesome, and that was strangely more threatening than any number of gorgeous women like Mirum had ever been. Seeing the way Ignis held her in that blurry photo made your hands on the glass tighten.

What if Ignis hadn’t told you about who he’d been with after you left because there wasn’t anything to tell? What if this was happening now, and you were too blinded by love to notice? What if—

“I’ve digressed enough,” the Producer said. “The reason I’ve pulled you away from the others is to offer you a permanent position on my team. The video you directed has been our most profitable. I know you plan to return to university, but I believe your talents could be better honed here in practice rather than theory.”

Your mouth went dry at the offer. This wasn’t something you expected. It wasn’t exactly work you wanted to do long term, but offers like this just didn’t happen. You looked from the article about Ignis to the glass in your hand. Lifting it to your lips, you grimaced a little at the burn as it went down. It was a heavenly warmth in your throat, and it left your mouth feeling slightly tingly.

You licked the stickiness of it from your lip. “I’ll think about it.”

—

A pinch more of turmeric? Test this tomorrow.

Council meeting at eleven today.

Review the proposed ordinances by Friday.

Pick up dinner for Noctis. Invite Gladio.

Meeting at her apartment went completely awry.

I still feel the heaviness upon my mind.

I worry for her, and I worry for myself for even caring.

—

You weren’t allowed to fall apart quietly in your bedchambers. Apparently, that wasn’t a courtesy given to someone who walked through the manor, telling the squire to lick your nuts when she questioned the small bottle of alcohol in your hand. Sitting on the cold floor in front of your unlit fireplace, you looked at the magazine article for the nth time that day. You’d gotten a third into the bottle when Ravus appeared, like the asshole he was, to take it from you.

“What is wrong with you?” he asked, prying it out of your hand.

Reaching but unable to take it back as he lifted it away, you clutched at the bottom of his robes.
“What’s wrong with you? Give it back.”

He looked down at you with an expression that wasn’t the usual irritation. Maybe disappointment with a touch of concern.

You scowled, coming to a stand on shaky legs. “He’s fucking her, Ravus. He calls me like once a week, and the rest of the time, he’s sucking her face outside his apartment.” The words came out blubbering, and you stretched as tall as you could in attempt to get the bottle from him.

He was far too tall, holding it above his head. “Try to form coherent speech. Otherwise I’m unable to help you.”

You didn’t want his help. He was terrible at helping. You deflated, backing away from him and throwing yourself onto your bed. “If you won’t give it back, just go away.”

Silence settled for a small stretch, and you thought he might’ve listened to you. Then you heard him walking around, doing something that you couldn’t see because you were lowkey trying to smother yourself with your pillow.

“What do you remember the first thing you said to me?”

You grunted, rolling over to look at him. “That you’re the prince of assholes?”

He was kneeled in front of the fireplace, a small fire growing at his ministrations. You sat up, watching him pick up the magazine as he stood. He looked at it as he spoke. “You said ‘the gods really hate me’.”

You crossed your arms. “And I stand by that statement.”

Still looking at the article, he shook his head. “The fact is, the gods are indifferent. They don’t care about such trifling things as broken hearts or the forever waxing and waning emotions of one particularly difficult human.”

In a move that startled you, he ripped the page from the magazine and wadded it up, tossing it into the fire. “It’s all well and good that you be the center of your own universe, but you can’t expect the same of him.” He dropped the magazine onto your desk and picked up the bottle again. On his way out, he said the last bit over his shoulder. “I suggest you take a day from work and talk with your therapist tomorrow.”

You sat in silence for a few minutes, the logical part of you knowing he was right. Getting up, you went back to sit in front of the fireplace. The gentle warmth from it was soothing. You jabbed at the ashes of the magazine page with the small iron, relieved that you wouldn’t be tempted to look at that blurry picture anymore.

—

She’s left her dress on my floor, Gladio on my doorstep, and utter confusion in my mind. Why did I let this happen?

—

Without Ravus’ permission, you paid for international cell service with your sponsorship credit card so you wouldn’t have to deal with anymore spotty connections and called Ignis. He always called you so you had little hope of him actually answering. You weren’t sure you even wanted him to answer.
Confronting him didn’t seem fair, even to you, because you had nothing to go on but a tabloid. All you’d been able to glean before Ravus burned it was that Ignis was close with this new person. A person he’d never thought to mention to you. Someone he was photographed kissing. Of all the times you had kissed Ignis in public spaces, not once did anyone care. There had never been press to worry about. This was, you suspected, just another reason he’d avoided courtship for so long. Now all of the noble population knew he was looking for someone to one day marry, and apparently even trashy magazines in Tenebrae thought that was newsworthy. All of it was inane to you.

“What a surprise,” Ignis said, answering his phone and disrupting your thoughts. “I just sat through a rather dull meeting and thought I might be imagining your lovely face on my screen. It leaves me curious, though. What have you to tell me that you called me first?”

His voice was an automatic comfort despite the thoughts on your mind. You smiled weakly. “Hey.”

He chuckled. “Ah, quite an important message indeed.”

You were trying not to let his good mood throw you off from the discussion you realized you needed to have. You’d sussed out all of your thoughts on this in therapy. “Ignis, we need to talk.”

The was a long pause, and for a moment, you worried that the better cell service wasn’t actually helping your crappy phone at all.

Then, Ignis let out a soft, “Oh.”

You took a deep breath. “When you said you didn’t have anyone waiting for you back in the Crown City, were you being honest?”

Another, shorter pause had you furrowing your brow.

“’I was entirely truthful,” he said. “I haven’t anyone but you.”

Believing him, you pushed forward with a rush of relief. “Then… tell me about your life after I left. You know all about what I did, but you haven’t shared anything with me.”

He hummed. “One moment, darling.” You heard him tell his assistant something away from the phone. Moments later, he took a breath, saying, “I admit I am guilty of withholding any mention of that time for reasons that are perhaps unjustified. Even now, I hold shame over certain hastily made decisions.”

When he went quiet, you pressed. “Like what?”

He sighed. “I told my uncle everything. I expected disappointment but received only understanding. My talk with him had only reinforced the growing thought that I had put you into an uncomfortable position for no reason. Our farce had been unnecessary, and I had lost you over it.”

You walked to your closet, moving things around in search of another blanket. Winter was approaching, and even with the fire lit, you were freezing. You let Ignis continue, the timbre of his voice deep and soft.

“I let it be known that I was seeking courtship. I hadn’t expected the response that occurred afterward. People I had never before spoken to were going out of their way to approach me. It was remarkably uncomfortable.”

Finding a blanket, you pulled it out of the armoire, various pieces of clothing falling out in the process. You didn’t want to tell him you already knew some of this. It was on par with your
reluctance to tell him you’d relapsed. Maybe that wasn’t fair, but you were still trying to figure things out, and you didn’t want to worry him all because of your petty issues.

“So you didn’t date anyone?” you asked, walking across your room to dump the blanket on your bed.

He cleared his throat. “Three people caught my interest. I… saw them concurrently.”

That hit you, a sharp, surprising pang. Looking down at the blankets piled on your bed, you suddenly wanted to roll yourself up in them and never return to the waking world. Three people was a hell of a rebound, you thought. You’d come into the conversation worrying about one person Ignis had been neglecting to tell you about, but there were three?

“Iggy, you slut,” you said, fighting back the hurt with a bit of humor. It was stupid to be bothered. He loved you. All of this had happened while you were apart.

“If anything,” he said, sounding surprised at your comment until his voice grew dry. “I thought you would approve.”

Giving in to your earlier thought, you crawled into the blankets and sighed. “I mean, I’d be impressed if you amassed an army of lovers, but I only approve of you dating me. I know once you get a taste for the slut life, it’s hard to go back. I hope my neediness won’t be an issue.”

Another chuckle. “Not at all.”

“So you’re not—” You bit your lip, hesitant because this was skirting a very thin line. You didn’t want him to know just how insecure you were at the moment. “You’re not talking to them anymore?”

He quieted for a moment. “I’ve kept in touch with one person. She’s become a dear friend. I know you will get along well.”

That was another hit to your fractured sense of self. “Would we?” Your voice came out higher and tighter than you wanted.

“She, too, spent most of her life on a farm and has a love of foul language, chocobos, and film.”

A frown cut your face. This bitch sounded more like a second-rate version of you than a potential friend. You knew without needing confirmation that this was the woman from the photo. You didn’t want to be her friend, and you didn’t think he could really expect that of you.

“It might be weird,” you said, doubt in your tone. “I mean, you dated her while we were separated. I just… no thanks.”

“That’s understandable,” he said, sounding thoughtful. “If it makes you uncomfortable, I will end my friendship with her.” He said it so matter of factly, like this was a totally reasonable thing to suggest.

“Seriously, don’t. I never gave you a hard time about Mirum. This is no different.” You sighed again. “I’m still a work in progress with my insecurities and shit. I don’t wanna be the reason you’re unhappy so please, just— don’t say stuff like that.”

Ignis went quiet again before responding. “I’m not unhappy, darling. Is there anything else you would like to know?”

Curling in the blankets, you were finally warm, cozy, and ready for this conversation to move on to
better subjects. “Yeah, the most important thing. Have you played the new Triple Heart game? Scorpion is back, and he’s got another secret ending. I need your help seducing him.”

Ignis hummed thoughtfully. “He’s as good as ours.”

—

She made me forget what I was doing, and I don’t mind it in the least.

—

The biggest problem with long distance relationships was that, no matter how often you kept in touch, sometimes everything felt purely hypothetical. You weren’t even in a relationship, technically. He was just waiting for you. His words had been specific, you thought, and you recalled them often. He was waiting for you, he loved you, and if he still felt that way when you got back, he would be there.

It was a big if made bigger because of the distance.

You’d been thinking a lot about commitment and the vague standing you currently had with Ignis, and all of it was boiling down to one simple truth: you wanted to court him. It would, at the very least, let him know how serious you were about starting over. And if his lady friend happened to see that and kindly disappeared, all the better.

“Am I insane for doing this?” you asked Ravus as you pointed at the image of a pen on your computer screen.


You stared at the image of the pen and ran hands down your face. “I’m crazy. What am I doing?”

Ravus shrugged, not even looking up from his book. “Taking action.”

Closing your laptop, you laid back on the pillows, stretching yourself out with a small shiver. The library was extra cold lately because of the season change. You weren’t looking forward to winter.

“Don’t you think, as my sponsor, you’re responsible for stopping me from doing stupid shit like this?”

“If that were the case, I would get nothing done.”

“This sucks. I just spent half of my savings on that pen.”

“No one was forcing your hand at commissioning something made of solid gold.”

Raising your head, you nudged at him with the toe of your shoe. “Could you at least act like you care?”

He grabbed your ankle, finally looking up from his book. “There’s no point in it. You may behave as if you regret this, but you’ve already made your decision. No amount of advice or direction from me will change that.” Letting go of your ankle, he pushed your foot away. “I know you well enough by now.”

Throwing your head back, you stared at the high ceiling. “I don’t even know how to do this.”

“Weren’t you in a courtship before?”
“Not a real one. We were just friends who kissed sometimes.”

He was quiet for long enough that you lifted your head to see what he was doing. Book closed in his lap, he peered over at you.

“You’ll need to make a grand gesture when you present it to him. The importance is that it’s seen by others. It’s archaic, but nobility place much stock in what they can and cannot claim.”

You didn’t like that at all. “I can’t just give it to him in private? He gave me the token in private last time. Kinda.”

Ravus shook his head. “You said it wasn’t genuine so you can hardly base anything off of that experience.”

Thinking on it for a few measured beats, you nodded. “Okay. What else?”

He frowned, and you knew that look. He wasn’t happy being roped into helping you with this. Still, he placed his book aside, leaning back to cross his arms and look at you thoughtfully. “Tell me about your family.”

You blinked at his sudden command, brows drawing together in confusion.

Rolling an awkward shrug over your shoulders, you said, “I have a mom. No siblings. Um, never met my dad.”

He stared at you. “That’s all?”

You nodded.

He kept staring. “You’re going to fail.”

Your mouth parted, lips moving to form words but you only sputtered at first. “W-wha— rude. Why would you s—”

“A person’s background is important when considering a courtship partner.” He shook his head as if it made complete sense, as if you were the silly one. “What is your mother’s profession?”

Not sure you wanted to hear another insult, you reluctantly answered, “She’s a landowner.”

He considered that for a moment. Then he uncrossed his arms. “That’s a start. In order to win him back, no doubt facing other suitors, you’ll need to first hone every possible skill or advantage you have that would make him accept your token.”

You looked at your closed laptop, thinking about the pen. Other suitors? Like his lady friend?

“He loves me,” you said quietly, meeting Ravus’ gaze again. “I think he’ll accept even if I don’t do everything the right way.”

“Are you certain about that?”

You really weren’t, but Ignis had told you he still loved you just the day before so you were holding out hope. Negatively, you kept waiting for the day when he’d stop or you would no longer feel like it was true. Your love felt, like everything, entirely hypothetical at times, but maybe the consistent reminder with each phone call was all you needed to help keep it alive.
No one is more inappropriate than I. To confess while she is under such duress was selfish of me. The pain in my hand is deserved. I feel a greater pain at what she’s been forced to endure.

—

Ravus met with you in a large parlor that you hadn’t known existed in the manor. Various musical instruments rested about the place, and he set about trying to find one that you could work on learning to play.

It was proving difficult.

“Say that again. The what does what?”

Ravus looked from the violin in your hands to your wide, amused eyes. “Pay attention to how the strings rest tightly against the nut.”

“So this is the g string,” you giggled, pointing at the first one. “And it rests against the nut. Nice.”

He ignored you in favor of continuing with explaining the anatomy of the violin. But it was only a minute later when you were doing it all over again.

“That can’t be what it’s called. F-holes?” You gently touched the odd little holes and giggled harder. “Violins have nuts and f-holes. I’m learning so much.”

Ravus wasn’t amused in the slightest. “If you’d rather not behave like an adult, I do have other, far better ways of using my time.”

“Okay, okay!” You lifted the bow in surrender. “You have my complete seriousness. What next?”

“Try playing this.” He pointed at a page in a book of sheet music resting in front of you. There was no way you knew how to read that. Ravus wasn’t the best teacher…

Running the bow across the strings just to see if you’d get lucky, you caused a loud screech to fill the room. Persistence set in, and you kept going, but it only seemed to get worse. Screech after agonizing screech bounced off the marble until Ravus took the violin away from you.

“Let’s try piano.” His voice sounded taught, as if he were holding something back. “I’m far more familiar with it.”

Piano was decidedly easier and less painful on the ears, even when you hit the wrong keys. Your hands weren’t as large as his so you stumbled, but he met it with a practiced patience. He decided he’d teach you the second part of a duet he was learning. By the end of the evening, you almost had him smiling at how well you were doing so far. It was a success if only for that reason.

—

The humiliation of playing that blasted arcade game was worth the look on her face as I handed her the cactuar. I gave in upon the sight of her smile. She has wrecked me completely.

—

It had begun as a simple know your enemy exercise, advised by Ravus. You needed to find their weaknesses, he’d said. You’d feel much better knowing what you were up against, he’d said.

He had been wrong.
Not only were you feeling less appropriate for Ignis than ever, but you were forced to face the fact that Ignis hadn’t been entirely truthful in his summary of her. Like you, she had grown up on a farm, sure, that much was true. But to compare the small wheat farm you were raised on to her family’s grand chocobo farm was wildly unfair. She was the billionaire heiress to the largest triple crown chocobo raising family in Lucis. You didn’t know how you could compete with that.

You scrutinized the picture of her you saw during your dirty research online. She really did look plain and wholesome, even in the best pictures. It gave off this very *down to earth* vibe that you resented. You were poor and oftentimes shallow. She was a better person than you all around, you thought. She was Ignis’ friend, and one day soon, he would realize he could be happier with her than —

You shut your laptop and sighed. Thoughts like this were always going to be a problem, weren’t they?

Getting up from your desk, you walked over to the small box you’d left on your bed. Opening it, you peered down at the gold pen with trepidation. You’d put it out of your mind ever since you’d ordered it, but now it was here. You couldn’t ignore it when it was right in front of you and took up actual, physical space.

You picked it up, eyeing the Scientia crest etched into one side of it. Small and understated. You’d chosen white gold because yellow was so obnoxious. Second thoughts spilled into your mind. Should you have gotten yellow gold? Would he hate it? Putting it back, you bit back a sigh. This had been such a bad idea. The worst idea.

“Papa-gâteau,” you called, leaving your room with the box in hand. “Help me.”

Ravus didn’t stop the conversation he was having with the squire, ignoring you until the end. She smiled at you and walked off to do whatever it was he had ordered. When Ravus turned to you, his gaze went down to the box.

“I see it came.”

You lifted it up, eyes wide. “Yes. Why did I do this? How could you let me?”

His expression remained impassive, and he crossed his arms. “I don’t presume to order you about. If you’ve such strong doubts, send it back.”

Fingers curling around the edges of the box, you drew it closer to yourself and shook your head. “No.”

“Then, what is the problem *now*?”

“What if he says no?”

You must look pitiful because his expression softened almost imperceptibly. It had taken you a long time to learn how to read him, but you noticed.

“If he rejects you, I’ll be furious.”

A small smile made its way to your face. “Because you care about me?”

“Because it means I’ve wasted all this time helping you,” he said, his expression hardening again.

“Right.” You nodded, your smile growing. “And because you care about me.”
His lip curled downward in a corner. “You’re pushing it, ma crevette.”

—it’s a wonder she spends her time with me. She’s had many and experienced much. I’ve yet to determine just how I’ve caught her fancy. Trying to figure this out is moot as she’s already stolen my attention in equal measure.

—

Shivering and cold, standing in the stables in the middle of the night, you watched Petit Argent’s egg hatch. It had been one of your more restless evenings so, despite the biting cold, you’d come out to pass the time by checking on the situation. And maybe spill your guts out to Ravus’ chocobo. She was a good listener and didn’t make you face your problems like your therapist did. Sometimes you just needed to vent without constructive guidance clouding your thoughts.

The chocobo began to pace her stall halfway through your long string of complaints. You peered down at the egg, startled to actually see movement as the shell cracked.

“Holy shit.” You ran out of the stables, then thought better of it and returned inside. Waking Ravus would only upset him. Besides, you weren’t even sure where his room was.

The process was slow but fascinating, and you wished you could tell someone. Prompto would be at work right now. It was the weekend, the busiest time for him. You decided to call anyway, just in case you caught him on his time off. Using the video option —what’s the point if he couldn’t see the egg hatching— you used the view of your face on the screen to smooth down your hair.

When Prompto didn’t answer, you called Ignis next. He was even less likely to answer, but you felt this justified a video call. Plus, you just really wanted to see him. You nearly screamed when he answered, his face appearing on the screen.

“Hello, darling.” His expression was curious, and he had a little smile. “I love these surprise calls.”

You smoothed down your hair again. “It’s not a bad time?”

He shook his head. “I’m merely surprised as to why you aren’t resting. Isn’t it rather late there?”

You rolled our eyes. “I couldn’t sleep so I got out of bed and came outside to think.”

His smile grew, and he rested his chin in a hand. You could tell by the background that he was in his office. You’d probably interrupted his work, but he didn’t seem at all bothered.

“Are those spectacles new?” he asked, tilting his head a little.

Eyes widening, you touched the glasses on your face. You had completely forgotten you were wearing them. You’d taken to only wearing them around the manor. They were much less tiring on your eyes than contacts, but you still weren’t sure you looked good in them.

“Um, yeah.” You adjusted them even though they didn’t need to be adjusted, then dropped your hand because you’ve seen him do a million times. “Apparently, working in a dark studio with bright monitors is bad for the eyes.”

His smile only appeared to grow more. “You look stunning.”

You deadpanned, unsure if he was picking on you or not. “I’m in my pajamas, my hair is a mess,
“...and I’m wearing big, dorky glasses.”

He hummed, raising a brow. “And I have never been more attracted to you.”

With a frown, you changed the camera view so that he could see the egg. Only the egg was merely a mess on the floor now. A tiny chocobo was sitting among the remains, damp and looking about in curiosity.

“Well now,” Ignis said. “You didn’t mention this.”

“You were too busy picking on me,” you told him. “Now what should I name it?”

Ignis chuckled softly. “Shouldn’t you wait for the stablemaster?”

You looked in awe at the baby bird. “I don’t know where he stays. It’s like four in the morning. Nobody is up but me and the guards.”

Ignis looked off screen for a moment, then asked, “What names have you thought of thus far?”

“None,” you admitted. You hadn’t expected it to hatch while you were still in Tenebrae. There were still three weeks left on the extremely inaccurate egg hatching countdown, and you would be back in Insomnia in just over two.

You changed the view on your phone again to carry the conversation with him more comfortably. The baby chocobo wasn’t going anywhere, it seemed. Petit Argent was blocking it from view right now, anyway.

“I was thinking about Moonbeam,” you said, a little embarrassed by it. “Because Ravus said it’ll probably be pure white. What do you think?”

He hummed thoughtfully. “I like it, but would you consider... Kwehvin?”

You fought a smile, touching your glasses. “Maybe. Any other ideas?”

“Well, if you must egg me on,” he said. “I believe I have a few more tucked away, under a wing. Be warned, they may ruffle your feathers.”

“Ignis...” You let the smile overtake your face. “I love you.”

His eyes lit up behind his glasses. As his amusement softened, his gaze sent warmth through you despite the distance. “I love you, too.”

—

_Sometimes she hurts me, and I think she enjoys it._

—

Prompto sighed heavily on the line. You were only a week off from hugging him again, and the dramatics he’d displayed during this entire conversation were only making you want to get home sooner so you could do just that.

You had been waiting in the large parlor for Ravus to arrive and teach you more on the piano when Prompto called. Now you were sitting on the piano bench next to the prince, ignoring his impatient looks while Prompto ranted his worries into your ear.
Gladio, school, his future. He worried about it all. He missed Noct on top of missing you, and was apparently comparing himself to both of you on a constant basis in terms of success in love and life, which only made him worry for his future more. For the first time since befriending him, you were uncomfortable with a question he was posing for you. What did you think love was?

“You know you’re asking the wrong person, dude,” you said, fingers on your free hand playing with a few piano keys. “I know I love you, and you love chocobos, and chocobos love greens. There are layers, and I don’t get most of them.”

“How deep,” Ravus spoke up. It was the first thing he’d said since arriving.

You rolled your eyes. “I didn’t ask for your input.”

Prompto grew quiet, as he often did when he realized Ravus was near. He was really intimidated by the man, but you didn’t see why. Because his question was one you’d thought about a lot recently, you decided to tell Prompto your closest guess on what love was.

“It’s that one scene in Cum Fast, Die Hung where one of the leads is getting fucked by the antagonist.” Next to you, Ravus’ hands stilled on the keys. You don’t let the way he tensed bother you. This was a thought you’d ran through your mind countless times, and if anyone understood, it would be Prompto. Ravus’ discomfort was just collateral damage.

“So he’s like, going really hard and choking her, but then her body and legs begin to shake from this insane orgasm. So he slows down and lets her ride it out, and that makes him come, too. So they’re coming together, and he loosens his grip on her neck so he can touch her face. And the way their foreheads touch while they look into each other’s eyes… like that. That’s love. Probably.”

Prompto remained quiet, giving you a moment to look over at Ravus. He was peering down at his hands on the piano, brows drawn together. You hoped you hadn’t actually upset the man with your conversation, but no one had asked him to butt in.

“So love…” Prompto said, catching your attention. “Love is something real and surprising that just kinda happens to you? Like, life can be really fake like porn, but love is the um, the real stuff?”

You were trying to say that love was a simultaneous orgasm that you could randomly have with another person during sex if you were really lucky, but his interpretation was better. “Yeah, exactly.”

He snickered a little. “I get it now. I’m just really confused about a lot of stuff.”

You pressed down a key, holding it for a second before letting go. “Isn’t everyone, though?”

When you went to press another key, Ravus stopped you with a hand on yours. He held out his other hand, palm up as if wanting something. He was still frowning, displeased as always.

Holding the phone away from your ear, you hissed, “What?”

Without answering, he took the phone and spoke to Prompto. “Argentum, would you be interested in my opinion on this subject?”

You could hear Prompto sputtering on the phone but couldn’t make out any words. You had a feeling very few actual words were being said anyway. Ravus was a cynic, similar to you, so you pulled your phone out of his hand before he could crush Prompto with any harsh words of wisdom.

“I think I have to go, Prom,” you said, elbowing Ravus. “He’s being bitchy because we’re supposed to be doing something productive right now.”
Prompto let out a short laugh. “Right. Dad-cake scares me. Have fun.”

Phone tucked away moments later, you sent Ravus your most scathing look. It was incredibly weak compared to his, but you tilted your chin up as if you refused to let him intimidate you. “Be nice to my other friends.”

He rolled his eyes, saying nothing as he set you off in the piano lesson. It was the last one you’d have together. You almost had the piece down perfectly. Another checkbox on the list of requirements for a suitable courtship partner. A list of expectations that you were slowly working on but truly hoped you didn’t need to meet.

I am deeply in love with a person who doesn’t want to be loved.

“I decided on Moonbeam,” you said, tossing clothes into a large suitcase. The look Ignis was giving you from the screen of your laptop told you he didn’t approve of your packing tactics. You were leaving tomorrow, and instead of sleeping, Ignis was keeping you company while you got ready. You suspected he might be a little excited about your return, making it hard for him to get a good night’s rest. You knew you were anxious to get back, at least.

Keeping quiet on the subject of your packing style, he looked off screen at something and smiled. “I had a feeling you’d stick with that. Which is unfortunate because I spoke to my friend about this; she suggested some very interesting names, specifically for a white chocobo.”

You frowned, throwing your weight into the suitcase so you could get it closed properly. “Oh, really?”

Jealousy hadn’t been something you experienced much until these past several weeks. It wasn’t something that bothered you, normally, and you hated that it was rearing its ugly head now. Why was Ignis sharing your private conversations with this woman? Why did he bring her up so often in the first place? It seemed like she came up in every phone call you had since he’d admitted to seeing other people.

“I bet she knows a lot about chocobo names since her family raises them,” you said, looking up from fighting with the zipper. Ignis’ smile had waned.

“Oh, so you know who she is.”

“Um, yeah. Prompto told me,” you lied, finally getting it closed. You looked at the suitcase in triumph, then turned to Ignis’ face on your laptop screen. “I heard she she’s a pretty hot Insomnian delicacy.”

Ignis blinked slowly. “What a crass way to speak of a person.”

You shrugged, picking up more things to pack away. “My boss said it. He gets fucked up and tells me stupid things all the time so what does he know?”

Ignis frowned, and you saw him look off screen again. Stifling a sigh, you emptied out your desk. You didn’t know when you’d accumulated so much, but you didn’t remember arriving to Tenebrae with this much junk.

“I can’t say how happy I am that you’re coming home,” he said, making you pause to look at him. “I
was relieved when you told me you turned down the permanent position there. A place like that is hardly good for anyone in recovery.”

He had a point, but all the positivity and care you received at the manor counteracted a lot of the nonsense you dealt with at work. The entertainment industry was full of people just like the Producer, and you knew you’d have to become jaded by it all if you wanted to make it very far. But Ignis was only thinking about your mental well being, and you couldn’t fault him for that.

“I’m glad to be coming home, too.” You didn’t voice the worries that tinted your excitement. The reasonable worry that he’d want to introduce you to his friend. The absurd worry that you’d somehow become exactly like the Producer someday. Alone, manipulative, and sad.

—

Noct asked me why I was still in the Citadel while she made her way to Galdin Quay. I took that as permission to temporarily abandon my station. I’ve never driven so far so quickly.

The salty air leaves a sour taste in my mouth. The port’s dock is creaky beneath my feet. I’ve just missed her. My timing, as it always seems to be, was off. She’s left me for Tenebrae. Will I ever appear at the right moment?

—

Prompto and Gladio were going to pick you up in Galdin Quay. To save yourself the pain of being a third wheel, you suggested that the squire make the trip with you. She was going to come to Lucis with Ravus less than a week later anyway, for the New Year’s Eve ball. He gave in to the idea fairly easily, and you realized why as you crossed the sea with her on the ferry.

Green in the face, she held onto everything she touched for dear life, including a painful grip on your arm. “Are we there yet?”

You looked at the approaching port, rubbing her back gently. “Almost. I thought you’ve traveled before.”

“I have, but not this far. I’ve never been to Lucis.” She held a hand over her mouth for a moment, squeezing her eyes shut. With a small sigh, she dropped her hand a moment later. “The sea is so far and so long. I hate it.”

“It’s gonna be okay,” you said, trying to comfort her. You wished her hold on your arm would loosen just a little. “We’re minutes away from land.”

When you looked over the railing at the port again, you noticed a figure, tall and singular on the dock. Was that—? As the ferry grew even closer to Galdin Quay, you realized that it was. Prompto and Gladio weren’t the ones waiting for you, it was Ignis standing in wait.

You waved, and he waved back. A deeper excitement you’d been holding back overtook your anxiety. He was always keeping his promises. He was going to be the first person to welcome you home, and you loved him for it.

Helping the squire disembark the ferry was an ordeal. By the time you were faced with Ignis, you’d had to calm her down three different times from throwing up all of her ginger tea on you.

“You’re not alone,” Ignis said, looking between you and the squire. He had flowers in his hand, something you were strikingly touched by.
“I thought Prompto and Gladio were picking me up,” you defended, looking at the squire as she finally seemed to mellow out. Then you looked at the flowers, giving him a smile. “Those are beautiful.”

He held them out. “They’re for you.”

Feeling shy because you couldn’t believe this moment was finally happening, you elbowed the squire. “Hear that? He brought you a welcome to Lucis bouquet.”

Ignis blinked as you took them out of his hand, giving them to the squire. She beamed, eyes growing wide.

“Oh! Merci!” She buried her face in them, and you grinned harder. If that didn’t exacerbate any allergies, the girl was invincible.

Ignis touched the wrist of a glove. “Yes, well. I’m happy to have pleased. I have something to attend to so, if you don’t mind waiting for a moment—”

You stopped him before he could turn away, catching him by the arm. He froze, easing as you pulled him into a hug. You’d wanted to do that from the moment you’d disembarked. He was warm, firm, and smelled like coffee. He pulled you close, hugging you to his chest.

“Welcome home,” he said into your hair. He couldn't know just how right this felt, his words and his presence. You were home.

—

Sitting alone on the cold, dark beach with Ignis, you wondered where all of the sudden awkwardness had come from. It had become increasingly obvious that he might have planned a romantic evening for just the two of you, but with the surprise third party, the experience had become slanted. The bouquet, the private table for dinner, the rose petals you saw near the bed that you guessed he had missed when trying to clean up the room before bringing you and the squire inside— these were little signs that something was definitely afoot.

Yet things were off, not tense but weird in a way you couldn’t pin down. Luckily, the squire was tired from travel and had went to bed early so you were given time alone together while she rested. If only it wasn’t so awkward.

“Do you have any goals for the new year?”

That was a question you’d gotten a lot recently, and you expected to receive it even more at the New Year’s Eve ball. So Ignis was resorting to small talk. With him sitting so near, you’d thought he’d have something more meaningful in mind. You gave him a side glance, meeting his eyes in the dim moonlight.

“Yeah,” you said. “I’m gonna get super into sports. Probably professional wrestling.”

His brows arched. “Oh?”

You nodded, giving him a smile. “Totally. I think I’ll be the Cactuar Queen. Instead of having a normal walking entrance, all the lights will go out for a moment, then I’d be in the ring when they came back on. Wearing a green jumpsuit or something and standing perfectly still like a cactuar. But with a crown on my head probably.”

His mouth parted a little, confusion making his eyebrows furrow just so. “You mean to participate,
not as a spectator?”

“For sure.” You nodded. If he was going to come at you with small talk on your first private
conversation in person, you wanted it to be at least a little interesting. “You should, too. Your alias
could be like, Ignis “The Business” Scientia. Walk into the ring with a briefcase full of money and
drop kick a guy for ruining your business deal.”

The corners of his mouth twitched into a near smile, and he looked away, out at the ocean. “The
championship belt would look atrocious with my Crownguard attire. I’d never get to wear it once I
won.”

“If you won,” you said, smile growing. He was playing along. Gods, you’d missed him. “And you
could just display it in your office. I bet you’d never get shit from the Council after that. They’d be
too afraid you’d suplex them into your desk.”

The waves crashed, high tide bringing the water only inches from your feet. Ignis shifted, probably
concerned about the approaching waves as they slowly inched closer. His voice, however, held none
of his obvious worry. Soft and amused, he said, “It’s heartening to see you haven’t changed at all.”

Another shrug, and you realized you’d been watching him for a while. So you looked away, too,
hands meeting each other as your arms wrapped around your bent knees. “Not everything’s the
same.”

He hummed in agreement. “You proved at dinner that it took the Oracle to endear proper table
manners in you.”

“Hilarious.” Without thinking, you shoved him. He didn’t budge, as always, and reached up to grab
your offending hand. The moment his gloved hand encircled yours, you tensed. Your eyes locked
for several beats. Then he let go, feigning that he had to adjust one of his cuffs.

You drew your hand back, curling it into a gentle fist. Clearing your throat, you asked, “What are
your goals for the new year?”

The words seemed to tumble out of his mouth as he thought them. “I’m, ah, going to improvise, I
suppose.”

This wasn’t like him. This wasn’t like you. This chaotic aura of awkwardness needed to go away.
You sent him subtle glances, trying not to remind yourself that your first kiss had happened only
meters away. That felt like a lifetime ago. You were practically different people now, sitting on the
same beach.

Somewhere in you remained that nervous girl who’d thought she was merely lusting after someone
she could never have. Channeling that old energy, you sent him another smile. “Since we’re alone…
you wanna make out?”

Brows arching over his glasses, he sent a subtle glance over his shoulder for anyone nearby, but the
beach was empty. “Best not,” he said even as one of his hands took yours, drawing you closer.
“We’re in a public space.”

You tilted your head upward, meeting his eyes behind his moonlit glasses. “Yeah, it’d be very
inappropriate.” Flush to his chest, his arm curling around your waist, you felt a thrill of anticipation.

As he leaned down to meet you, a call of your name made you draw back sharply. Running out of
the car lot and onto the beach, the squire kept repeating your name with an urgency that startled you.
You withdrew from Ignis to stand up when she reached you. “What is it?”

“Look!” She held out a piece of jewelry on her wrist.

“I thought you were in bed,” you said, letting annoyance color your words. She’d disrupted you to show off a bracelet. Because of course she did.

“I was, but I got hungry.” She either didn’t notice your annoyance or didn’t care. “Then, I met a man, and he gave me this. Everyone here is so nice!”

Looking from her to Ignis, who’d stood up and was dusting the sand from his trousers, you frowned. There were some real creeps in the world. You were fairly certain the squire could beat up anyone trying to take advantage of her, but gifts and flattery were exactly the type of thing that worked on people who weren’t used to attention.

Whatever the motivation of this stranger who’d given her the bracelet, you weren’t sure you could leave her alone in the resort if she was just accepting gifts from and talking to people she didn’t know. You sent Ignis longing glances on your walk back to the resort, resigning yourself to hold off on your want for him with no small amount of chagrin.

You could be patient. You had plans, anyway. Hopefully there wouldn’t be anymore unfortunate mishaps, and you could pass the squire off to Ravus as soon as he arrived. That way you’d have Ignis swooning into your arms without interruption.

Chapter End Notes

Just imagine a montage of you walking in and out of a dressing room in different outfits. Ravus shakes his head at all of them until you come out looking Perfect. Instead of giving you the “okay” head nod, he picks you up like a polearm and fucking bunts you into Ignis’ waiting arms.

Also, this is for sure a segue into my wrestling AU… if only.

It’s almost over, guys. If you haven’t already left, just one more part to go. <3 thanks for reading!
Congratulations, liars!

Chapter Summary

You know who you are, and you know who you want.

Chapter Notes

Just like this story as a whole, this final part became longer than planned. I unloaded a lot of little meaningless scenes that I thought suited Ignis and Reader’s dynamic. This could’ve been two chapters, but I gave you a big block of text instead because I’m stubborn and wanted to stick to the set chapter amount. I hope it doesn’t wreck the flow too much.

Get ready for gratuitous friendship, obvious misunderstandings, vague time skips, a brief stocking kink scene, and maybe some fluff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You’d thought the excitement of once again being within the confines of the Wall would keep you awake, but somewhere between sending glances to the squire in the back, making attempts at holding Ignis’ hand before chickening out each time, and playing every game you had on your phone, you fell asleep on the ride north.

When you were woken up, it was jarring. You’d been ripped from that horrible sweet spot between a nap and full on rest, climbing out of the vehicle slightly disoriented. Hammerhead was just as laid back as you remembered. A few people milling about and that hot mechanic standing nearby, talking to an obvious local.

You moved your tongue around your mouth to get rid of the dry feeling of sleep, wiping at your eyes. A heavy feeling overcame your body, bogging down your mind. “Iggy, I feel like death.”

Ignis rounded the car and shut the door behind you when he realized you weren’t going to do it. “Perhaps you need a meal.”

The squire came to your side, touching your arm and asking, “Who is that?”

She pointed at the mechanic. You couldn’t remember her name. “Uh. Mechanic.”

Looking doubtful, she pointed at someone else. “What about him?”

Someone needed to tell her it wasn’t cool to openly point at people. You pushed her hand down, looking at the guy she meant. He was leaned against a motorcycle, appearing as if he’d just driven into the rest stop. His leather jacket was cool, but you couldn’t make out any of his features because he wore a helmet.

“I have no idea,” you sighed. “Dude, all Lucians don’t just know each other. That’s like asking if
You have tea with the Oracle every… Y’know what, my country is way bigger than yours, okay?”

You had much more important things to do than stand around pointing at strangers. Like getting some food and catching up on months of flirting with Ignis that you’d missed out on. Speaking of which.

Ignis tilted his head toward the diner. “Are you hungry?”

You nodded, walking over to him. “Yeah, for you.”

Slowly, a small smile came to his face along with the faintest blush, and he lifted a hand to grab yours. The moment he opened his mouth to say something, you heard your name being called by someone behind you. Looking back, you watched the stranger next to the motorcycle pull off their helmet, revealing a messy head of blond hair. His bright smile came next as he walked toward you.

“Prompto!” You pulled your hand out of Ignis’ grip and ran to meet your best friend in a hug, the helmet hitting the ground with a clunk as he dropped it to pull you close. His chuckle reverberated from his chest to your own, the sound sweet to your ears. Drawing back, you grinned at him. “Dude, you have a motorcycle?”

He scratched his nose, shrugging. “Yeah, kinda.”

Touching the jacket, you laughed. “And you’re wearing sleeves. This is so weird.”

“It’s cold!” He defended, knocking your hand away before hugging you again. “I’m so glad you’re back.”

You looked over his shoulder, laughing into the hug. “Is Gladio here, too? Are you guys bikers now? This is what happens when I leave. You start a gang without me.”

“Nope, just me,” he sighed, letting you go again. He held you at arm’s length. His hair was a sweaty disaster, and you loved it. “When did you get hot?”

You blinked, recoiling slightly. “What?”

He dropped his hands to jab you in the side. “You’ve got squishy bits now. It’s cute.”

You blocked his hand, a blush rising to your face. This hadn’t been a concern of yours because Ignis either didn’t seem to care or was gentleman enough not to bring it up. Ravus had made some offhand comment once that it was just a sign of being healthier in general so you’d taken the slight weight gain in stride. You didn’t like Prompto’s assessment, though. Who knew what the hell he was going to say when he realized you wore glasses now, too.

“Hey,” the squire said in quiet Tenebraen as she came to your side. She kept looking between you and Prompto. “You said you didn’t know him.”

Prompto looked past you at the girl, confused, probably because of the language barrier she’d put up for some reason.

“He’s my best friend. Prompto.” You’d mentioned him more than once in Tenebrae. A lot, actually. Ravus probably knew more about Prompto than the blond would’ve been comfortable with.

His eyes went to you at the sound of his name. “Huh?”

The squire eyed him over, then looked away. “You never said he was so handsome.”
You stared at her for a minute before grinning. There must’ve been something about Prompto that had Tenebraen girls everywhere swooning. The women at Noct’s wedding had been the same way. You slapped her arm, ready to tell her to not even think about it. That he was too old for her and probably in love with someone already.

Ignis cleared his throat, interrupting you before you could get the first word out. “We mustn’t tarry. Shall we eat before we are on our way?”

Looking his way, you saw that he still held the smile from earlier. You shared the look, ushering the squire away from Prompto who needed to have an important conversation with the mechanic before joining you.

—

Looking at the motorcycle out the window, you asked, “Can I drive it?”

“That’s a terrible idea,” Ignis said from the other side of the booth. He was elbow to elbow with Prompto who everyone was waiting on to finish. The squire seemed to think even the way he scarfed down his fries was fascinating. Astrals help the poor girl.

“Oh, well, if that’s what Iggy says,” Prompto said, pulling the key from a pocket and sliding it across the table to you.

With a wide grin, you snatched it up. Your stomach was full and your grogginess gone. “Wanna ride with me? Where should I go?”

“The nearest haven shouldn’t be too far,” Prompto reasoned. You wondered how he knew that, then again, he had been obsessively looking at maps for his trip for the last few months even though said trip was over half a year away.

“You can’t be serious,” Ignis spoke up with a look of total alarm. “We haven’t the time, and it’s hardly safe.”

Sliding out of your seat, you made your way to the exit. “It’ll be five minutes, and I’ll be fine!”

Prompto followed you out, leaving behind the rest of his meal to quickly show you how everything worked.

“The accelerator is kinda wonky right now. I’m still trying to figure it out,” he explained. “So don’t go too hard on it unless you wanna be in Lestallum in like an hour.”

He sat down behind you as you started it up, the roar of the engine sounding a little off but overall satisfying.

“Hey, Prompto, weren't you just tellin’ me that this bad boy needed a little work before it was ready for the road?” The mechanic walked over to you, sending you both a smile as she slapped a hand on the bike.

Prompto sputtered a little, shifting his weight behind you. “C-Cindy, uh, yeah, I did. But a short ride shouldn’t be a big deal.”

She crossed her arms, her hip cocked. “You willin’ to risk your friend’s health over that?”

You felt Prompto looking at you, but you were busy looking at the bare skin between her very long socks and her very short shorts. She was so close, you could see a few smudges of grease on her
Emerging from the diner, Ignis strode toward you, ripping your attention away from the distraction. You grabbed Prompto’s helmet from where it hang at the handlebars and shoved it on your head. When Ignis stood about a yard away, you pushed the kickstand up, called out “Later, bitches!” and throttled it. Prompto yelped, wrapping his arms around your waist as you shot out of Hammerhead and onto the road.

It was fast. It was very fast. Too fast. Prompto screeched from behind you as if he’d never ridden this thing before. He quieted after you’d stabilized yourself, following the fairly straight path of the road. You were tempted to look back to see if Ignis had followed in his car, but you were too fearful of veering off and wrecking.

“Slow down and turn here!” Prompto told you eventually, pointing toward a dirt road you were approaching. You did as he said, going around a long bend in the path and stopping in what looked like another small rest area. Your legs shook, and Prompto helped steady the bike while you kicked the stand down.

Breathing hard, you both got off and looked at each other. Then he whooped, hitting you on the arm. “We didn’t blow up!”

His words weren’t inspiring great confidence in you to get back on it for the ride back to Hammerhead so you looked around with mild interest. “Where are we?”

“A hunter outpost,” Prompto said, bending to inspect the bike. “I delivered something to this place yesterday for Cindy. Nice guys.”

“Huh.” You wondered what constituted nice when it came to hunters. You also vaguely wondered if your dad was here. With a quick glance around, you didn’t find yourself as entranced with the idea of meeting him as you used to be. Maybe he’d been one of the nice hunters Prompto had met. That thought alone satisfied you enough.

Prompto needed a moment to check things over on the motorcycle so you scuffed at the dirt and stood awkwardly waiting. As Prompto did his thing, you wondered what was happening between him and Gladio that would have him out here helping Cindy. When you looked at a nearby road sign, you paused in your thoughts. Oh, Gladio. You couldn’t wait to see him.

**You:** Here’s what I’m going to do to your dad when I get back.

You snapped a picture of the sign, a bright yellow with black lettering, *speed hump*. He responded within seconds, taking you by surprise.

**Gladio:** ya right, youre all talk, youd faint if he talked to you

**You:** I’d be sitting on his face in five minutes or less.

**Gladio:** ok juicy I’ll tell him you wanna meet him at the new years ball, he’ll love to meet the chick who shot the duke

Your eyes bulged, and you looked over at Prompto, who was too busy finagling the bike to notice.

**You:** I’ll rock my pussy out that night. Better start calling me mommy.

**Gladio:** youre on your way to gettin your ass kicked
You: On my way to your dad with legs wide open. (ienia°)

Gladio: welcome back juicy, can’t wait for you to leave again already

When you got back onto the motorcycle, Prompto took the lead. He handled it better on the way back, taking it slower. By the time you returned, Ignis looked entirely done, arms crossed and expression blank. You didn’t have time to think about his annoyance when Cindy approached you.

“You did a whole lot better than I expected,” she said with a smile. She had this habit, you’d noticed in the short time you’d been at the rest stop, of leaning forward as she spoke. It was a very nice view. “I’ll be sure to soup this baby up for Prompto so you can take it out again, alright?”

Swallowing, you nodded.

As Cindy walked away, you were reminded that you hadn’t been intimately touched since the autumn festival. There had been nothing remotely sexy about life in the manor. You sent Prompto a meaningful look that he seemed to understand.

“I know right?” He had a small blush dusting his cheeks. “She’s a goddess.”

You wouldn’t go so far to say that, but you could definitely see what he was getting at. You watched her lean over Ignis’ car to clean some dirt from the windshield.

Prompto snickered as he shoved you a little. “Don’t even think about it, dude. I saw her first.”

Rolling your eyes, you asked, “What about Gladio?”

His smile faltered, but his blush grew in intensity. “I saw him first, too.”

—

Prompto left his bike in Hammerhead for Cindy to look after. Always calling shotgun, he laughed at you over his shoulder as you kicked the back of his seat.

“You could perhaps not?” Ignis said, sounding miffed.

You stuck out your tongue when meeting his eyes in the rear view mirror. The entire ride to Insomnia was much more boisterous than the first leg of the trip. Prompto kept turning around to carry on silly conversations, and the squire stared at him with adoration. Barf. You ignored most of it and watched the desert pass by in long stretches, the terrain growing rockier in the distance the closer you got to the Wall.

Tired from travel and ready to drop once inside the city, you helped the others carry in your luggage to Prompto’s apartment by bringing up the lightest one, watching Prompto’s eyes bulge as he witnessed the squire easily pick up something much heavier than what he was struggling with. If you noticed Ignis’ hand lingering on your lower back as he let you go ahead of him, you said nothing. The other two did, though.

“Oooh,” the squire cooed, standing behind Prompto as he unlocked his door. She made kissy noises until you pushed your hand into her face.

“I’m too tired for your shit,” you groaned, shoving her into the apartment after Prompto, who snickered and joined her in the teasing. You hadn’t so much as looked at Ignis in a sexy way since Hammerhead so this was entirely uncalled for.
By the time you were all standing around in Prompto’s living room, it was midnight thirty and you were somehow less tired now than you had been during the entire trip.

“I’ll take you to the Citadel,” Ignis told the squire. “They’ll have a room for you.”

You rose a hand. “Why not stay for the night? It’s super late.”

Ignis checked the time. The golden face of his pocket watch caught your eye as it always did, and you wondered how it would look in his pocket next to the pen you’d commissioned. Gods, you hoped he accepted it.

“There should be accommodations even at this hour,” he said, putting the watch away. His hair had flattened a little in your travels, strands falling over his forehead. Your raised hand lifted higher of its own accord, and you straightened it out as he spoke. “It would be in our best…”

You dropped your hand, smiling at him. It waned when you realized he wasn’t returning the look. Eyes on yours, mouth parted on a sentence he didn’t finish, he paused. Were you being too familiar? Things were still a little awkward, but he’d described over the phone all the soft parts of you that he wanted to kiss just a week before. So really, this small gesture shouldn’t have been affecting him so much.

“Are you stayin’ or not?” Prompto yawned. He stretched and knocked one of your suitcases with his shoe. He didn’t have a sofa or spare bed because his previous roommate had taken them when moving out. So the place was pretty bare save for the gigantic tv.

Asking Ignis to stay was unreasonable, but you hadn’t gotten a single moment alone yet. You were so impatient that sleeping on the floor together sounded nice.

Ignis looked from you to Prompto to the squire. She seemed very on board with staying. There went another reason why asking Ignis to stay was a bad idea. It wasn’t like you’d be able to spend a moment together when you’d probably have to keep the squire from casually assaulting your best friend all night.

Biting back disappointment at Ignis shaking his head, you followed him as he ushered the squire toward the door. She waffled in the hallway while you hugged Ignis, keeping him from leaving for just a bit longer. He was no doubt tired after driving all the way from Galdin, and you really should’ve just let him go by now.

But he let you sigh into his chest and held you for long enough that Prompto groaned.

“C’mon already!”

You let go of Ignis and gave him a tired smile. “See you soon?”

He brushed knuckles against your cheek, tucking hair behind your ear. You hadn’t thought that your own hair might’ve been just as flat as his was becoming. When he dropped his hand away, you resisted the urge to grab it.

“Of course,” he said. “Rest well. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Prompto reached past you to shut the door after they left. You pouted at him, and he pretended to feel sorry for you, leading you to his room with promises of late night catching up. He was asleep in less than an hour, his arm slung over you carelessly. His bed wasn’t as comfortable as the one you’d had in Fenestala manor. You realized, with an uncomfortable amount of embarrassment at yourself, that you’d gotten really spoiled this past year.
Pulling your phone from Prompto's cluttered nightstand, you blinked against the brightness of it as you typed out a message.

**You:** Are you awake?

**Ignis:** I am, but you shouldn't be.

**You:** I'm so tired, yet I can't sleep.

**Ignis:** I know precisely what you mean.

**You:** What are you doing?

**Ignis:** Getting ready for bed.

**You:** What are you wearing?

**Ignis:** You are full of questions tonight.

**You:** So you're naked, then.

**Ignis:** Perhaps.

**You:** :O

**You:** Show me.

**You:** I wish to see the forbidden nudes.

**Ignis:** We both need rest. Goodnight.

**You:** Fine. I love you.

Falling asleep before he responded, you weren’t disappointed until morning when you noticed that he never did.

---

Breakfast was a hastily made waffle that you choked down dry as you rushed across the city to pick up the holiday gift you’d bought and put on reserve for Mom. You were going to visit soon to celebrate your return and give her a run down of how to behave at a grand reception like the New Year’s Eve Ball. She was going as your date so she could meet everyone —she was especially curious about Ravus— and you were fairly certain she was going to embarrass the shit out of you.

Picking up the gift, you reconsidered an idea that you’d been playing with on and off for weeks. You looked at the thread of messages between you and Ignis. He knew how hard it was for you to grind out words of love so it bothered you in no small amount that he had left you hanging. If it was an indication of his feelings having changed after seeing you in person again, you were worried.

So you made a hesitant choice.

**You:** I’m visiting my mom for the holiday tomorrow. I’m sure you’re busy but would you want to come with?

**You:** I just need a ride. I don’t want to take the bus.
You tacked on the last message to save yourself embarrassment just in case he rejected your offer.
His response came as you walked back into Prompto’s — and yours now, too, you reminded yourself — apartment with the gift and an armload of wrapping supplies. Your phone chimed in your pocket, but you ignored it in favor of dumping everything in your arms next to Prompto. He was sat on the floor of his living room, watching tv.

“Cup noodles for breakfast?” You flopped down next to him, digging your phone out. “Gladio’s rubbing off on you in more ways than one, huh.”

While Prompto sputtered, you read Ignis’ reply.

**Ignis:** It would be a pleasure.

**Ignis:** It’s sudden, but would you care to meet me for lunch?

You were glad he wasn’t turned off by your invitation, but the offer for lunch threw you off. Was it meant to be a date, or was he planning to tell you he didn’t love you anymore? You typed an affirmative, wanting any excuse to see him either way.

Thoughts of him saying that the feelings weren’t mutual anymore made your gift wrapping shoddy, and you spent the morning unloading everything onto Prompto —your plan to propose and the worries that came with it— while you taped garishly bright paper over presents for your friends. He made you hot cocoa, overloading it with marshmallows and sprinkles even though you’d argued with him over how you hated how needlessly cute that was.

He scratched his head, looking from the muted tv to you with a questioning glance. “You sure you wanna get that serious?”

Thinking on his question, you wrote Noct’s name on a tag and put it on a wrapped video game. Then you sighed and picked up the Li’l Malbuddy mug at your side. “The scary thing is, yeah, I totally do.”

Prompto actually laughed a little, picking up Noct’s gift. “They really helped you in Tenebrae, huh?”

You sipped from the mug, the warmth of the cocoa a deep comfort. “They fucked me up, Prom. I feel like I have something to lose now, and it sucks.”

He put down the present and patted your back. “You’ll be fine, dude. Iggy still has a huge boner for you, trust me.”

Giving him a flat look over the mug and fighting amusement, you were so happy to be with him again. Even if everything went to hell, you knew you’d never be completely alone.

—

Ignis wanted to meet at the same cafe where he’d first asked you to be his fake girlfriend. You thought that might’ve meant something, though you couldn’t be sure what. Just one block away in your walk there, you spotted a weird sight—a large cloud of balloons floating overhead. They were red, heart shaped, and numerous, and grazed the sides of the buildings as they rose. They blocked the sun overhead, dotting the sky and moving with the wind. You stopped to take a picture of the spectacle and were almost knocked over by someone running past.

“S-sorry!” They called, not stopping. The voice was familiar, but as you steadied yourself and looked back, you only caught a glimpse of them before they rounded a corner.
You watched the balloons disappear behind a building in that same direction. Poor person; no wonder they were running. It must’ve been their balloons on the loose. You didn’t think there was any chance they’d be getting those back.

Stepping into the cafe minutes later, you were confused to find the place almost empty. Only one barista stood behind the counter, not a server or patron in sight. Ignis stood facing away from you, phone to his ear. He turned at the sound of the door closing, brows rising over his glasses as if he were surprised to see you. Which was weird because he’d invited you to be here.

“Dulcis, it’s a lost cause,” he said. “We’ll discuss this careless mishap later.”

Your nerves eased slightly when he put his phone away and approached you. He was back in full form, looking like he hadn’t driven across Lucis just yesterday. You admired the fine suit, his broad shoulders, and every line of his face. Your attention was so caught taking him in that you didn’t realize he was speaking to you until he stopped, head tilting slightly as he stared at you.

“Oh, uh, sorry,” you said, warmth rising to your cheeks. “I was distracted thinking about— about all these balloons I just saw outside. It was crazy.”

He rose a brow. “Balloons?”

You nodded, following him to a table. “Yeah. They were heart shaped and romantic. Probably for some special thing but got loose because somebody almost ploughed me over chasing them down.”

Ignis’ expression changed, looking miffed almost as he sighed. “That’s unfortunate.”

Nodding again, you peered around the cafe. “So where is everybody?”

The soft music playing did nothing to make the atmosphere of the place just a tad unsettling. The barista nodded when you looked at him, and you smiled awkwardly before returning your gaze to Ignis.

“I bought the place out until two so that we could have the chance to catch up.” He rose a hand, and the barista began to do things behind the counter.

You grew excited by the small surprise of this. “We could’ve caught up even with people around.”

He smiled, and it made you smile. “I wanted to be able to savor your every word.”

—

While the barista served you coffee and a light lunch, you shared everything you hadn’t already told him about your experience in Tenebrae. When it came to asking about him, you kept away from any mention of his lady friend. It was easier that way, lest he decide today be the day he wanted you to meet her.

“I was just a vampire for halloween. I sent you a picture,” you said, rolling your eyes as he chuckled. “What are you even talking about?”

“You looked absolutely terrifying.” He stifled his laughter and took a drink of his coffee.

“That’s the point. Those guys at the manor take their spooky stuff very seriously.” You bit into a pastry, remembering the parties during that time. Even Ravus had dressed up, looking daemonic for an entire day. More daemonic than usual, at least.
Ignis put down his mug, a corner of his mouth curling with a smirk. “Perhaps I shouldn’t admit so much, but I had anticipated something less… modest from you.”

That made you grin. “Were you hoping for sexy vampire cleavage or something?”

He lifted his mug again, though it did nothing to hide the smirk that was still in place and the dust of pink on his cheeks. Had you disappointed him back then by sending him a truly scary picture instead of something sexy? The thought was amusing. Ignis really was just a man underneath the fancy suits and responsibility.

“You could’ve told me, y’know,” you said, nudging his leg with your foot under the table. “I would’ve loved to use the classic ‘I vant to suck your cock’ line.”

He drank his coffee, unphased by how loudly you’d said that in front of the barista. “I’m sure it would’ve been an unforgettable experience.”

The dry delivery of his words made you laugh. You picked at the crumbs left on your plate, grateful for this little date. The privacy wasn’t necessary, but you liked being able to talk with him without interruption. For an entire hour, you had his full attention, and he’d done that just for you.

“Thanks for this,” you said, meeting his eyes.

His face softened. “Of course. Though I must say I had ulterior motive in mind when inviting you here.”

Your smile waned slightly. Despite the caring look on his face, what he said only made worry spring forth. What other motives could he have for a date like this? He slid a hand into his jacket pocket, and you sat up straighter in your chair, watching him closely.

“I’ve given it a great deal of thought—” Ignis stopped abruptly when someone burst into the cafe. His gaze went past you, brows rising. You looked over your shoulder, finding his assistant panting in front of the door. She was hunched, hands on her knees as she breathed heavily.

“I’m sorry, sir. I wasn’t able to retrieve a single one of them.” She paused at the sight of you the moment she righted herself. “Oh darn.”

“Excuse me for a moment,” Ignis said quietly as he stood up from the table. “Dulcis, I told you not to fret over it.”

Facing forward to not seem like you were eavesdropping, you took that time to drink the rest of your coffee and play around idly on your phone.

Gladio: dads lookin forward to meeting ya

You rolled your eyes at the message, not humoring him with a reply. If you actually did meet the King’s Shield, you’d probably make a fool out of yourself just like you did with the Oracle and other powerful bodies. Gladio knew that, and this only served to rub it in.

“Take an early holiday,” Ignis told his assistant. “Go home to Galahd and spend time with your family.”

You couldn’t see her, but she sounded distressed. “A-are you firing me? Because I didn’t mean to —”

Ignis, on the other hand, was calm and firm. “No, but it’s become clear you need the time off. You
can return with the new year.”

“Lord Ignis, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to leave the doors open, but it was—”


The exchange was awkward to overhear, and you thought the barista felt the same way as you met eyes with him while he cleaned. When Ignis returned to the table, he didn’t sit down so you guessed your time together was up.

“Apologies for the interruption,” he said, offering you a hand up. You smiled at the gesture but didn’t take it.

Pulling on your coat and picking up your bag, you stood up and shook your head. “It’s fine. I have to go now anyway. Prompto and I are looking for a coffee table. He saw one online that somebody left for free on the streetside that we might try to pick up if we get there fast enough.”

This seemed to alarm Ignis slightly. “You’re not serious.”

You shrugged. “Yeah? I mean, not everyone can afford to just buy whatever they want for their two homes.” Although, you’d bet his quarters palace-side came fully furnished.

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, then nodded once as if accepting this fact. You didn’t care if he accepted it; if you and Prompto wanted someone’s discarded coffee table trash, you were going to get it.

“I suppose I must be on my way as well,” he said, leaving a generous payment for the barista before leading you toward the door. “Thank you for joining me.”

You nodded, wanting to thank him again for inviting you out. It would’ve been overkill, you knew, so you kept quiet and smiled at him. A part of you was relieved that he hadn’t been able to say what he’d been planning to tell you. His ulterior motive for getting you here would remain a mystery, and you were happy with that. For some reason, you had the feeling what he had to say wasn’t a going to be a good thing.

He hugged you goodbye, but you couldn’t gather the courage to tell him you loved him. You felt like he should know just how much you loved him by how strongly your chest had burned while in his arms. Maybe it was one-sided. Maybe the thrill of every moment you touched each other had always been one-sided. Who could ever know?

You just knew he was no longer saying he loved you.

—

The drive to Mom’s was quiet. Ignis’ pristine car had you sitting still, not wanting to muddy it with your shoes, which had gotten really dirty in your adventure with Prompto to retrieve the coffee table. In the backseat sat the gifts. There were already two when he’d picked you up, and they knocked against yours when Ignis took one of the sharper curves. You didn’t want to ask what they were or who they were for. Surely he wasn’t bringing gifts for Mom, right? He could be a suckup, but he didn’t even need to. Mom had, for whatever reason, decided she liked him the moment they’d met.

“Oh, come on,” you said, watching him pick up the presents from the back. “Mom doesn’t need more stuff.”

He looked down at the gifts in his hands, then met you with a small frown. “Wouldn’t it be
inappropriate to visit barehanded?”

You sighed, taking your own pair of gifts and knocking the door shut with a hip. “Whatever, Iggy. Just don’t complain when she doesn’t have a present for you.”

To your bewilderment, she did have one for him. When gifts were exchanged, you gave one to Mom and the other to him, something to keep him from feeling left out. It had only been an afterthought on your part, but he genuinely seemed to like the book of Tenebraen poetry.

As he stood in the kitchen, kitschy apron tied on, helping Mom make gingerbread men, you wished you’d brought the pen instead. You practically wanted to throw the token right at him when, amidst kneading dough, he actually tried to correct Mom on the recipe. You grinned at him from your place at the kitchen table, wondering if he would find it inappropriate to take him upstairs for a while.

—

Standing in the cold outside your apartment, you admired the way the nearby streetlamp lit up Ignis’ features warmly. His gift to you had been a bracelet, one you were tugging at nervously. Jewelry didn’t last very long with you, but you didn’t want to tell him that.

“I know we’ve just spent the day together,” he said, looking down at the way you gripped the bracelet. He gently took your hand to keep you from pulling on it too hard. “Would it be selfish of me to ask to see you tomorrow?”

Part of you was overjoyed because this was a lot of time you were getting to spend with him. Another part was wary that he was doing all of this to build up to some bad news. He just wanted to be friends. He wanted to be with that other woman. You couldn’t bear meeting her yet so the thought of him choosing her had you doubling down on your decision to at least try to ask for his hand before you lost him. These negative thoughts kept building up, and it only pushed you to want to be with him sooner.

“Sure.” You nodded, hand squeezing his. “I was hoping we could grab dinner tomorrow, actually. My treat.”

You were almost offended at how surprised he was by this offer. There wasn’t anything weird about you wanting to treat him. Would his delicate sensibilities be shaken to their core by someone actually taking care of him for once? If so, they needed a good shake, and you thought you had been doing a good job of that even before you’d fallen in love with him.

“I would be delighted, darling,” he said, pulling you by the hand so that you were close enough for him to wrap an arm around you. Before you could voice how you’d missed that pet name, he pressed a kiss to your forehead. Knees feeling stupidly weak over this, you looked up at him and hoped he would give you more than that. But he was already pulling away, giving your hand one last squeeze before he let go. “You should go inside before you catch cold.”

Gods, you wished you had a bed you could invite him up to. Getting it out of storage should’ve been top priority upon returning, but you were too distracted by this handsome nerd to get any actual progress done in moving into your new place. You waved before following his advice and heading inside. You climbed the cold stairwell, hand on your forehead.

You were going to propose to him so hard tomorrow.

—

“Dinner and a movie?” Prompto asked, standing in the doorway to the bathroom. “You mean the
most stereotypical date imaginable?"

You were working on the finishing touches of your makeup, face probably too close to the mirror in concentration. “Yeah, so? He’s a romantic. He’ll eat it up. I hope.”

A knock at the door stopped Prompto from responding but not from hitting your arm with the back of his hand and snickering before leaving the doorway to see who it was.

“Oh, hey, Iggy!” Prompto called down the hallway, just for you. “It might be a while. She’s using the bathroom right now.”

Staring at your reflection wryly, you felt like you could choke him. He was taking your plans to propose in such supportive stride, though. So you couldn’t really be annoyed for long. You left the bathroom and waved at both of them as you crossed the hall to your disastrous bedroom. The small box that held the pen sat in a pile of clothes that you’d pulled out of a suitcase. You picked up your bag and carefully put the box inside.

This was it. You could do it. You would do it.

—

The high end restaurant you had Ignis drive you to was one of the best in the city. You’d made reservations over two months in advance after Ravus had told you the proposal needed to be public. Ignis hummed thoughtfully at the choice and sent you the occasional curious glance that you purposely avoided.

You were really nervous. You hoped you’d dressed appropriately, and by the appreciative onceover Ignis had given you back in the apartment, you knew you’d done something right. The issue lay in how this just so wasn’t your thing.

You were a romantic in the sense that you’d imagined Ignis coming to Tenebrae to take you home because he couldn’t stand to be away from you any longer. The romance you longed for was to be coveted and worshipped and to do the same for him. It was self-centered, you were aware, and it didn’t help in any way in your endeavor to romance him in turn. What if you did everything the wrong way because you’re only thinking about yourself? He was already a hard enough person to impress.

All you had on your side was his love, but even that had become a doubt after the last couple of days. He’d yet to say it since seeing you again, and you wished you could take back the text you’d sleepily sent that first night in the city if only because you were a bit embarrassed that he hadn’t ever said he loved you back.

—

You hadn’t done your research on the restaurant; the five star rating and exclusivity of it enough had made you feel like you’d made the right decision. You regretted this lack of planning when you were faced with the minimalist menu, free of prices or descriptions of what the dishes actually contained. You had no idea what to order and planned to just copy whatever Ignis chose. Too bad he was a gentleman who waited for you to order first.

“Oh, this,” you said, pointing at something and hoping it was good.

Ignis smiled at your cluelessness. You drank your water, avoiding his gaze with a pout.

“I’m impressed you were able to obtain a reservation.” He sounded just as amused as he looked, and
you didn’t like it at all. It was like your effort had been wasted, and his surprise over it was winning out over the romance.

You put the glass down carefully and met his eyes, hoping your nerves weren’t as obvious to him as you felt they were. “I have my ways.”

He chuckled, and you tried not to pout again. You were in a fancy restaurant wearing fancy clothes, the least you could do was pretend you fit in.

Fitting in was hard. You didn’t know what exactly you were eating, and Ignis had already pointed out that you’d been using the wrong fork — how the hell could there be a *wrong* fork? — for the first half of dinner. You stabbed at what could’ve been a meatball or possibly a very stuffed and sturdy mushroom with your new fork, and it burst open, some sort of sauce hitting you in the face.

“Ah!” You let out a string of swears as you rubbed at your face with the cloth napkin in your lap. Whatever it was burned your eyes, and you felt them watering heavily to fight the intrusive substance. “I-I’m going to the bathroom.”

Expression concerned, Ignis nodded and stood from the table when you got up. Brushing off the overly polite gesture, you picked up your bag and walked briskly through the restaurant, not entirely sure where you were even going. You locked yourself inside once you found it, washing out your eyes and lamenting the ruin of your makeup. You’d worked so hard on it, too.

The burning didn’t let up, and you regretfully took out your contacts to relieve the pain. You sighed at your reflection and began to redo your face with what you’d brought in your bag. You didn’t want to leave Ignis alone for an extended amount of time, but you also didn’t want to propose something like courtship to him while looking like you’d been run over by a Garula.

To make matters worse, when you tried putting the contacts back in, the burning returned. Begrudgingly, you put on your glasses, frowning at the sight of yourself in the mirror. Ugly. All you saw was an ugly mess. Someone knocking at the door made you jump. You’d been in there for a good fifteen minutes. Good job. You were doing terribly at this so far.

You returned to the table with red eyes, dorky glasses, and a hastily made up face. You didn’t think you could’ve possibly felt less attractive. Ignis still seemed concerned, and with how long you’d been gone, you didn’t blame him.

Touching the brim of your glasses slightly, you said, “It got in my eyes. So I, uh… yeah.”

His look of concern softened into something close to a smile. “As long as you’re not in pain. Is there anything I can do for you?”

You didn’t want him to look at you right now, but that didn’t seem like a reasonable request so you shook your head. “I’m fine.”

Wishing there had been time to give yourself a pep talk before being kicked out of the restroom, you looked into your bag at the small box. Maybe you were going about it all wrong by trying to ask him in a way befitting him more so than yourself. You wanted to reach across the table and slide it into his pocket without even asking him. Or casually hand it to him when he asks for a pen to sign the check with. But Ignis seemed to always be prepared, and neither of these were remotely special ways of doing it. He deserved special.

“I want to ask you something,” he said, tearing you out of your thoughts.
You looked up from the pen box, a frown coming to your face involuntarily. What question could he have for you? For some reason, you kept imagining the worst. Can we remain friends even though I don’t love you anymore? You couldn’t let him do that before you proposed. That way he would really have to think. You didn’t know about his lady friend, but you were ready to commit. To him. And that could be enough to make him reconsider what might be left of his feelings for you.

“I have a question, too,” you said, watching with a bit of nervousness as he reached into an inner pocket of his jacket just like he had at the cafe days before. You scrambled for the box, opening the lid without taking it out of your bag. It was bulky. You thought it’d be more impressive to present the pen itself.

Except it wasn’t there. The box was empty.

“What the fuck?” You moved around the contents of your bag, breath growing heavy. You ignored Ignis as he asked what was wrong, trying to think about the last time you’d seen the pen. You hadn’t shown it to Prompto. Was it when you were packing? You’d taken it out of the box only a few times, back in Tenebrae. You’d put it on your desk in your bedchambers after testing it out to make sure it worked as fluidly as its creator had claimed it would. Then what?

“Oh, no.” You closed your bag and covered your face with your hands, smudging your glasses.

You’d left the pen in Tenebrae.

“Darling, please tell me what’s wrong,” Ignis said, beginning to sound impatient.

You peeked at him through your fingers. His expression was as concerned as ever. He’d removed his hand from his jacket, at least, so there was the hope of him not giving you bad news tonight. You let that thought give you minor relief, combating the more negative thoughts that currently plagued you.

Of course this would happen. You’d left the token you’d spent most of your savings on in a castle on the other side of Eos. Even if everything had gone well before, you were missing the most important component of this night. You dropped your hands, fighting another pout.

“I just wanted this to be romantic,” you sighed, straightening out your dress. There were wet spots across the front from when you’d quickly flushed out your eyes. You met his gaze awkwardly. “I’m sorry, Ignis.”

You had to remind yourself that he wasn’t a never ending well of kindness and patience even as his expression grew soft, his small smile returning. He was just a dude you were trying and failing to impress. It wasn’t fair how perfect he could be when you were one disaster after another.

“The night is still young,” he said. “I’ve been thoroughly charmed so far.”

You rolled your eyes. He would say that. He was really trying to butter you up before telling you he didn’t want to give your relationship another chance. As if that would soften the blow. What else could he possibly be trying to do by taking you out and spending time with you like this? It was obvious; he wanted to remain friends.

Ravus had been right. You would never be the center of Ignis’—

A sudden thought came to your mind. But of course. There was still a chance to do the proposal right another time. You just hoped Ravus hadn’t left Tenebrae for Lucis yet.
Ignis had suggested you stop by Prompto’s to change into something more comfortable and less stained for the movie. You were just grateful he didn’t expect you to wear a dress and heels into a movie theater.

“Did you do it?” was the first thing out of Prompto’s mouth, loud and excited. He wilted a little as you shook your head, lightly shoving past him to get to your room.

As you stripped out of the dress, you dialed Ravus’ number. You dug through your suitcases, finding a shirt by the time he answered.

“Why?”

It wasn’t biting, but you could almost feel his annoyance.

“Because I need you, Ravus.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I do! Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong.”

He sighed. “So you haven’t proposed yet?”

You stopped in the middle of putting on the shirt, one arm awkwardly tangled in the fabric. “No! I can’t because—”

“You left the token at the manor.”

Tugging the shirt on and resuming the prowl for pants, you let out a disbelieving breath. “You knew?”

“It was brought to my attention the day after you left.” He paused and it sounded like it was raining on his end. Or maybe he was somewhere near the ocean? “The poor souls tasked with cleaning your old bedchambers brought the pen to me.”

You tried to listen to the background noise, ignoring his words. “Are you still in Tenebrae?”

“No.”

You groaned. “Please tell me you have it with you.”

“I do,” he said, growing curt. “But you don’t need it. Just tell him your intentions. If you’re both so in love, you don’t need a token to prove it.”

“But I don’t know if we are. In love, I mean. I know I’m in love. Which is why I need you, Ravus.”

You shoved a leg into a pair of jeans. “When will you be in Insomnia?”

Another sigh. “Tomorrow night.”

“Good!” You jumped a little to get the pants on. Your butt really had become a little thicker while you’d been gone. “I’ll come up to wherever you’re staying, and you can give it to me.”

“I’ll be staying in the Citadel, and I’ll be busy.” His tone sounded resolute, but to you, it meant little. “I’ll have Amicitia or one of your other friends pass it along.”

“No, I don’t want him,” you complained, the irrational side of you coming out as it often did with Ravus. “I want you. I need you.”
“So you keep saying.” The background noise became clearer, and you thought he was probably on a ferry at the moment. “Look, ma crevette, you’re not my responsibility anymore.”

That made you crumble a little. “I know.”

There was a pause, long enough that you thought he might’ve hung up. “I’ll meet with you to hand over the token,” he suddenly said, giving in. “If Scientia so much as thinks about rejecting you, you’ll have to forgive me for killing him in a duel. I’d be doing both him and myself a favor as you are possibly the most tiresome person on the planet.”

You grinned, putting on your glasses and checking your reflection in the mirror. “I love you, too, papa-gâteau.”

He grunted disapprovingly and disconnected.

—

Opening your bedroom door, you were met with Ignis and Prompto standing at the end of the hall. They both looked your way when you emerged. Ignis’ brows were drawn, eyes inquisitive and oddly scrutinizing. Prompto’s were wide and searching. Neither look was one you understood.

Prompto sputtered a little, but Ignis shook his head, cutting him off. “We should be on our way.”

You nodded, still trying to figure out the looks you were getting. On the way out, Prompto took your arm in a light grip, stopping you in place.

“What was that phone call, dude?” he whispered.

“Huh?” You shook your head, not understanding.

Prompto sighed, letting you go and shifting his weight from one foot to the other as he crossed his arms. “Nothing. Talk later?”

You fought an eye roll. If he was fishing for juicy details, you were afraid you wouldn’t have much to share with him. Since the token was in transit, you weren’t going to be doing any proposing tonight. It had now just become an average date. Turning your gaze over to Ignis who waited at the door, you rethought that statement because Ignis was anything but average.

—

The theater was absurdly nice. Reclining chairs, full dinner menus, no trash on the floors. It was surreal. You didn’t recognize the movie you were going to watch, but took your reserved seat with a bucket of popcorn so large you already knew you wouldn’t finish. As the lights dimmed, your stomach lurch ed painfully. You stopped throwing popcorn into your mouth, pressing your hand to your middle as if that would help. The pain eased but didn’t disappear completely.

When the movie began, you were able to ignore the discomfort for the most part, letting yourself get enraptured into the plot like you so often did with films. It was an old classic that you’d never seen before.

Every other scene, you could see Ignis look over at you in your peripheral. You returned the gaze once, meeting his eyes in the dim light from the projector. His mouth was pulled into a small frown. If he didn’t like the movie, he shouldn’t have picked it. You remembered he claimed to like this old stuff, though, and reasoned that that couldn’t be the cause of his mild distress.
The pain in your stomach became greater toward the midpoint of the movie, an intermission appearing on the screen. The lights brightened a little, and people began to mill about. You thought this was the perfect opportunity to run to the bathroom to hopefully rid yourself of this awful feeling. It must’ve been whatever you’d eaten at the restaurant. You fumbled with the bucket of popcorn as you made to get up.

“Leaving?” Ignis stood from his own seat. “Could you, ah, wait but a moment longer?”

“I really need to…” you shook the bucket of popcorn, taking out a handful and shoving it into your mouth. “I need to get a refill, like right now.”

A display of words suddenly lit up the screen, but you couldn’t make out what it said. Your glasses were too smudged with popcorn butter. It hadn’t bothered you during the movie because, to be honest, the old film style was pretty blurry already. You didn’t feel like obscured vision made much difference.

A litany if “aww” waved through the viewing room, and you looked up at Ignis who was now staring intently at you, expression expectant and hopeful.

“What’s the big news?” You held your stomach, your curiosity overpowering the pain for a moment. “What does it say?”

Ignis frowned, looking from you to the screen. “You don’t… you don’t see it?”

You took off your glasses, peering at the blurry image on the screen. You knew it was a message of some kind, but the words were impossible to make out. Wiping the lenses of your glasses on your shirt, you put them back on just in time to apparently miss whatever the message had been. You caught different people in the dimly lit theater looking around, some of them shrugging.

“It was a proposal of sorts,” Ignis said.

“Wow, really?” You looked at him, a smile coming to you involuntarily. “Hah, lame.”

Ignis blinked, mouth parting as if surprised. “Is it?”

You loved that look on his face, but the pain in your stomach had you backing away. “Yeah, it’s really fucking dorky, but good for them.”

He watched you back away further. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yeah! Just a popcorn emergency.” You held up a hand to ward him off from following. “I’ll be right back!”

Running to the restroom, you threw the bucket into a bin in your dash down the theater hall, popcorn flying everywhere. You felt a bit of guilt creating that mess for the theater attendant who had to clean it up, but you desperately needed to go.

—

Ignis sent you more glances upon your return to the viewing room. Probably because you’d left to get popcorn but had come back empty handed. You’d been gone so long —twice now, on this one date, you’d spent more time in the restroom than with Ignis— that the movie had continued on by the time you returned to your seat. You weren’t sure what was going on with the plot anymore, and you were even less certain about what was happening between you and Ignis. He hadn’t so much as tried to hold your hand. This place was dark! Even the most PDA adverse person couldn’t be opposed to
something like that in a place like this.

You spent the second half of the movie overthinking whether or not you should make a move. You were at a total loss here, caught between guilt over how badly things were going and wanting to be upset at him for not putting a move on you first.

Leaving the theater with him, listening to his casual analyzation of the film, you thought this just had to be the nail in the coffin of your romantic relationship. Yep. This was it. This lame date solidified you as just friends, a fact of which made only more apparent by how he kept a polite distance.

*I’m sorry I spent forever in the bathroom. I was shitting for ten minutes straight.* It would’ve been a truthful apology, but you didn’t want to say something so vulgar in front of him like you used to do. Would a simpler apology work? *I’m sorry this date was terrible. I’m sorry I’m really bad at being romantic.*

“Thank you,” he said as he remotely unlocked the doors of his car, opening the passenger side for you. “For accompanying me this evening.”

You stifled a snort, climbing in. “Thank you for showing me a new old movie I’d never even heard of.” If anyone were to ask you what the movie had been about, you wouldn’t have a clue because half of it had been spent with blurry vision, the second half with your attention clouded with anxiety.

You watched him round the front of the car, buckling in as he took the driver’s seat. He was silent during the drive back, putting on quiet music, his thumb tapping the steering wheel. No longer sending you looks of any kind, he seemed particularly thoughtful. Distracted, almost.

“Well I see you tomorrow?” you spoke up, looking purposely out the window to avoid any look he might give you.

He gave a small hum as if thinking, but the curt manner of it told you he’d already made up his mind. “I’m afraid not. My schedule is completely booked until the New Year’s Eve ball.”

You watched storefronts pass as he drove through the city, taking in his reply. That was fine. It would’ve been unreasonable to expect to see him all the time. Your hopes of working things out, which had been steadily rising from the moment you’d returned, were falling low. That didn’t mean you were giving up. You’d spent too much time and money on that stupid token. There wasn’t a chance in hell you were going to let that go to waste. You just needed to regroup and come up with a new approach.

—

“Prompto, I need more!” You called from your place on the living room floor. A mug sat on the coffee table nearby, empty of the cocoa you so desired. You groaned when he didn’t answer, instead skipping across the apartment to the front door. “Prompto, my dude, help a girl out.”

“Why don’t you get it yourself?” a gruff voice boomed from the hallway. “You really get that spoiled in Tenebrae?”

You sat up, narrowing your eyes at Gladio. He was right, in a way, but you’d never admit to it. “Prompto makes it the best way.”

Gladio, gifts in arm, stepped over you to put them down somewhere. You grunted, swatting at him as you ducked out of the way. Noctis appeared next, followed by Lunafreya, the sight of whom made you sit up straighter.
“Oh, hi,” you said, unintentionally flustered just because she looked so much like a very young Oracle. You smoothed down your tacky Lookin’ Sharp cactuar T-shirt. “I didn’t realize you were coming.”

“Hey,” Noctis said. “Iggy has a shirt just like that.”

You looked down, then remembered that you’d bought him one to match so long ago. Eyes wide, you looked at the prince. “He wears it?”

With a laugh, Noct nodded. “Not in public, but I’ve seen it on him a few times.”

That made you smile. Of course not in public. He wouldn’t get caught dead in something like this outside of the barn at Mom’s house. As you were inexplicably surrounded by your friends, you were further surprised when the squire came in, followed by Prompto, who appeared a little pink in the face. You hated to think of what she might’ve done or said to embarrass him.

“Oh, good, you’re here,” you said, picking up your mug and holding it out to her. “Could you get me some hot cocoa?”

She nodded, reaching down to take the cup from you, but Gladio intercepted her, grabbing it out of your hand with a grunt.

“Don’t order her around, juicy.” He walked toward the kitchen. “C’mon, I’ll help you make it, you brat.”

—

You leaned against the counter while Gladio began to boil water in Prompto’s electric kettle. He moved around the kitchen as if he knew it well, opening cabinets and drawers for another mug and spoons. You wondered if, now that you’d be living here, you’d be seeing a lot of him in the future. You hoped so. You hoped to see all of them more. There was so much catching up to do.

“So, you and Ravus, huh?”

You started. “What?” It took a moment for you to catch up to the blunt question. Gladio was still on this bullshit? You didn’t know how you could possibly make it more obvious that you weren’t interested in anyone but Ignis.

He crossed his arms over his broad chest. “You gonna be the next queen of Tenebrae?”

Sighing, you kicked at him. “I’d be a duchess. Being a foreigner and a commoner would keep me from gaining the title of queen.”

Gladio didn’t budge at your kick. “So you’ve thought about it.”

You ground your teeth. This specific fact had been made apparent to you by the many whispers of the members of Tenebraen nobility who had never liked you for suddenly appearing in the manor the way you did. You think he’ll keep you for long? Even if his interest lasts, you’ll only ever be a duchess.

That had been fun.

You crossed your own arms. “What’s your problem?”

The kettle made a small ding, punctuating your question. Gladio poured the water into the mugs,
stirring with more care than you would’ve given the big guy credit for.

“I might’ve heard about your phone call with him yesterday.” Gladio’s attention to the task slowed, and he looked over at you. “Telling him you love him and all that.”

You groaned into another sigh, dropping your arms. Prompto had asked you about that as soon as you’d gotten back from your awkward date. He must’ve told Gladio so now they both think you’re torn between two loves. Your friends were morons.

“Yeah, I love him like I love you and Prompto,” you said, scowling. “I love all my friends.”

He stared at you for a moment before going to the fridge. It seemed like he, too, liked to put a mess of things on top of his hot cocoa. As he carelessly tossed sprinkles on top of the marshmallows, he grinned and shook his head.

“I didn’t know you loved me, juicy. I’m touched.”

You took the finished drink from him with slight confusion, your scowl abating. Had you really just admitted that so easily? You hadn’t even realized, and that was strange. Not only was the world continuing on as normal, but telling people you loved them seemed to actually feel good if you didn’t overthink it first. You followed him back into the living room where he handed the other mug to a surprised Prompto.

The evening unfolded that way, gifts exchanged and cookies eaten between rounds of cocoa. You pulled nervously at the bracelet on your wrist whenever anyone opened a gift from you. Especially Lunafreya, given you didn’t know her well yet. Her warm smile sent your way at the small set of hair pins you’d given her made you think that, soon enough, you might grow to love her, too.

Love was actually pretty easy, you thought with the sort of subtle amazement that made you quiet for the rest of the night.

—

Ravus acted like giving you the token was something sketchy. The approach he took amused you, his behavior very similar to people you’d bought drugs from in the past.

**Ravus:** Citadel employee cafe. Noon. Be prompt.

You arrived at twelve thirty two—the guards took their time admitting you to the higher levels and then you got lost—to an unamused prince who kept sending subtle glances around the cafe. The fact that Ravus had even texted you was weird. Phone calls with him were already brief enough. He liked to keep things face to face or have no contact at all.

“Oh, you decided to show?” He rose a brow, fingertips tapping along the table impatiently. There wasn’t any food in front of him, and you wondered if he’d eaten already or if he’d waited for you. “I’d thought you’d be here sooner. Is the token not that important to you after all?”

You rolled your eyes, taking the seat across from him. This place was huge. You hadn’t expected to get access to a place made for the employees and other important people—like asshole foreign princes—in the Citadel so you were taking this in with great interest lest you never get the chance again. People sat at tables and roamed about, some guards, mostly people in suits. Ravus, in his white robes, stuck out like the sorest of thumbs. His sour expression didn’t help.

“Just hand it over, and I’ll leave you alone,” you told him.
He sighed, and brought out the pen from a pocket, giving it a glance before holding it out. If he was trying to be conspicuous, it wasn’t working. You took it from him, relieved that it had made its way back to you from Tenebrae. You were going to be extra careful from now on. This thing was worth six months of rent.

You grinned at him, putting it safely into your bag. “Thanks, papa-gâteau.”

Then you remembered something you’d been planning to give him in exchange. Digging though your things, you found the library key. You’d handed over your credit card and all the rest before leaving Tenebrae, but you’d accidentally taken the key with you. It had found a comfortable place in your pocket next to the carbuncle totem after all these months, and you’d forgotten about it completely.

You placed it on the table, sliding it toward him. “Here. I forgot this, too.”

He looked at it but didn’t take it. “Keep it. Luna gave it to you as a gift.”

“I mean, I can’t use it,” you said, pushing the old key between your fingers, liking the clank of it on the tabletop.

“You may use it in the future, should I invite you back some day.” He was dead serious, and you couldn’t fathom how you’d grown so close to someone like him.

“Okay,” you murmured, putting it back into your bag. Standing up, you gave him a small wave that he didn’t return. “See ya, I guess.”

“Just like that?” He appeared surprised, though it was a subtle change. “You’re simply leaving?”

You gave him an incredulous look. “I do have a life to live.” Hadn’t he been the one who said you weren’t his responsibility anymore? You had stuff to do. Like sign up for spring semester classes and try, with Prompto’s help, to haul your couch up the stairs in your new apartment building without dying.

“Sit.” He rose a hand for a staff member, purposely drawing attention to himself this time. “I’ll buy you lunch.”

You gave him a flat look but followed the direction, never one to pass up free food.

—

“You should do it during the ball tomorrow,” Ravus said after putting his fork down.

You swallowed your current bite, raising a brow. That was a big topic shift from you rambling about what classes you were going to take next semester. His expression was so serious suddenly, too.

“Huh?”

He pursed his lips, letting out a slow breath through his nose before saying, “I’m going to play a piece at some point in the evening as a kind gesture to the king. It could be your chance to show him what you’ve learned while away in a more tangible manner.”

You took another bite of food. “The pen is pretty tangible.”

“Certainly,” Ravus said with a shrug, picking up his fork again. “It was merely a suggestion to help you stand out against that other woman.”
You furrowed your brows, looking down at your food. He had a point, you thought. With how things had been going the past few days, you had no clue how well you were faring in the **Ignis’ love** department.

“Okay, sure.”

What could it hurt? You’d practiced piano for months; may as well use that talent to play in front of everyone who’s anyone in Insomnia while you had the chance. At the very least, you’ll get a few laughs.

When you looked up again, your attention was caught by something past Ravus. On the other end of the large room stood Ignis. He appeared to be alone, a thick file in one hand and a takeout box in another. With what seemed to be a thanks to the staff who’d handed him the box, he walked away from the counter. Toward you.

Smile coming to your face and warmth in your heart at the sight of him, you rose a hand in a wave to catch his attention. He slowed when he noticed you, eyes going to Ravus when the prince looked over his shoulder to see who you were waving at. Then Ignis seemed to straighten his posture, giving you a nod but not stopping to talk. Not even to say hello.

You stared at him as he left the cafe, turning to Ravus with a frown. What was **that** about? Before Ravus could say anything, you lifted a hand.

“If you’ve gotta duel and kill anyone, kill **me,**” you said, then sighed as you jabbed at what was left of your lunch with your fork.

Ravus gave you a dead stare. “Although I’ve thought about it, I’m not killing you.”

Your stabbing motions stopped. This wasn’t the helpful sort of thing you’d hoped he would say as he sometimes did, though you weren’t sure what else you could’ve expected out of him. He seemed endlessly tired at this point, and you had to agree.

---

Chandeliers tinkling from high ceilings, indistinct chatter, and harmonic overtures from a small symphony greeted you when you crossed the threshold into the grand ballroom. It was much bigger than the one in Fenestala Manor. Mom had a gentle grip on the crook of your elbow, but the moment you introduced her to Ravus only minutes into the party, she ditched you.

His entire temperament changed, no smiles but a definite softness about him. To your complete confusion, he led her off to dance, leaving you standing alone. They couldn’t even talk! Ravus didn’t know sign language. But she was laughing, and you were happy enough seeing that.

You opened your clutch, staring at the pen inside. You’d had to take it out of the box for it to fit. Plus, this would make it easier to keep an eye on it. You could just casually take the pen out and slide it into Ignis’ shirt pocket when the timing was right. If it was ever right. Snapping it shut, you kept your eyes peeled for anyone you might know.

To your surprise, the first person you recognized was Mirum. She stood between two other people, manicured nails tapping against a champagne flute held delicately in her hands. Before you could think better of it, you walked her way.

Her eyes widened, and she actually pushed one of the men aside to face you. “So you **have** decided to attend. How’s Tenebrae? How’s the Oracle Prince?”
The blunt questions startled you for only a moment before you huffed a small laugh. You motioned toward Ravus on the dance floor. “Seducing my mom, apparently.”

She looked at you strangely, confusion marking the excitement on her face. “Life has been boring without you.” The confusion disappeared into amusement as she drank from her flute. “Perhaps we may find another scumbag to shoot during this event. Begin a tradition.”

The men at her sides looked away awkwardly, and you fought another laugh. “That’s not something to joke about, Mirum.”

“I know,” she laughed, completely unapologetic.

The ensuing conversation was a bit weird, but you endured, glad that Mirum seemed to come out of everything alright. Not that you’d been particularly worried. The men wandered off when they realized neither of you were paying attention to them.

When, at some point, you’d both spotted Ignis at the party, the tone of the conversation shifted entirely. He stood a distance away, smiling at a woman who rested a hand on his arm. The sight of it made you ill. That was his lady friend. You might actually have to meet her tonight.

“I thought Ignis would be here with you,” she said, trading her empty champagne flute for a glass of wine. “I’d have much preferred that over seeing him with her. You were fun. She’s boring.”

“Am I detecting jealousy?” You rose a brow.

“Am I jealous? No,” she scoffed. “Am I so bitter that I can taste the burning bloody bile in my mouth at the mere sight of their happy faces? Perhaps.”

You snorted, hiding a laugh by sipping the cider you’d been given.

She gave you side eye over this, continuing, “We could go over and intimidate her, if you’d like. Just a little. I’ll throw my drink in her face while you tear out her hair.”

Shaking your head, you said, “Hard pass.”

She shrugged. “Your loss.”

“Does that mean you’ve been flexing? I hope you’ve been giving her as hard a time as you gave me.”

She rolled her eyes. “My dear, learn to take a joke. I’ve matured beyond such things. Besides…” She smirked at you over her wine glass. “Have you ever seen the royal marshal, Cor Leonis?” She didn’t wait for you to answer. “He met with me in person not long after the prince’s wedding. He wanted to know how and why I’d brought a weapon to Accordo.”

You didn’t understand the sudden subject change or where this was going. She persisted, not even letting you get a word in.

“I’ve been withholding that information in hopes that he will… force it out of me.” She took another sip of her wine, her smirk growing.

Oh, that look on her face, you understood. “Is it working?”

“No bites quite yet.” She sniffed. “Though… he does give me rather long looks anytime our paths cross. I’ve been snubbing him, and it leaves him simply fuming.”
She was teasing and snubbing the royal marshal. If that’s what she considered maturing, she was insane. Of course he’d get irritated at her avoidance, anyone would. “Can you blame him?”

With a light gasp, she subtly pointed with her index finger on the hand that held her wine glass. “Can you blame me?”

Following her small gesture, you looked at a man who stood a short distance away. Cor Leonis was someone whose face and name you recognized, but those facts seemed to reside in separate parts of your brain, mutually exclusive to one another until you actually saw the man in person. He had a sharp gaze that scanned the room, lingering in your general direction for a bit longer than you expected. A frown pulled at his mouth, and you were actually pretty intimidated.

“Dude,” you said, looking at Mirum. “You’re probably on a watchlist.”

“I certainly hope so.” She handed you her glass, still half full. “Hold this, dear. I’m getting a head start on my New Year’s resolution.”

You held the glass uncomfortably, looking around for someplace to put it down. “Which is?”

“To see how long it takes the Immortal to find the weapon I’ve hidden on my person.” She looked over her shoulder as she walked into the crowd, sending you a wink before disappearing.

You stood there, glass in each hand, trying to find a good place to get rid of hers. That’s how Gladio and his father found you moments later.

“I thought you were calling it quits with that,” Gladio said, taking them out of your hands.

You tried to get the cider back because it wasn’t alcoholic, and you liked it more than the sparkling water being served. Gladio put the glasses down on a nearby table, just out of your reach. Then he introduced you to his father before, to your surprise, asking you to dance.

Looking between both men, you nodded and let him take your hand. You didn’t know why he wasn’t following through on his promise to give you a hard time about his dad. Maybe seeing you with two drinks in hand hadn’t helped.

The party was mostly boring, if you were being honest, until you saw a small flash of black feathers shoot past your feet as you danced with Gladio. You stopped the dance to look at him. “Was that a tiny chocobo?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t see anything.”

You backed away from him, bending a little and peering in the direction the little black puffball had went. “I definitely saw something. I’m gonna go after it.”

Gladio chuckled. “If you didn’t wanna dance, you could’ve just said so.”

You rolled your eyes, following the trail of small yelps of people as you tracked down the mysterious black blur. You were met with a dead end at a long buffet table. With probably less hesitation than you should’ve been exercising at such an event, you bent over and checked underneath the tablecloth.

At the far end of the table, holding something shiny in its mouth, sat a tiny, black chocobo. Thinking quickly, you stood and snatched a piece of spinach from the salad portion of the buffet. Using the
light of your phone, you lit up the space and crawled under the table, approaching it slowly.

“Hey there, cutie,” you cooed, offering the spinach leaf. “Where did you come from?”

It let out a soft *kweh*, dropping the shiny object before quickly picking it up again. You’d never seen a black chocobo in person before. It was so adorable. The closer you got, the more you realized it was chewing on a monocle, the chain of which dragged on the floor.

Waving the spinach at it, you grew close enough to touch its beak with the leaf. It followed the spinach, dropping the monocle again to take a bite. You picked up the monocle, hiding it in your hand. The chocobo let you brush fingers over the feathers on its head.

Gently, slowly, you picked it up into an arm. Its talons scratched at your dress a little, otherwise it was completely docile. Crawling out from under the table, you were met with a fair number of stares. You ignored the looks and set off to find Prompto because if anyone would appreciate this cute bird, it was him.

As you weaved your way through people, you felt a hand grip you by the shoulder. Throwing it off immediately, you rounded on the person, aggression at the forefront of your expression. Words about how *dare* someone try to grab you fell silent on your lips at the sight of Ignis.

He stood there in front of you in a tux, everything in place down to every hair on his head. His perfection was sickening, as always. The accented voice only made it harder to handle. “I can’t say I’m surprised it was you that found him.”

The chocobo squirmed a little in your arm, nipping at the braided metal chain that held your clutch over your shoulder. You looked at Ignis in confusion. “Found him?”

He shared the look. “That chocobo in your arms?”

Oh. You laughed, looking down at the bird. “He’s yours?”

Ignis held out hands to take him, and you reluctantly handed him over. “Not mine. Though, it is my fault he was able to run wild.”

“I can’t say *I’m* surprised,” you said, smoothing out your dress. “You’re always letting baby chocobos loose during parties.”

A small smile came to his face. “Only twice. If I recall, the first time hadn’t been only my doing.”

Thinking back to the day you’d met, you nodded in agreement. “That’s fair.” You looked at the chocobo in appreciation. He kept tilting its head, looking at you with his large black eyes. You lifted a hand, scratching his neck softly. “What’s his name?”

“He doesn’t yet have one.” Ignis’ voice was soft, and when you looked up, he was looking at your hand resting on the chocobo’s head. “What would you name him?”

You drew your hand away at the sudden question, thinking on it. Uncurling your other hand, you held up the monocle. “Well, since he seemed pretty attached to this when I found him, I’d say he’s a fancy boy. Probably something like… Doctor Eggcelent.”

Ignis chuckled. “That’s a fine name.”

You chewed on your lip, giving the chocobo one last pet on its head. “If only you were mine, you little fluff ball.”
Clearly Ignis’ lady friend had brought him, probably as some minor entertainment. Now you were a little more jealous of her just because her life was so cool that she had access to the rarest chocobos.

The chocobo shifted from the crook of one arm to the other as Ignis began to dig into a pocket for something. “On the contrary, I have something I must—”

“Ignis!” A man suddenly drew up next to both of you, slowly running a hand from Ignis’ shoulder to his elbow. You thought the only reason he stopped rubbing Ignis’ arm was because the chocobo began to nip at him. “Will I be the lucky one to kiss you at midnight?”

Ignis cleared his throat, slight embarrassment seeping into his expression. “We shall certainly see.”

When the man wandered off with a not so subtle wink, you couldn’t help the huge grin on your face. “He seemed nice.”

Ignis sighed. “He’s a baron who holds land that neighbors my county. He’s one of the people I met with in your absence.”

Laughing into your hand, you shook your head. “I kinda like him.”

Ignis gave you an unamused look. “Of course you do.”

You stood there, laughing quietly together until Ignis seemed to remember something. He began to dig into his jacket pocket again, face becoming serious.

“This may seem sudden,” he said, sounding uncertain. “I’ve had so much time to think on it, but I hadn’t—”

The music hushed, an announcement cutting Ignis off as it drew both of your attention. You heard your name, and furrowed your brows as you searched for the announcer to figure out exactly what was going on. Then it became clear when you saw Ravus walking toward a piano.

Oh, here it was. You’d wanted to impress Ignis in some small way, and this was your chance to stand out against the others. It wasn’t comparable to a black chocobo, but you’d do your best.

Looking up at him with a smile, you said, “I guess I’m needed over there. Save me a dance, okay?”

He took the monocle from your hand and nodded, the corners of his mouth drawing downward. “Of course. Thank you for finding this little one.”

Nervous and hoping Ignis liked the song, you made your way through the crowds and joined Ravus on the piano bench. Once you were there, though, and it seemed like every pair of eyes in the entire kingdom were on you, you felt frozen. You’d spent so much time thinking about how Ignis would like it that you hadn’t considered everyone else who’d be listening.

Your hands shook a little, and you leaned toward Ravus to whisper. “I don’t know if I can.”

His eyes searched your face for a moment. “You’ll be fine.”

With a slight shake of your head, you rested your fingers gently against the keys. “This isn’t the same as practicing in front of the squire.”

“I don’t believe this,” he sighed in a soft whisper. He took one of your shaky hands in his, squeezing it gently. “It’s time you turned your weakness for Scientia into a strength.”

You nodded slowly, pulling your hand away with a nervous smile. After a deep breath, you splayed
your hands across the keys before setting off the duet. The melody was wistful and lilting, a waltz that had people circling on the dancefloor. You wished you could see if Ignis was dancing, too, but you were satisfied enough by not messing up a single time.

Bowing afterward felt strange while people clapped. Like you were being praised for not doing anything special. You’d truly expected laughter, but now you couldn’t figure out why. Ravus went his own way while you tried to find your way back to where you’d left Ignis. It was unlikely that he’d remained in the same spot, but maybe he wouldn’t be far. You still wanted to have that dance.

Hell, you felt like you could propose to him now. The song had given you courage. You couldn’t find him, though. Not anywhere near the place you’d last seen him, at least. Walking around for a few minutes, dodging dancers and accepting compliments from strangers on your dress, your performance, your hair, you were beginning to feel a bit overwhelmed.

Then you finally found Ignis, standing near a column and talking with Ravus, of all people. He no longer had the chocobo with him. He extended a hand as if to shake, but Ravus knocked it away. The prince scowled, saying something you couldn’t possibly make out with the distance and music in the air. It couldn’t be good because Ignis clenched his hand into a fist before dropping it to his side and walking away.

Torn over which man you wanted to approach first over the exchange, you stood in place, eyes going from Ignis’ retreating back to Ravus’ shaking head. A few people near them seemed interested in whatever had occurred, a lot of stares being sent their way. You really hoped Ravus hadn’t actually challenged Ignis to a duel. It wasn’t his fault you were taking so long proposing.

“Hey, that was incredible! I didn’t know you could play any instruments.”

Your thoughts were halted by Prompto’s appearance at your side. He was grinning from ear to ear, an infectious sight that had you smiling just a little.

“Yeah, I learned one song, and I need Ravus otherwise I only know half a song.”

He snickered, knocking your shoulder with his own. “Geez, learn to take a compliment, dude.”

You looked to where Ravus still stood, sighing and turning to Prompto fully. “You’re right. Thanks.”

He rolled on the balls of his feet, chewing on his lower lip. He wanted something.

Your smile waned into a flat look. “What is it?”

His smile became sheepish. “Do you have any lip balm? I haven’t kissed anyone in a while and the motorcycle has made my lips kinda…”

You knew what he meant. It was dead of winter so everything was dry. You’d noticed his chapped lips, too, but hadn’t ever planned to say anything. Opening your bag, you gave him what you had. “Here ya go. Hope Gladio likes cherry flavor.”

Prompto took it with a growing blush. “You don’t know that it’s Gladio.”

“Sure it isn’t,” you laughed. Someone knocked into your back, pushing you into Prompto. You looked over your shoulder to see that the mingling crowds had adjusted to give a wider berth for the people dancing. You regained your footing, using Prompto’s shoulder for balance before snapping your bag closed and offering him a smile. “Go get ‘em.”
Turning down offers for drinks began to prove difficult. You wanted to let loose a little and have fun rather than focus on the exchange that you’d seen between Ravus and Ignis. Hanging around Mom, though it made you feel juvenile, seemed to help for a short time.

You found her in a serious conversation with Mirum, talking about boring things like taxes and ordinances the marchioness planned to enact in the next year, some of which Mom seemed to appreciate.

You thought it was mildly interesting, but found yourself checking out of the conversation at one point. The world felt so small when Mom seemed to know more people than you did, or at least befriending them while you wandered around, finding things to occupy your attention.

You’d roped Noct into a game of tossing horderves into each other’s mouths when you saw Ignis again. You froze, distracted as he walked toward you. A bite sized piece of food smacked your face. You closed your mouth, wiping at your cheek and shooting Noct an unimpressed look.

“I expect this of her,” Ignis said, standing between you. “But I don’t believe this is princely behavior.”

Noct brushed it off with a roll of his eyes, shoving the last horderve into his mouth and walking away. Ignis was right, you guys were too old to be doing this, but where’s the fun in talking to a bunch of people you didn’t know? Especially those who kissed your ass all day.

It had been fun for a while, introducing yourself to people as a music video director. Why yes, that shocking video for that problematic song about King Regis was my creation. But you didn’t really feel like you were in the same league as most people present. Uptight and political. It wasn’t quite the right fit.

Ignis turned to you, gaze more serious than you thought you could handle. Furrowing your brows, you prepared for an argument or to be told off for making the prince do something embarrassing.

Instead, he offered a hand. “May I?”

Knowing what he was asking but feeling a little strange under his intense gaze, you nodded and put the last horderve you held into his hand.

He looked down at it, then up at you. You opened your mouth, pointing at it with both hands.

“I won’t play your silly game,” he said, even as a smile threatened his lips.

“Why not? You just heckled my best player into ditching me.”

“It was causing a minor stir. I’ve learned to shut down such things immediately.”

“Well, Lord Scientia,” you drew out every vowel as you leveled your gaze on him. “What’s considered a minor stir?”

“Throwing food, for one.”

You tilted your head. “And letting loose a baby chocobo?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“What about getting a handshake rejected by a foreign prince?”
His eyes widened slightly. “You heard about that?”

“I saw it,” you admitted. You reached over and took the horderve back from him. If he wasn’t going to eat or throw it, you would. “I’m sorry about Ravus being such a dick. I don’t know why you rub him the wrong way.”

His pensive expression returned. He dusted crumbs off his hand as he spoke. “I hadn’t been quite sure myself until this evening.”

“Oh. What was it about, then?” You really wanted to know. You hadn’t seen Ravus since then either, otherwise you would’ve asked him first.

He straightened a cuff. “Nothing terribly important. Small misunderstandings carry more weight than one realizes at times.”

You weren’t sure you bought it. Maybe the altercation had nothing to do with you, and the two just had conflicting personalities that had clashed in that moment. You didn’t think that was the case, though.

“Now,” he said, holding his hand out again. “May I have that dance?”

You put the horderve back on the table, to which Ignis gave a disapproving look, then placed your hand in his. He walked you to the dance floor, and even before his hand found your waist, your heart was pumping harder. It burned so sweetly, you never wanted it to stop. Finally, you were close to him like you’d wished to be ever since returning.

He took the lead, turning you in slow circles like everyone else around you. Looking at him wasn’t an option; this close, you were at risk of doing something stupid like prematurely kissing him or worse. You kept your gaze on his chest to keep the blush from your face.

It wasn’t working.

When you did chance a look up at him, he smiled. The lights all over the ballroom glinted off of his glasses, but you could still see the care in his eyes. It was familiar and nostalgic, yet scary in the way that this was the first time you felt like you deserved to be looked at in such a way.

“I’m happy that you’ve waltzed back into my life,” he said.

Surprised but delighted, you searched his face with your eyes before responding. “I just couldn’t stay away.”

A slight shake of his head, his smile growing, told you he thought your pun was bad. And it was, you had to agree.

You blushed deeper, dropping your forehead to rest against his chest. Your steps aligned with his, and he led you into the next song without hesitation. His hand resting at your waist wound around you slowly, coming to your back and bringing you closer.

Turning your head, it rested solidly against his chest. This was quickly becoming intimate, but you didn’t want to move away. An entire song passed that way, moving slowly with Ignis in a dance that didn’t quite match everyone around you anymore.

“I saw you with your lady friend earlier,” you said.

“Never mind her.”
His voice was low, making you raise your head to see what could be wrong. His face centimeters away, his nose brushed yours and you froze. Fighting the urge to lean up just that little bit to kiss him, you looked off to the side. No good to jump the gun. You wanted to do this the right way.

“What time is it?”

Creating a small bit of distance between you, he retrieved his watch from his coat pocket. “Two minutes to midnight.”

Oh, wow. You’d been at the party for that long already? This was your perfect opportunity. You were going to wait a few minutes, gather your courage, and kiss him. Then, you’d tell him how ready you were to commit to him. Finally.

“Remember where we were a year ago?” you asked.

He hummed with a smile. “In a library, drinking coffee.”

“I can’t believe I missed out on this party for that,” you giggled. “Tonight has been fun.”

His smile softened. “I’d rather be there, if I’m to be honest. Surrounded by books, coffee in hand, by your side.”

The dance between you had stopped, his eyes searching yours and both hands falling to your waist. You hoped you weren’t imagining the intent on his face. The way his eyes flicked to your lips, the way he leaned slightly closer by the second.

Music suddenly changing into something rhythmic and timed, everyone around you began to cheer the countdown to midnight. It was happening. You wet your lips slightly, last second nerves making you wish Prompto hadn’t taken your balm.

On the chant of “one” someone grabbed Ignis’ shoulder, pulling him away from you. As the party went wild, the time rolling over into a new year, you watched in total surprise as Ignis was kissed by that flirty baron from before.

The man sauntered off as if his work there was done, leaving a shaken Ignis. He smoothed down his suit, face growing red. It was really cute, and you would’ve appreciated it if you weren’t still in mild shock.

When he turned to you with wide eyes, a laugh bubbled up from your chest. You covered your mouth, but it did nothing to lessen the effect as your laugh grew harder.

Ignis’ remained disgruntled, frowning at you. “Why do you enjoy my discomfort so much?”

Calming yourself, you sighed. “I can’t believe he did that. I mean, he kinda warned you earlier.”

“That doesn’t give him the right to put his hands on another person,” he said, pulling the handkerchief from his front breast pocket and wiping his mouth.

“Hey,” you swallowed the last of your humor and touched his arm. “I didn’t realize you were so bothered by it.”

He stuffed the handkerchief into a trouser pocket and sighed, “I suppose I shouldn’t complain too much. He was fairly generous with his tongue.”

You paused, staring at him before another laugh escaped you. Dropping your hand from his arm,
you gave him a sardonic smile. “You’re such a smartass.”

“I feel I deserve the opportunity to sass when I’ve been so accosted.” He smiled a little. “Now my mouth tastes like crab cakes and…” He moved his tongue around in his mouth. “Pickles. I believe the baron might’ve partaken in the horderves before finding me.”

Laughing into your hand again, you watched his smile grow. “You probably need a breath mint.”

“Capital idea,” he said, once again smoothing down his already perfect tux. “I’m going to find something to wash down the taste. I’ll be a moment. Care for anything?”

You shrugged. “Anything nonalcoholic is fine.”

As he disappeared into the throngs of people, you dispelled your amusement and opened your bag. Someone else stole the first kiss of the year, but that didn’t mean you couldn’t still propose. Looking around in the small space, you frowned. The pen was gone. Alarm hit you hard. Not again. You moved things around, but the bag was tiny. It couldn’t possibly be hiding anywhere inside.

Closing the bag, you groaned. “Godsdamnit.”

How the hell did this keep happening to you? This was bad. You looked around in distress. Someone had to have found it, right? You could retrace your steps, but you’d danced pretty much everywhere. Maybe it was under the buffet table or something.

Walking around the ballroom, you began to search, inquiring a few people every so often if they saw anything like it. No one had. Just great.

“It’s a pen,” you explained to a young woman who seemed entirely uninterested. “It’s, uh, silver and has a crest on it.”

You didn’t want to admit that it was made of solid gold because then anyone might not want to give it back if it was found.

“Yeah, what crest might that be?”

You turned, eyes wide at Gladio standing next to you.

“Uh, the Scientia crest,” you admitted, caring more about finding the pen than your pride. It had been so expensive. You weren’t going to give it up so easily.

His eyes widened in return, then slowly, he grinned. “I’ll help you look. You have a picture or something?”

Bringing up the image on your phone, you scrutinized your friend. “You don’t think it’s weird that I wanna propose?”

He studied the image, his grin only growing. “Nah, I was hoping for something like this. Watching you two is entertaining. Both of you overthinking everything. It’s priceless.”

You looked at him flatly before lowering your gaze to begin the search. You walked with him through the ballroom, keeping your eyes peeled for anything shiny on the marble floor.

“Why didn’t you try to embarrass me in front of your dad?”

He rolled a shrug over his broad shoulders, bending low to check under a table. “You looked lost and confused. Wouldn’t have been fun. I’ll wait until you’re acting cocky again.”
You scoffed, lifting up a platter on a table. Everything was silver and sparkly so finding the pen seemed impossible. You needed to find that damn token quickly before Ignis—

Attention suddenly caught on something shiny and yellow gold, you looked past Gladio at something that made you frown. Ignis stood a distance away, talking to his lady friend who held the small black chocobo from earlier. She seemed nice, smiling at Ignis warmly. You hated it.

He returned the smile, saying something you couldn’t make out. One of his hands came up to the collar on the chocobo’s neck that hadn’t been there before. The golden tag that had caught your eye hang from it, and Ignis inspected it with an approving smile. The woman said something that made Ignis nod, taking the chocobo into his own arms before they shared a hug. Her arm lingered on his shoulder as they spoke close to one another, smiles plastered on their faces.

You had to look away, avoiding Gladio’s gaze. “I think I’m too late. Did that just happen?”

“I dunno. Let’s check it out.”

You didn’t respond, bringing a hand to your face to cover your eyes as they watered. This was humiliating. Right after admitting your intentions to Gladio, you were too late. That woman was a genius. A black chocobo as a courtship token? That was way better than a pen. Plus, she’d used yellow gold. If you’d done that, you probably would’ve found the pen by now. You felt like kicking yourself, like curling up and crying.

Lowering your hand, you looked their way again and found Prompto standing nearby, saying something in abject excitement. Really? He couldn’t even pretend to be upset on your behalf? Ignis was his friend, too, but Prompto knew about your plan. How could he congratulate Ignis so eagerly when you were standing right there?

To your horror, they looked your way, the conversation dropping. Oh no, you thought as Ignis approached, chocobo in arm, his lady friend and Prompto on his heels. The blond had the decency to look sheepish when they grew closer, and you fought hard not to scowl at him.

Ignis had controlled his expression into something much less excited than what you’d just witnessed, but it did nothing to make you feel better. This was what you’d been dreading for a long while now. This was the moment he’d say he didn’t want to be with you because he’d accepted her ridiculous token instead. Before you even realized what you were doing, you curled your hands into fists, crossed your arms, and opened your big mouth.

“That’s a terrible courtship token. You know how many places in the city you can bring a chocobo? Like, none. It’s impractical. I thought the point was to make sure everyone could see that you’re spoken for, but Ignis can’t take a chocobo with him. He works in the most guarded building in the kingdom.”

You looked past Ignis at his friend. Her brows were high on her face, shock written in her expression. Good. You’d worked hard to do things the right way even though nothing so far had gone the way you’d hoped. She couldn’t just swoop in with a better gift like this. You knew this was the most petty thing you’d ever done in your life, but you weren’t going to drop this and just be happy for Ignis. He’d told you he loved you just a week before. To accept this without fighting would belittle what you’d said to each other on his visit to Tenebrae and every interaction thereafter.

“As stupid as using a chocobo is, I wish I’d had that idea,” you huffed, eyes moving to Ignis. His face had become hard to read, mouth a flat line. “But all I got you was a pen, and I don’t even have it anymore because I can’t be trusted with anything, apparently. Who knows where it is. So I can’t
even ask you to let me court you instead.”

You uncrossed your arms to throw them up. This was becoming a small scene. Gladio backed away a step, and people were beginning to watch. You couldn’t get yourself to care, continuing with another frown at Ignis’ lady friend.

“Did he ever tell you about the time he got so high, he refused to leave my kitchen because he was afraid to watch a gory movie?”

“You’re misunderstanding—” Ignis spoke up.

“No.” You held up a hand, palm out toward Ignis, your eyes not leaving the woman. “Do you know what he looks like when he gets ready for the day? What his aftershave smells like right after he puts it on?”

The woman shook her head, eyes wide. “I—I don’t—”

“Did you know he’s terrible at pretty much every video game except dating simulators?” You didn’t want to give her the chance to talk, your hurt coming out in waves as you thought about what you were saying. “What about—”

“That’s enough,” Ignis interrupted again, handing the chocobo over to the woman. His mouth was pulled into the smallest frown as he faced you. It wasn’t angry. He seemed more confused than anything, brows arching over his glasses. “May we speak privately?”

Tearing your eyes from him, you looked at the surrounding audience. The woman was still pretending to have no idea what was going on. Prompto watched with hands over his face, fingers spread just enough to peek through. Gladio held an unreadable expression, scratching at the scruff on his jaw as he watched the scene unfold. Everyone else nearby, you didn’t recognize, for which you were grateful.

Meeting Ignis’ eyes, you shook your head and dropped your arms. “Whatever you wanna say, just do it now. I have nothing to offer, but—but I can’t just let this happen.” Your throat felt tight. “I still love you, Ignis.”

Slowly, a smile overcame Ignis’ face, then he chuckled. “You’re incapable of making anything simple, aren’t you?”

That wasn’t the response you’d been hoping for. Your frown deepened, your chest pulling tight. He was laughing at your love.

With a slight shake of his head, he reached a hand into a pocket and withdrew a pen held between long fingers, the light from a chandelier shining off of it. Your eyes widened, relief at seeing it almost overpowered by the alarm of who was holding it. You’d already begun to think it would be lost forever, the Citadel too large a place to find it.

“Is this the pen you spoke of?” He seemed hesitant to even be asking, his face a mask of uncertainty.

Tearing your eyes from it, you looked at him. “Where’d you find it?”

Fingers closing around it, the tension in his expression easing, he lowered his arm and said, “Prompto gave it to me earlier. He seemed to think I’d lost it, and unwittingly told me of your intentions.”

It felt as if a large rock had seated itself in your stomach, drawing you downward painfully. He
already knew before you could ask. How unfair. You looked at Prompto who was retreating slightly into the crowds.

“I saw you guys dancing, and I thought you already did it. I’m sorry!”

Sighing, you returned your attention to Ignis and the pen in his hand. You held your own hand out to take it. “Since you don’t need it, give it back.”

He’d accepted the chocobo from his friend even though he’d known you were going to ask. This was turning out terribly for you and your heart. Only days ago, you’d been certain he loved you in return. Now you wanted to crawl into a hole and rot.

“I never anticipated you would try to propose,” he said, making no move to give the pen back. He lifted it to inspect the crest etched into the side. “It’s not like you.”

You let out a frustrated huff. “As soon as you told me you were open to courtship, I couldn’t stand the idea of not even trying,” you replied, still reaching.

You hated that things had to be this way, that, at any moment, he was going to tell you about the courtship he’d already begun with that other woman.

“If that’s true,” he said, looking up with wide eyes, uneven breaths passing through a growing smile on his face. “Will you accept my offer in return?”

Your mind timed-out, and you blinked slowly. “What?”

He swallowed, his eyes searching your face. Hope, lingering confusion, excitement. All of it flitted across his face.

“I’d planned a grand gesture to propose to you that seems to have fallen apart spectacularly. I had been unable to get his collar on before he ran off.” He nodded toward the chocobo who kwehed from the woman’s arms.

Your gaze wandered from him to the bird, then back. “You were… gonna propose? But what about her?” The hand you’d had reaching for the pen, motioned toward his friend.

He huffed a small laugh. “I hadn’t known you were also prone to unfounded jealousies. She brought the chocobo from her farm. She’s here as his handler.”

You couldn’t believe it. Pointing at the chocobo again, you asked, “That woman didn’t propose to you with that chocobo?”

He shook his head, expression still a mask of amused disbelief. “I’m proposing to you with that chocobo.”

“Oh.” Realization dawned on you. Bringing a hand up to your mouth, you let a disbelieving smile of your own slip onto your face. “Oh.”

“Are words becoming difficult for you?” He chuckled, taking a step closer. “Will I be lucky to receive an answer?”

Dropping your hand, you motioned vaguely at him and the pen he still held. “W-what about you? Technically, I went first.”

Brows arching over his glasses, he straightened his posture and placed the pen into the breast pocket
of his tuxedo. It looked a tad silly, but his earnestness made you blush. “I accept your gracious gift and your intentions.”

That made you snort, hand coming back up to stifle it. You’d nearly forgotten how stiff he could be sometimes.

His serious expression eased into something softer. “If it’ll help your decision, I want you to know that I love you, too. I’d wanted the next time I said it to be after you’d let me have your hand, but I now realize I’d only confused you.”

The terrible feeling in your stomach dissipated, though you were still having a hard time believing this was happening. “I’ll say yes under one condition.”

“Anything.”

Biting your lower lip with a bit of hesitance at first, you said, “You have to ask me again in the form of a freestyle rap.”

His smile waned, his stare becoming flat. He cleared his throat, then said, “I’d like to retract my proposal.”

A sudden and small laugh erupted from you. “Okay! Yes. I accept your stuff and whatever.”

It seemed to take a moment for everything to sink in for both of you. The quiet chatter of the people watching and the lilting music filled the background as you looked at each other. You reached out a hand that he met, taking it in his own. It was warm, and he was drawing you to him within seconds, wrapping you into a hug that pressed you firmly against his chest.

You were so happy. You were having a hard time believing it still. Pulling back a little, you looked up at him. “You really don’t care that I’m a disaster?”

He chuckled, leaning down toward you, voice low. “I’ve never cared less or loved you more.”

Not wasting another moment, you leaned upward on your tiptoes to kiss him, resting hands at his chest for balance. His lips were soft against yours, his mouth hot when he tilted his head to deepen the contact. He tasted like champagne, giving you a conflicting mix of yearning as you pressed melted against him.

Your lips were chapped and your heart was a wreck in your chest, but he kissed you as if you were alone. Hands sliding up to clasp behind his neck, you ignored the whistle you recognized as Prompto’s and the indistinct chatter surrounding you.

Like Ignis, this moment was only yours.

—

You wandered blearily to the kitchen of your apartment, wondering what could’ve gotten into Prompto that he was cooking breakfast. You stopped in the archway, blinking away sleep. Dumping the contents of a pan onto a plate, Ignis sent you a smile.

“Morning, love.”

“G’morning, babe,” Prompto said, walking past you to open the fridge.

You snorted, leaning on the archway with a sleepy grin. “Do you always make breakfast the
morning after? This is obnoxiously polite.”

Ignis turned off the stove, wiping his hands on the apron at his waist. “I enjoy caring for you. No need to make a fuss.”

Prompto closed the fridge, an energy drink in hand. “Hey, if you don’t want it, I’ll take it. I had to blast my headphones all night just to keep from having nightmares.”

You didn’t stop him from taking one of the plates, pushing off from the archway as he left the kitchen. Walking to Ignis, you looked at the remaining plate of food. “You eat. I’m sure you have work or something so you’ll need the energy. I’m just gonna be laying around today.”

He shook his head, reaching up to brush hair out of your face. “It’s for you.”

You scrutinized the dish again. “You put spinach and stuff in it. That always gets stuck in my teeth.”

With a quiet breath of laughter, he dropped his hand and took off the apron. “That reminds me. I’ve something for you.”

You grew excited, but stamped it down because getting things from him always made you feel a little guilty for not being able to do the same. You just couldn’t afford most of the things he liked. He walked back to your bedroom, taking his jacket from its place on the back of your desk chair. This dork had carefully placed it there the night before while you’d been throwing off your clothes at warp speed. From within a pocket, he pulled out something golden, round, and altogether familiar.

“You kept it?” You asked, looking at the compact. When he placed it in your hand, you examined its scratched surface, brushing fingers over all of the recognizable little nicks.

“I carried it with me every day,” he said. “The number of times I tried giving it back to you before the New Year’s ball is an embarrassment. You’re nearly impossible to propose to.”

You opened it and looked at your reflection, seeing someone completely different than who you’d seen the last time you’d used this particular set of mirrors. Snapping it closed, you beamed up at him. “Thank you, Ignis.”

He shared the smile, leaning down to kiss you. Before his lips could brush yours, you leaned back to ask, “I still get to keep Doctor Eggcelent, right? We already moved him to Mom’s so you can’t take him back.”

With a quiet chuckle, he said, “Of course. Now eat your breakfast before it grows cold.”

—

Shoving yet another covered dish of *something* into your already packed fridge, you left the kitchen of your new place to look over all of the boxes that had yet to be unpacked. As soon as you move into a new neighborhood, *all* the neighbors wanted to give you food, it seemed.

A soft *mew* drew you down the hallway and into what would be Ignis’ study once you got around to unpacking that room. A cat meandered among the boxes, stopping when it saw you. Then it was bounding for your feet. You picked her up, snuggling her even though you were pretty sure you were allergic to cats.

She’d been a gift from a family in the neighborhood. It seemed kind of strange for a *welcome to our district* gift for the woman who was dating their count, but you weren’t complaining because she was a sweetheart so far.
You just needed to figure out how you’d explain her to Ignis when he came home.

Eyes already becoming itchy and watery, you put her down. She became a noodle, flopping onto the floor. You poked her with your foot, but didn’t entertain her wish to play. You’d never had a cat before so this move was bringing all kinds of new things into your life.

“Help me get some stuff unpacked, and I’ll come up with a good name for you,” you told her, leaving the room to focus on other areas first.

If you gave her a name, Ignis couldn’t possibly make you give her back, you reasoned with yourself. She followed you through the apartment all day, getting in the way at times. Your throat became itchy at some point, eyes pink when you checked them in the compact. When you sneezed loudly, it scared her into hiding. You were trying to dig her out of the space between the wall and the washing machine when Ignis arrived.

He stopped in the doorway to the laundry room, giving you a curious look. “Darling, what’s going on?”

You could feel the redness of your face and the rash that had begun on your chest. You were definitely allergic to cats, and you had to look like a red-skinned daemon right now, bloodshot eyes and all. Finally prying the cat from the small space in which she’d gotten stuck, you lifted her as if she were a prized newborn coeurl.

“We got a cat from our neighbors,” you said, blinking your itchy eyes. “She’s my new best friend, but I don’t have a name for her yet.”

His curiosity became amusement. Taking you by surprise, he took her out of your hands and looked at her with a small smile. She mewed at him, and he looked down at you.

“You’re highly allergic, I see.”

You shrugged. “It’s nothing.”

As if your body wanted to boldly contest your statement, you sneezed again, barely catching it in the crook of your elbow this time. You sniffled, lowering your arm. “Can we keep her?”

He sighed, placing the cat on the floor. She weaved between his legs, a sight that made you smile. He was going to give in. Whether he was also charmed by her already, or he simply couldn’t find it within himself to deny you, he was sighing again as he nodded.

“So long as you get treatment for your allergies,” he said, bringing a hand to your cheek. “I don’t understand how you enjoy things that bring you discomfort.”

You put a hand over his, grinning at him. “The same could be said for you. You like me, and I always make you uncomfortable.”

He affected a light scoff. “You haven’t made me uncomfortable in weeks. Months, rather.”

That sounded like a challenge.

—

“Moonbeam Nox Fleuret and Doctor Eggcelent Scientia are soulmates. How dare you keep them apart,” you yelled at your phone indignantly.
What had begun as a surprise phone call to Ravus to catch up with each other had become a conference when Ignis had called an hour in, and you’d added him to the line. Other than the occasional moment in which the two would talk to each other instead of you, you’d done a pretty good job of dividing your attention between carrying the conversation and trying to work on your final film project for school.

Until Ravus mentioned Moonbeam, and you remembered the single video call you’d had with him in which you’d introduced your chocobos to one another. You may have decided they were meant to be together because they’d kwehed at each other a few times. Unsurprisingly, Ignis wasn’t on your side of this argument. Apparently sending a chocobo across the ocean was an expensive endeavor that neither man wanted to do just to entertain your whims.

Amidst the overlapping voices of the other two, your phone beeped from its place on the table. You peered down at it, then grinned as you pressed the button to add Prompto to the call.

“Hey, Prom!” You called, disrupting the conversation between Ignis and Ravus.

“Dude! I just saw a real life spiracorn. Like in the wild.” He sounded breathless, as if he’d been running.

“Is that Argentum?” Ravus asked.

Prompto immediately began to sputter, but you spoke up before he could begin some nonsensical ramble before hanging up out of nervousness.

“Yes! He would know better than anybody so I’m bringing him into this,” you said, picking up your phone and turning off the speaker to speak into it directly. “Prompto, do chocobos have soulmates?”


Ravus sighed. “This entire phone call has hit its lowest possible point. I’m going.”

As he often did, he hung up before you could convince him to stick around. If you were lucky, you might get a be well, ma crevette message later, but you weren’t counting on it.

“You’ve scared him off, Prompto,” Ignis said. “Excellent work.”

Prompto chuckled. “Y-yeah, that was totally my plan.”

You gave your cat, Friendly, a flat look. She purred as you gave her pets, and you felt a little less lonely. Prompto was so far away, traveling Lucis, and Ignis spent most of his time in the Citadel. Even Friendly got out more than you did these days, doing whatever it was cats did when they wandered the streets.

Taking a break from your film editing, you let the conversation carry on for a long while, soaking in the attention as much as you could.

—

Entering your apartment at the end of a long day in the studio, you kicked off your shoes carelessly. It was abnormally quiet, but you didn’t notice because you were absorbed into a phone call. You stopped abruptly at the end of the hallway, attention caught, your bag falling from your hand, a muted clunk against the floor. In the absurdly fancy wingback armchair you’d brought across town from his old place sat Ignis. He faced you, completely bare of anything but—
“Craigory, I-I’ve gotta go, dude.” You hung up before he could answer and swallowed thickly.

Ignis’ expression wasn’t the usual amount of shy reservation you had grown to adore during the moments he’d surprise you like this. A light smirk rested on his face. This was pleasantly different. He uncrossed his long legs, the black stockings pulling against the garter at his waist a little. This was a million times worse than the sock garters he wore on a regular basis. Those flustered you every damn day. This was sudden, white hot tortue going right to your core. Your face flushed at the sight of him, already hard and waiting.

“Undress for me,” he said without greeting. This was very different, but you weren’t opposed.

You dropped your phone, pulling your shirt over your head. He began to stroke himself, and you had to temper your eagerness, wanting to go slowly so he could enjoy the show. You were distracted by his movements, having an abnormal amount of trouble unclasping your bra. You grunted a little in frustration, skipping it to remove the rest. When you returned to it, bare of all else, he beckoned you to him with his free hand.

“Come here, kitten.” His stokes were slow, his length twitching in his hand. “Sit on my lap and let me take care of that for you.”

You nodded, already feeling the stress of your workweek falling away as you walked over to him. Moving in together had been the best decision you’d made all year. Even though you rarely saw each other in recent weeks due to work, the few moments like this reminded you that you’d always be his mostly joking but you were into it live-in sex kitten.

—

“Iggy, wake up.” You poked at him, knowing you should’ve felt bad, but you were too excited to keep this to yourself.

His eyes slowly opened, roaming for a moment before settling on you. “What’s wrong, darling?”

You leaned over him, holding a mewling bundle of kittens. “Nothing’s wrong. Friendly had her babies.”

He blinked once, twice, then sat up. Backing away a step, you held out the kittens to show them off. They had to be less than an hour old. Friendly had been laying around like usual when you’d gone to bed, and you’d heard the quiet little noises they made when you’d gotten up for water.

Ignis put on his glasses, the blanket falling away from his chest as he leaned forward to look at them. You swallowed your libido at the sight of him. This wasn’t the time, you told yourself. Even though he did make bedhead look incredible.

“It’s no good to move them,” he said, blinking away sleep. “Where is Friendly? She may try to hide them somewhere so they won’t be bothered any further.”

You hadn’t thought about that, feeling a little guilty about bundling them up like this. You’d just wanted them to be comfy and safe. As you turned to take them back to Friendly, Ignis stopped you with a small gasp.

“Is that my Armani coat?”

Because it was his Armani, and there was some pretty gross stuff on these wet little newborns smearing all over the fine fabric, you rushed out of the room without an answer. Friendly and Ignis both were going to be cross with you for moving the kittens and wrapping them up in a designer
You hadn’t realized that trying to be a good cat mom and girlfriend could backfire so easily.

—

Your home smelled heavenly when you stepped through the front door. Walking directly to the kitchen after taking off your coat, you placed your bag on the table and looked at Ignis. “What’s cookin’, hot stuff?”

His gaze remained focused on removing a sheet of gingerbread cookies from the oven. “I don’t believe that’s how it goes.”

He swatted at your hand when you reached over to poke at the cookies. You stuck out your tongue, peering around at everything he’d made while you were out. “Did some stress baking, huh?”

“No, not so much stress as preparation,” he said, taking off the oven mitts. “I’ve made gingerbread men using your mother’s recipe.”

“Oooh, flattery. I like it.” You nodded with a smile. “Maybe they won’t kill us after all.”

He turned off the oven, putting things away while you leaned against the counter uselessly. “They aren’t going to kill us. We’re all adults. We made a decision, and they will have to respect it.”

“Oh, here’s my suggestion.” You picked at a gingerbread man with a broken leg. “We just go over dowry stuff and general agreements at the meeting with my mom and your uncle tonight.”

He nodded along, bringing a hand up to your cheek. It helped ease your discomfort, but only a little. “Then at the next meeting like— five years from now, we tell them that we already live together.”

That made him chuckle.

“And, uh, at the ten year meeting,” You broke the gingerbread man’s other leg, getting crumbs on the counter. “We can finally tell them that we eloped when you visited me in Altissia last year.”

He smiled softly, thumb caressing your cheek. “We have to tell them.”

Your eyes searched his. “The guys know. Luna and Ravus know. Isn’t that enough for now?”

The tip of his nose brushed yours as he drew close. “I want everyone to know. Should King Regis himself pass us in the Citadel, I want to be able to say, ‘your majesty, this is my beautiful wife. Why yes, she does have food on her face. I assure you that’s but one of her many charms.’”

You swallowed, a flush overtaking your face. Even now, with all of your anxieties over being a countess as well as a director, you regretted nothing. He still made your heart ache in the best way.

You kissed him, quick and playful, before drawing away and picking up the bag you’d dropped on the table.


“Flattery and bribery,” he laughed. “We’ve become quite of one mind in all these years of courtship.”

You placed the book on the table, raising a brow when you looked at him. “I thought courtship
ended with marriage.”

He stepped closer, snaking arms around your waist and drawing you close again. “Don’t be silly. It never ends.”

Sliding your hands up his chest to rest at his neck, you frowned slightly. “That’s kinda daunting.”

He leaned down, mouth grazing your neck. You tilted your head, enjoying the feel of him against you. Did you even have time to enjoy each other before you needed to get ready for the meeting? You could make time, if you were smart about it.

“Let me fuck you,” you breathed as he left marks along your neck.

“Mm, I’m far too sore from the new training,” he murmured, hooking the collar of your shirt with a finger to nip at your shoulder.

You laughed lightly. “Your ass is sore from training? What exactly are they making you do, babe? Should I be concerned?”

He chuckled against your neck, drawing back to look at you. “Perhaps, after spending my days at the mercy of the royal marshal, I’d prefer someone surrender to me for the night.”

The way his grip tightened at your waist, his fingers digging into your sides and sliding down to grip your behind, had you melting into him. “O-okay.”

“I’m afraid we have to get ready,” he said, lowering his mouth to your neck again. “We have little time, and you know how atrocious traffic is at this hour.”

A moan falling from your lips became a whine. “But it’s been days. Iggy, please.”

Mouth leaving your neck, he pressed a lingering kiss to your lips. When he drew back, you followed, pulling him down for more. He chuckled into it, lips moving against yours in wet, breathy motions.

“Later,” he said between kisses. “I’ll make it more than worth the wait.”

You let him go reluctantly, getting the feeling that he wouldn’t keep that promise once the meeting was over.

Ignis suddenly chuckled again as he left the kitchen. “Your suggestion to wait a decade to tell them is tempting, I must say. My only fear is that we may have a child by then, and I perish the thought of keeping them a secret.”

It was said jokingly, but you stalled in the hallway, watching him disappear into the bedroom. Did he know? Catching up, you found him undressing to change into something more formal, an easy smile on his face. No, he had no idea. You pulled your shirt over your head, digging into your closet for something nice.

Mom and Uncle weren’t going to be the only ones surprised tonight.

—

Mirum’s office was too hot, you felt, as you shifted in your chair. She sat next to you, going over the proposal you’d both worked on to present to King Regis concerning recent tax changes. Half of this stuff went over your head, but Ignis had seemed impressed by your initiative to take care of your
countess duties while not busy with a film so you’d wanted to make him proud.

Your profession lended you to months of free time between big projects that came up. It was convenient and had ended up being the perfect way to balance your energy and time between your responsibilities. If only you understood politics more. They were confusing and sometimes, utterly boring. Right now you blamed your lack of focus on Mirum’s lack of air conditioning.

A wave of nausea struck you suddenly but not surprisingly. You bent over to expel into a bin she’d placed nearby. This ended up being a long one, and you felt her hold your hair back with one hand while she pressed a button on her office phone with the other.

“Could we get more tea for Lady Scientia, please?”

“Gods, don’t call me that,” you said, sitting upright.

She let go of your hair and handed you a handkerchief, her red lips forming a smile. “Still not used to it?”

You grunted noncommittally, wiping your mouth with a grimace. “It offputting to call me a lady when I’m blowing chunks everywhere.”

She rested an elbow on her desk, arching a brow. “Well, I think you’re simply glowing, my dear.”

With a groan, you shifted in your chair again. Your growing tummy was all kinds of uncomfortable, going to the bathroom all the time, making you nauseous and shit. You could tell Mirum was eating it up, even if it was good natured. She was far from envying you anymore, especially now.

Rubbing a hand over your stomach absentmindedly, you sighed. “So anyway, tax stuff?”

She gave an unladylike snort before pointing at the paperwork strewn about her desk. You were already droning her out within minutes.

—

Ignis’ hands went to your stomach as soon as he crawled into bed; it was routine. You’d been laying there for over an hour, dozing in and out, but he’d just gotten home. His fingers traced soft, circular patterns on your skin before his palms rested flat there, waiting for any sign of movement.

“She’s asleep,” you said, opening your eyes to look at him in the dim light.

“As you should be,” he lightly admonished, moving closer to brush his lips across your forehead. “What has you up at this hour?”

“Mmm, waiting for you.” You slid a hand underneath his shirt, fingers trailing up his abs. “Go drink an ebony and come back ready to fuck.”

He chuckled, his breath hitting your hair. “Is that what you want?”

You tugged at his shirt impatiently. “If you’re not too tired.”

He kissed your head, sitting up to slide his shirt off. “Never.”

—

Soft snores and Prompto’s distant laughter, a warm breeze and the occasional cloud, these made up the backdrop to your afternoon. Ignis arrived when he said he would, rounding Mom’s house just as
the clouds opened up to light up the grassy lawn in a vibrant green. The sunlight didn’t touch you, though, from where you sat in the shade of the tree.

Ignis relaxed when sitting next to you, resting his head on yours, chin fitting there comfortably. One of his hands gently tousled your daughter’s hair, something she usually hated, but she was napping and defenseless now.

The absence of a greeting threw you a little, but it wouldn’t be the first time he’d left work with a lot on his mind. Making the drive out here wasn’t exactly conductive for his always be at the ready for Noctis modus operandi. It was special that he did these things only for you. A weekend visit with family, Prompto included.

This was the kind of stuff you’d imagined life would be like with him. To find yourself finally here was a profoundly comforting experience, and you wished, more than anything, to stay like this for as long as you possibly could.

He touched your hand, his fingers curling around yours and giving them a gentle squeeze. You returned the light pressure, sighing contently. His chest was warm at your cheek, his thumb rubbing small circles on the back of your hand.

—

“The sun’s so loud today.”

Ignis looked at you, tracing your profile with his eyes. He understood what you meant. It was cruel for the gods to give you a bright, sunny day when you were trying to mourn. The giant rock you both sat atop was uncomfortable, and with every shift, his bottom grew more numb. But he remained quiet, wanting to support you with his presence and not unnecessary blather.

Not that he knew what to say to comfort you. He’d never had his own chocobo, much less endured the loss of such a pet. He wasn’t even sure why he felt such a strong desire to be by your side for this.

You saw something on the ground, perking up for a second. Looking over your shoulder at him with a weak smile, you said, “Dandelion puffs. I’m gonna pick some. Hold on.”

He watched you disappear as you climbed down the rock. Then, he peered into the distance. The long driveway was empty, the wind tossing waves through the wheatfields that surrounded your childhood home. It was peaceful here. He liked this fresh air outside the city. When you reappeared, he helped you up and took a dandelion when you offered.

“Blow on it for a wish.”

He twisted the stem between his fingers, then thought it couldn’t hurt to play along. With a single breath, he sent the seeds flying through the air. His wish was simple, the barest thought crossing his mind.

You caught his attention with a distressed noise. Turning to you, he found you wiping at your face. He had to fight a smile, suddenly reminded of why he felt that need to be near you. The wind had blown the seeds back toward you, catching at the corners of your mouth and in your eyes. Gently, he rubbed the little, white puffs off your face. Your eyes were closed, and a pout rested on your lips. Moments such as this were undeniably the cause of his interest in you. He didn’t know what to do with himself.

Your eyes fluttered open, searching his. “Did you make a wish?”
“I did.”
You smiled again, softly this time. “I hope it comes true.”

His heart suddenly unraveled, let loose with a certainty he’d never known before. A featherlight feeling overtook his earlier amusement, growing at your warm smile.

His wish was simple.

With a gentle smile of his own, voice coming out soft and shaky, he couldn’t look away. “As do I.”

Chapter End Notes

For anyone interested, here is a tiny epilogue from Ravus' pov. He was the sole witness to their elopement.

I hope this ending was the right amount of dumb and corny that I wanted it to be. Now that it’s finished, I’m probably gonna go back to my cave and hibernate before coming back with more garbage.

If you have any thoughts, good or bad, I’d be more than happy to hear them! I can’t thank you enough for reading and all of the encouragement I’ve been given. I have truly appreciated every last bit of it. ❤️

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