Borrowed Time

by acesdesire

Summary

It has been eight months since the light has been restored to Eos, and Noctis is in the midst of rebuilding his kingdom. Since his return to the throne, he has allowed himself to at least consider the possibility that Prompto could rule alongside him. The only problem is, Prompto has been keeping himself at a distance. Noctis has to wonder, what is it that is keeping them apart, and is there something he can do to fix it?

Notes

Hello, everybody! So, here I am, uploading this massive story that I've had in the works for over two years now. After months of beta searching with no luck, I've decided to simply bite the bullet and give this a go myself. I've made tons of notes, cue cards, and timelines to help me pull this thing together as well as I can, and I hope it comes across as clean and polished as I always wanted it to be.

The idea for this story began back when I first heard one of the game developers say Prompto might not have a long lifespan because of the way he was created. Of course, as a Prompto fan, I could not accept this piece of information, and had to take it upon myself to fix it. The whole game ending needed a fix-it in my opinion, anyway, so after two years of writing, here we are!
I've written over 250,000 words to date, and the story is mostly done, save for a few gaps later on, which I will hopefully have filled in before it's time to upload those chapters. I've never uploaded a major story like this before finishing it 100%, so this is kind of new territory for me, but I think at this point, it's the best way for me to stay committed to it and see it through to the end. Don't worry, finishing this is a bucket-list item for me, so I will not quit until I finish and upload every chapter!

I hope everyone enjoys this first little taste of this story, and enjoys reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Without further ado, I present to you... Borrowed Time. Happy reading!
Chapter 1

“Have a good evening, Highness.” Ignis’ voice was full of fondness, and so much relief; there was a time when he and his companions never thought they would get to address Noct like that again, but he was here, and he was alive. Gladio gave a nod of agreement as he helped Ignis down the steps of the caravan. They would travel back to Insomnia tonight to reconvene with the glaives who remained there. The sooner they could recruit help for the restoration of the Citadel, the better. Not to mention, they were eager to share the good news: their king had survived, even though he was never meant to bring back the light and still escape with his life.

As the screen door swung shut, Noctis and Prompto exchanged a glance—Noct looking uncertain, and Prompto looking downright nervous. Noct strolled over to shut and lock the inside door; he wasn’t sure how much privacy they would want or need tonight, but even if they didn’t do anything more than talk, he was sure they wouldn’t want any interruptions in this conversation.

“So... we made it, Noct,” came a breath of relief from behind. Noctis slowly spun around and took a seat at the small card table across from Prompto. His friend smiled shyly at him before averting his gaze to the window beside him. Sunset was coming much too early tonight, having just gotten the light back, and Prompto hoped with all his heart that the sun would rise without fail tomorrow.

“Yeah,” Noct smiled, softly, following his companion’s gaze to the pink sky outside. His gaze didn’t linger, as he didn’t long for this sight as much as Prompto did; he hadn’t suffered through the years of endless night. Instead, Noct’s gaze travelled to Prompto’s face, studying the tiny ways in which it had changed. At least those laugh lines probably meant he had kept his positivity and sense of humour through these tough times, right?

“Prompto?” Noct’s voice was so gentle, causing Prompto to look up, though he still looked a little wary. Of what? Of him? Noct bravely reached out for one of his hands that were resting on the table, needing to rid him of whatever tension lay between them. Prompto’s fingers were rougher than he remembered, his trigger finger the roughest of all, and Noct swallowed hard as he tried to imagine how many battles Prompto had had to fight without him.

“How have you been holding up all this time? And you can be honest,” Noctis murmured, intending to provide some genuine comfort. He was startled when Prompto laughed.

“Sounds like you expected me to fall apart without you.”

“I didn’t mean it like that—I mean, I know you’re strong, and obviously, you made it this far, but...” Noctis trailed off, and averted his eyes. “I know I would have had some trouble... if I’d lost you,” Noct admitted, solemnly, his gaze fixed on the table.

The confession made Prompto’s heart twinge, and his teasing grin faded as he regretted tormenting his friend. He brushed a thumb over the back of Noct’s hand, letting him know he appreciated what he’d said.

“I certainly had some trouble,” Prompto said, with a flicker of a smile, but it was sad. Eyes met
“In the beginning, I was a wreck,” he divulged, but didn’t feel like dragging Noct down with the details—the way he’d fallen to his knees, crying in despair in front of the crystal until Gladio and Ignis had to carry him away; the way he used to break down at the drop of a hat; the way night terrors ruined his sleep.

“But there comes a point when you’ve cried yourself dry, and you can either give up or keep fighting.” Prompto looked up to meet Noctis’ eyes before continuing. “And I knew what you would have wanted me to do.”

“Thank you,” Noct smiled, squeezing his hand. “For fighting, for doing what you could to keep people safe.”

“Come on, it was the least I could do for you,” Prompto chuckled, softly. Silence set in, and their other hands slowly wandered across the table to link as well, meeting somewhere in the middle as their owners stared out at the darkening sky. Their actions should have told Noct what he needed to know, but he had to make sure.

“Was there anyone around to help you through this? I mean, like Cindy, or...?” he tried, fumbling with his words.

“What do you mean?” Prompto asked very slowly, his eyes shy and curious. They seemed to flicker uncertainly, or maybe it just looked that way in the unnatural, yellow light of the caravan.

“I mean...” Noct started, sucking in a loud and uncomfortable breath, finding it difficult to properly choose his words. “When it comes to us, do you still...?”

Now Noct was the one with worried eyes, and they stared up at Prompto, seeming brighter than ever with his long hair swept away from his face; those eyes used to be so heavily covered in bangs, which sometimes helped to hide his emotions, but they were out on display for all to see now. Prompto still appeared anxious, but he leaned forward slightly in his seat, his hands clutching Noctis’ a little tighter.

“I still,” he assured him, giving a tiny, innocent shrug, and before he knew it, Noctis was leaning in across the table. Prompto wasn’t about to deny either of them this moment, and he leaned in to meet his king’s lips. Noctis’ technique, and the feel of his lips was very much the same, but Prompto couldn’t help but chuckle as his stubble tickled his skin. He heard Noct give a muffled laugh against his lips, too, and knew he was feeling the same thing—a kiss that was familiar, but new; different, but so very good.

Prompto was the first to pull back, wanting to look into Noctis’ eyes again to confirm that this time he wasn’t dreaming. This time he wouldn’t have to watch as Noct vanished before him, was brutally murdered or sucked into the crystal. He wouldn’t have to wake up in a cold sweat, or cry into his pillow when he remembered his prince was gone.

“It’s been a long ten years,” he laughed quietly, and absentmindedly tugged his bottom lip into his mouth to taste Noctis again, which did not go unnoticed by the man across the table. Noct thought it was endearing, and quite adorable, but it also saddened him that his absence had taken such a toll on Prompto, making this moment so very precious to him.

“I know that, to me, it doesn’t feel like ten years have passed, but... I’ve missed you, too,” Noct murmured. He could remember times in the crystal when he would try to call out to his friends—crying out Prompto’s name, in particular—so loudly in his head, but never being able to get the
sounds past his throat. There were times when Prompto would appear in his dreams. Sometimes his hand would be there in front of him, the rest of his body shrouded in a white light, and Noct would reach out for him, but he was always too far away to grasp. He may not have been fully lucid in the crystal, but his mind certainly hadn’t been void of thought.

Prompto smiled at the confession, and Noct leaned in again, noses brushing. He could feel Prompto’s quick and ragged breaths on his chin, and could feel the urgency of the moment increase. Noctis wanted nothing more than to pick up where they’d left off all those years ago. They’d parted in Zegnautus Keep of all places, right after Prompto had told the guys about his origins. They had only gotten a brief chance to talk in private after that, during which time Prompto had seemed to keep his distance, sitting across the bed from Noct instead of venturing over to sit beside him. Prompto had deserved about a hundred hugs and kisses that day, after his confession about the MTs and after being held as Ardyn’s prisoner, but Noct had been afraid to seek much contact when Prompto had still seemed a little reserved. He could make up for that now, right? Couldn’t he at least try?

Noctis unlaced a hand from Prompto’s, but only to tangle it in the back of his hair instead. Prompto whimpered weakly, his heart aching as he realized how desperately he had missed this man, and how many of his feelings he had cut off so he would no longer suffer the pain of losing him. Now all of those emotions were all trickling back, and it was overwhelming. He wanted to cry tears of both joy and sadness, of satisfaction and disbelief, but he held back; if Noct saw tears, it might end this blissful moment all too soon.

Prompto could sense Noct standing up across from him, though his lips and hands remained in place. The hand in Prompto’s hair tugged upward slightly, and Prompto followed the gentle coaxing, getting to his feet as well. Kisses hastened, and they stumbled away from the table, Noct’s hand finding Prompto’s waist as soon as the darn thing was no longer between them.

They manoeuvred through the tiny caravan and collapsed onto the bed with very little grace, Prompto narrowly avoiding hitting his head on the upper bunk as Noctis pulled him down. Hands worked together to send Noct’s dark grey t-shirt tumbling towards the floor, and Prompto found his hands trailing over Noct’s chest as he kissed him. Just hours before, they had been cleaning blood from that spot where the ghostly sword had been thrust through him. Now, there was no sword, no blood, nor wound. There was not even the tiniest mark of evidence that Noctis’ life had almost been taken from him that day, and Prompto felt tears stinging his eyes now as he absorbed that fact. He blinked, and pulled back from Noct’s lips, earning a confused and slightly disappointed look from the king.

“Everything okay?” Noct asked, his hand settling into the small of Prompto’s back and rubbing gently, his blue eyes gaining more worry by the second. Prompto nodded, but his eyes travelled down to Noctis’ bare chest. He watched his fingertips rub over the smooth skin, still finding it hard to believe that there was no damage at all after the incident in the throne room. Had the Astrals been the ones to save and heal Noct after his sacrifice? Prompto supposed no one would ever know for sure.

“It all just seems too good to be true, you know?” he said, tearfully, and felt a painful jerk in his stomach that reminded him it was too good to be true. Even if Noct was in the clear, this wasn’t Prompto’s fairytale ending, as much as he wanted it to be.

Noct stared at his friend with penetrating eyes, trying so hard to read him. There was still that hint of humour in his voice that rarely seemed to leave, yet Noctis sensed there was a darkness behind those words. He couldn’t pinpoint what it was, but felt there was something Prompto wasn’t saying. Of course, it wouldn’t be surprising. He probably had ten years’ worth of things he wanted
to say, and certainly couldn’t pour them all out for him right here and now. Rebuilding would take time. Even trust would take time. They may have known each other better than anyone before, but Noct needed to get to know this older Prompto—the one who had been through so much during his absence.

“Noct, do you mind if we... just take things slow?” Prompto asked, before Noctis could decide what he wanted to say next. The king’s eyes widened slightly, and Prompto hoped it was more out of confusion than hurt, but it was hard to say for sure.

“I know. I really want this, too, but we just saved the world. We should probably... take a little time to fix your kingdom before we start fixing ourselves.” Noctis let out a breath, which was a poorly disguised sigh, and Prompto lowered his head in regret and embarrassment. He shifted backwards to kneel near the end of the bed, giving Noctis the room he needed to sit up. He rubbed his arm sheepishly, looking like a child awaiting punishment.

“I’ve let you down,” Prompto whispered, sorrowfully, but Noct quickly shook his head.

“Not at all,” he promised. “I mean, of course, I wasn’t opposed to...” He gave an amused glance at the abandoned shirt on the floor, and it was enough to make Prompto chuckle softly.

“But I understand, this is all happening pretty fast,” he said, reaching out for Prompto’s hand again—tenderly like he had at the beginning of their conversation. He brought it to his lips and softly kissed the back of his knuckles.

“So, take all the time you need, okay? I’ll wait.”

“Thank you for coming to see me today,” Noctis smiled softly, his eyes scanning over each of the citizens before him. A mother and father were kneeling before the throne, their little girl staring up at the King with wide, curious eyes, her lips parted in awe. Noct scooted forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I hope you enjoy your life in Lucis, little one,” he said, addressing the young girl, who swayed timidly at his words, her hands laced behind her back, blonde hair sparkling in the sunlight.

“Thank you so much, Your Majesty,” the father said, helping his wife up as he got to his feet.

“You’re very welcome. One of my glaives will escort you out.” Noctis gave a nod to a young glaive, who stood at the doorway to the throne room, and she strode forward.

“Follow me,” she instructed with a brief flash of a smile, and led the people out. As the door shut behind them, Gladio abandoned his post at the other side of the door, stepping forward and stretching an arm across his chest, holding it tight with his elbow before stretching the other arm in the same fashion.

“You did good,” he praised, and Noctis rubbed his temples, still leaning forward, but slouching more than when his visitors were present.

“So many people have been through so much,” the King breathed, sadly and wearily. Gladio halted when he reached the stairway leading to the throne, looking up at Noctis for permission—who gave an approving nod—before ascending to the next platform up and leaning casually against the railing.

“They were from Niflheim?” Gladio inquired, double-checking what he’d overheard from his
position at the entryway.

“Yeah. If the circumstances had been just a little different, they could have ended up in Besithia’s laboratory. The girl’s parents... they could have easily been snatched up when they were infants, when Verstael was experimenting with the daemonification,” Noctis lamented, gaze fixed on the floor. Gladio let out a grunt of agreement, not liking the thought any more than Noctis did, and his thoughts instinctively travelled to their companion who had been far too close to those experiments.

“Speaking of which... you know what today is, right?” Gladio quizzed. Noctis popped back up in his seat, rotating his shoulders in what looked like uncomfortable motions rather than a good stretch. Prompto is coming back today. He’d been trying not to think about it, yet it had been on his mind enough to make him feel sick to his stomach.

“Yeah. I know,” he replied, quickly and casually.

“Feeling okay about it?” Gladio smirked at the question.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because the last time Prompto was here, you got kind of sulky.” Noctis’ mouth popped open in shock at the accusation, then he pouted sourly.

“I wasn’t sulky,” he protested, though his current expression reflected the mood perfectly; he’d worn that face all week the last time Prompto had visited. “Things have just been a little strained between us. I’m... not exactly sure why, to be honest.”

Gladio peered up at his friend, who looked so pensive as he gazed straight ahead now. He had to admit, he had been surprised as well to see Prompto so cautious around Noctis, so quiet and timid that Gladio thought the kid might actually be avoiding his friend, but he wasn’t about to get involved. Gladio knew there were reasons why Prompto might not want to jump right back into things with Noctis, and he didn’t want to push the guy; it was really none of his business.

“Well,” Gladio grunted. “I guess you can’t expect things to fall right back into place. Ten years is a long time. Maybe he’ll be more relaxed now that the mission you sent him on is over, and he can settle back in here.”

“I didn’t send Prompto on this mission. He volunteered,” Noct defensively clarified, and Gladio smirked as he threw his hands up in mock surrender. His king may have been trying to play off Prompto’s return like it was nothing, but he was wound far too tight to make that act believable.

Noctis caught on to that, too, when he saw Gladio trying to hide that amused smile, and he lowered his head in regret. It was childish to pretend this wasn’t bothering him, and would be far more honourable to simply admit it.

Honestly, I feel like he wanted the distance from me,” Noctis solemnly confessed, his dark lashes falling down to cover his eyes.

“Don’t let this get you down, Noct.” Noctis nearly coughed as a giant hand patted him on the back; he’d been so caught up in his thoughts, he hadn’t even noticed Gladio climbing the last set of steps to his throne. Now, he stood beside him, his hand remaining on his back in a sign of comfort.

“Prompto will come around. Don’t forget, he’s been through a lot, too, and he took your disappearance pretty hard,” Gladio reminded him. Noctis’ eyes flickered up to his Shield for a moment before returning to the floor as he wondered what Prompto had gone through back then.
His answers about that time had been so vague when they had talked that night in the trailer, and since then, they hadn’t spoken much at all—at least not in private.

“Do you think... he’s scared of losing me again?” the king asked, with eyes that reflected those of a young Noctis when they looked up to stare at Gladio. Gladio gave a warm smile, and gave his friend another pat on the back.

“I think you should just talk to him.”

It was weird being back in Insomnia, seeing only mere pieces of a city he remembered, and other pieces that had been completely replaced or reconstructed. It was almost familiar, almost comforting, but Prompto felt more sick than anything as he took in the sights—the sushi place where Noctis used to work was now a bank; the vintage camera shop and antique store was now a venue that sold only modern electronics. From the outside, the arcade didn’t even look anything like it used to, its familiar sign now lit up with different coloured lights and updated lettering. Prompto wondered if they had managed to salvage any of the old games he and Noct used to play.

“You doing okay back there?” The glaive ahead asked from the driver’s seat. It hadn’t been the first time he’d caught Prompto looking rather carsick in the rear view mirror during the journey back from Leide, but this time it had nothing to do with the locomotion.

“I’m fine,” Prompto promised, but he only felt even more ill when they pulled up to the gates to the Citadel. The driver said his name into the roadside speaker, and a voice responded, giving them the go-ahead to enter. Prompto swallowed hard as the metal gate swung open, granting them passage to the courtyard.

This was it. He had completed the last stage of his mission. He was back for good, and dodging Noctis would be much more difficult now that they would be under the same roof—an extraordinarily large roof, but still... There were only so many places to hide in the Citadel.

“Here we are,” the driver announced much too soon. He stopped the car in front of the palace steps, uttering that he would park the vehicle in the back of the building and meet them inside later. Prompto thanked him, and he and the two other glaives that had accompanied him stepped out of the car as he did.

Together they ascended the steps, the two calling quick goodbyes to Prompto once they reached the top, and disappearing inside the heavy doors, probably heading straight for the showers. Prompto wished he could do the same, as they were all a little grimy from a couple of days of driving in close quarters, but he had been instructed to report in as soon as he arrived back. With a sigh, and an unsettled flutter in his heart, he pulled open the double doors and slipped inside.

The lobby was quiet and empty, and he was relieved that his return didn’t call for celebration; knowing his friends, it wouldn’t have been completely out of the ordinary to see coloured banners and ‘welcome home’ signs upon arrival. He strode directly to the elevator and hit the button for the eleventh floor, and waited patiently, but the ride was too short. Before he knew it, he was stepping off, his heart pounding now as he headed for the advisor’s quarters. Quietly, he gave a knock on the intricately designed black door, and Ignis appeared before him seconds later.

“Hey, Iggy,” Prompto greeted softly, his gaze travelling immediately to the man’s glasses as he adjusted them over his blind eyes.

“Prompto,” Ignis smiled, never questioning who owned that voice. “So, you’ve returned safely.”
“Yep. All in one piece. Happy to report that there were no sour negotiations anywhere, really,” he said, trying to muster his chipper tone, but not quite managing. It was flat, containing a poorly disguised sadness.

“That’s good to hear. We shall discuss said negotiations further with the council. Shall I inform the king?”

“Sure...” Prompto hadn’t meant it to, but the word came out soft and unconvincing. To his surprise, he felt a hand on his shoulder as his solemn gaze tumbled downward. His eyes flickered up towards his friend only for a second or two to gauge his expression, but ever-stoic Ignis was still hard to read. His lips were pulled into a straight line, his brows tugged downward ever so slightly.

“Prompto, if you’re concerned about your rapport with Noct—“ he started, but Prompto knew by his tone where his thoughts were going. Ignis wasn’t wrong in his assumptions either, but Prompto wasn’t ready to lay it all on the line just yet. How he was feeling, how scared he was... It wasn’t the time for dwelling on any of it.

“Rekindling things can wait until the kingdom is in better shape,” Prompto said, before Ignis could get another word in, but the man could sense the uncertainty in Prompto’s tone; the boy was doubtful they even would rekindle things.

“Prompto,” Ignis addressed softly. His caring tone made the younger man shut up and listen, his blue eyes perking up in curiosity. Ignis gently squeezed his shoulder as he spoke.

“I understand how you must be feeling right now, but I believe it would be best for both of you if you informed Noct of our discoveries concerning your well-being.” Prompto appreciated how kind and patient his friend was being with him, but his suggestion was far easier said than done. Prompto shook his head, forgetting Ignis couldn’t see the motion.

“No need to drag him down with that right now. He’s got enough on his plate;” he said, trying yet again to maintain a cheerful front, and Ignis could hear him making a move to leave. He stepped forward as Prompto stepped back, his hand squeezing the young man’s shoulder one last time.

“I shouldn’t have to tell you not to bottle this up, but I know you will do whatever you feel is best for everyone,” Ignis said, with an ounce of accusation in his tone that stung a little, as Prompto knew the man was referring to the past—when Prompto had felt the need to hide his barcode from even his closest friends. “Just promise that if it becomes too much, and you don’t feel you can talk to the king about this—”

“I’ll talk to you or Gladio. Promise,” Prompto swore, with a smile that Ignis could hear in his voice. He sounded honest enough, so Ignis didn’t feel he had any reason to doubt him, at least for the time being. The elder gave a nod and released Prompto from his grasp.

“I’ll gather the council.”

Noctis was a nervous wreck as he sat in the meeting room, feeling like a hundred pairs of eyes were on him as they sat around the long table. In actuality, no more than eight people watched him as he subtly tried to slow his breathing. He hoped to calm himself down as he waited, the anticipation of seeing Prompto bubbling up inside him. He felt like a child waiting for a birthday gift, but with a slight fear that he might not like whatever he was going to get.

He perked up at the sound of the door swinging open, and Prompto hurried in, looking frazzled as
he tried to keep what looked like various papers from falling out of his stuffed notebook. He ran a
hand through his hair to distract himself from the fact that he had gained a lot of unwanted
attention upon entry, only making himself look even less put together. Noctis wondered if
Prompto’s current state had anything to do with the apprehension of seeing him, too; he sort of
hoped it did, so he wouldn’t be alone in his anxious state.

“So sorry I’m late,” Prompto breathlessly announced, quickly taking his seat in the last empty
chair, and setting his notebook down on the shiny black table. “I was just unpacking my stuff, and
I lost track of time.”

“No worries, Prompto. We understand you’re just getting settled in,” Noctis addressed him, with a
small nod and gentle eyes that Prompto timidly met only for a moment; he wasn’t sure if the short
bout of eye contact relieved him or not.

“Right, thanks.” Ignis could hear Prompto struggling to catch his breath as he sat there next to him,
so he spoke up to give him a moment to recover.

“Perhaps not everyone has been properly introduced. We have a couple of guests sitting in with us
today—the glaives who were on assignment with Prompto. Meet Elea, a glaive who proved herself
to Bahamut on the Isle of Angelgard,” he explained, waving blindly towards one of the girls on the
opposite side of the table with Iris.

Although Elea had never spoken of that time in her life during their mission together, Prompto
remembered being told the stories by others—stories of the glaives who defeated Bahamut on the
Isle. After that, it was said that some were chosen to stay and defend Angelgard until Noctis came
out of his crystal slumber, and some even died for the cause. A few members of the council eyed
the warrior and acknowledged her with a nod.

“And Fae, who played a large role in keeping citizens safe during those ten dark years,” Ignis
announced, waving to the next glaive.

Prompto’s gaze travelled to the young girl with bright green eyes, her cherry-red hair fading into
pink as it fell around her shoulders. Her hair was pulled into braids that ran just above her ears and
met in the back, and although she didn’t wear much of a smile, there was a light in her eyes that
had been nowhere in sight when she and Prompto had first met.

“Fae and I go way back. We used to fight together in Lestallum,” Prompto informed the crowd.

“It’s true,” Fae agreed with a curve of her lips.

Noctis found himself leaning forward in his seat, intrigued by this part of his best friend’s life that
was completely unfamiliar to him. There was this sickening feeling—this worry, even—that he had
missed something vital.

“So, let’s get to it. What’d you find out?” Gladio butted in, if only to get that perturbed look off of
his king’s face.

“Well,” Prompto started, opening his notebook and flipping through until he found the page he
wanted. “Secretary Claustra has agreed to help with restoration efforts of Insomnia, assuming we
lend Altissia the same aid. I told her it would be no problem. Uh...” Prompto hummed as he flipped
to the next page. “Oh right. Galahd. I think they would like to be part of Lucis again, but it’s going
to take some time to win that trust back. They don’t have much leadership there aside from a guy
named Libertus, who seems to be taking charge for now. They also don’t have much in the way of
funds to support themselves.”
He glanced up at the king who nodded pensively.

“Alright, sounds like we may need another visit there in the near future, depending on how things go, I suppose. What else?” Noct queried.

“As for Niflheim, I wasn’t quite sure who to speak to,” Prompto went on. “The other glaives and I talked to a few town mayors, but there’s no real leader there anymore either. Most of the regions I visited are just so happy to be at peace, they’re content to be part of Lucis or maintain their own regions themselves.”

“How are communications?”

“Good. We can probably maintain healthy long-distance relations. I don’t think another visit is necessary at this time,” Prompto announced.

“You have contacts in your notes?” Noct inquired.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Noct nearly cringed at those words that seemed so terribly out of place coming from his longtime friend. He caught Prompto’s eye, Prompto looking totally oblivious to the fact that he’d done something to cause Noctis so much heartache, so Noct pushed forth a small smile. Perhaps Prompto just didn’t feel it appropriate to address him by name in a meeting such as this; it was probably a simple formality in the presence of others, though that had never been a concern for him in the past.

“Alright then,” Noctis eventually said, taking a bit longer than expected for him to reply to Prompto’s previous comment. “Perhaps we can discuss those names at a later time, if correspondence with any of the regions is necessary.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Prompto nodded, noticing even in the brief meeting of their eyes that there was a wounded look in Noct’s. Prompto swallowed hard and tried to ignore it.

The rest of the meeting was fairly uneventful. Ignis asked most of the questions, while Cor and Prompto carried out the better part of the discussions. To be honest, Noctis zoned out the majority of the time, absorbing the odd comment here and there, but mostly, his attention was on Prompto —his strong jaw and facial features that had filled out since he’d seen him last, the goatee that Noctis would have once bet he couldn’t even grow, the way his hair was slightly shorter and less wildly styled than it used to be. Noctis wondered how much ten years could really change someone. Just because Prompto looked older didn’t mean he’d lost his cheery disposition, or his fascination with chocobos...or his love for him.

Some time together was probably all they needed to get back to where they had been all those years ago, and now that Prompto was back in Insomnia for good, finding time to spend together shouldn’t be that hard, in theory at least.

It didn’t take much effort to recall the way they used to be attached at the hip, the way they used to be able to make each other smile at the drop of a hat, and how they always used to know exactly what to say when the other was feeling down. Noctis couldn’t forget all the ways in which Prompto had confided in him—about his family, his insecurities, his feelings for him—and Noctis had sought comfort in Prompto just as many times, if not more. He had cried on his shoulder on more than one occasion—about his fears of inheriting the throne, when his father had become increasingly ill, and of course, when King Regis had passed away.

Prompto had always been there, like an extension of Noctis himself that Noctis wasn’t quite sure how to live without now that he had been blessed with its presence. Prompto was there to comfort
him, to love and protect him, and Noctis couldn’t forget how well they fit together—emotionally, physically. They belonged together, and if some part of Prompto still believed that, too, then surely their problems would fade to nothing before they knew it.

“Is that alright with you, Your Majesty?” Ignis inquired, and Noctis bolted upright, realizing he might have been staring at Prompto a little too obviously, his head resting dozily in his palm.

“Um, what?” Noct regretfully had to ask. The amused smirks and stifled laughter did not go unnoticed by him either as he glanced around the table, wondering what he had missed.

“Is it alright if we adjourn for now?”

“Yeah, sure,” Noct said, nonchalantly, sounding like his spoiled teen self again with that ‘do-whatever-you-want’ sort of tone. He could feel his cheeks warming up now, as he honestly had no idea how long the meeting had been going on while he daydreamed.

“That’s it for now, then. Thank you, everyone, for your attendance,” Ignis announced, and everyone got up from their seat, giving Ignis and the king a nod before wandering out.

Prompto was quick to stuff his papers back into his notebook, and gave Noct a brief and rather nervous smile before departing, leaving only Ignis and Noctis behind. Ignis could tell by Noctis’ heavy sigh that he was unhappy, and he listened carefully as the last of the attendees shuffled out before he closed the door and spoke up.

“It’s Prompto, I presume?”

“It’s like we’re kids again and he’s afraid to talk to me,” Noctis mumbled, clearly disheartened. He folded his hands in front of him on the table, his gaze focused on them rather than on his advisor. He didn’t want to see what kind of expression Ignis was giving him right now, as it was probably either pity or disapproval, and he didn’t want either one.

“Did it occur to you that you could seek him out rather than waiting for him to do so? Good communication requires effort from both parties, after all,” Ignis stated, simply, and Noctis felt like he was a student again, being taught a concept far more complicated than this one.

“You really think it’s that easy? Remember the last time he was here?”

It had been four months into Prompto’s mission—four months after Noct had saved the world—and he had returned for a week of rest and relaxation before travelling to the remaining locations to create bonds of peace. Noctis had followed him back to his room with a smile on his face, hoping to spend some time together, but Prompto had given him an apologetic smile in return, thanked him for the invitation, but hoped to have some time to himself. He never showed up at regular meal times, and always took off as soon as any Kingsglaive meetings were over. Noct had tried once more after that to reconnect with him, only to receive the same type of response. After that, he just didn’t feel like setting himself up for the rejection.

“I do, but perhaps he simply needed the rest,” Ignis said, with a slight curve to his lips; he knew full well that in the past, spending time with Noctis had led to quite the opposite.

Noctis remained unconvinced of his argument, and Ignis waited patiently for the king to speak again, or even to give him some hint of his reception to his last comment. When he received nothing, he eventually broke the silence.

“Speak with him, Noct. He’s been through… much more than you can imagine,” Ignis said, softly,
and Noctis slowly looked up with worried eyes that Ignis could feel on him even without his vision.

“What does that mean?” the king cautiously inquired, not sure he wanted to know the details.

“You should ask him yourself,” Ignis replied, trying to make his point for what felt like the tenth time that day. He stood up, indicating to Noctis that he wouldn’t get another word out of him until he took his advice and sought answers from Prompto himself. Noct let out another heavy breath as he stood as well, and followed Ignis toward the exit.

The walk to Prompto’s room was a long one. Noctis’ feet were heavy as he made his way to the elevator and pressed the button for the eleventh floor. He waited with knots in his stomach, unsure of whether he would be relieved or disappointed if the elevator were to get stuck unexpectedly. The device dinged before he was prepared for it, but he exited with as much courage and confidence as he could as he strode down the hallway toward Prompto’s room.

It hadn’t been all that long since he’d been here. He hadn’t told anyone, but from time to time, he would find himself making his way to Prompto’s room, just so he could feel some connection to Prompto when he was half the world away. He would run a hand along the bed where he used to lie, would venture into his closet to see what was left of his wardrobe, and would open up the nightstand to smell the bottle of cologne he had left behind. This invasion of privacy was a secret that he swore would die with him.

Swallowing the guilt and unease he felt from remembering those days at a time like this, he reached a hand out and knocked on the door. He lost count after a few seconds of waiting, all thoughts disappearing as Prompto opened up the door with a tiny smile on his face.

“Hey,” he uttered, softly.

“Hey. Just thought I’d stop by to welcome you back,” Noct replied, relieved that he had come up with a reasonable excuse for being here. Prompto stepped back, and opened the door a little wider to allow Noct entry.

Noct heard the door shut behind him, and Prompto strolled into the room, pulling out a seat at the desk for Noctis before sitting down across from him on the edge of his bed. Judging by the wrinkles on top of the comforter, he had been relaxing with his feet up before his visitor had gotten there.

“It’s good to see you,” Noct said, when Prompto merely gave him a smile. Maybe he was nervous. He certainly didn’t seem to have much to say, nor did he seem eager to speak.

“You, too,” came the man’s reply, and he gave Noct another smile to prove his point. Noctis watched him carefully as he reached for the bottle of alcohol that was on his nightstand, unable to look away as he brought it to his lips, his adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed the liquid. Noctis felt his insides flutter at the sight. Prompto looked so much older and more confident in that moment, but both looked good on him.

“You develop a drinking problem while I was gone?” Noct chuckled, softly, hoping the joke would break the ice. Prompto gave a light laugh and lifted the bottle out in front of him, eyeing it as if it had just become a suspicious object.

“I’d hardly say that,” he grinned, meeting Noctis’ eyes, which filled his friend with relief.
simple a gesture as it was, it had been far too long since Noct had seen him smile that freely—no holding back.

“Just making sure,” Noctis smirked. “Because I haven’t seen you drunk since, you know, that night at my apartment.” He hesitated, hoping the memory of their first intimate experience wouldn’t stir up any uncomfortable memories—only good ones. Prompto seemed amused enough at the mention of that night, his lips lifting up slightly at the corners, and a sparkle in his eyes as they met Noct’s.

“No, but sometimes after hunts, the glaives and I would crack open a cold one, and I kind of acquired a taste for these,” he said, raising the bottle as reference. “It’s been a long day, and I felt like I needed to kick back. You won’t hold it against me, will you?”

“Of course not,” Noctis promised, eyeing the bottle. “So, what’s it taste like?”

“Huh?” Prompto asked, his eyes lighting up in curiosity like they used to when they were younger. He held the bottle out to the side a bit to read the fine print, as if it could describe the flavour better than he could.

“It’s a Galahdian ginger drink. Do you want to try?”

“Sure,” Noct agreed, presuming that having even a swig of liquor in him for this conversation was better than nothing. All they had needed that night at his apartment were some slightly lowered inhibitions to get things moving with them; it had been the night that had started everything, and Noct wondered if that was the key to getting Prompto’s guard down again.

He was brought out of his thoughts when he saw Prompto wandering over to his knapsack to find an extra flask. To his dismay, he found none, and hurried over to the wooden cabinet instead where the wine glasses used to reside, only to find it was empty.

“Specs took them to clean them. Said he didn’t want anyone drinking out of them when he could feel a good inch of dust sitting inside,” Noct said, and Prompto grimaced. “I think it was an exaggeration,” Noct added, hoping he hadn’t turned Prompto’s stomach too much for him to finish his drink.

His own stomach was in knots, however, seeing Prompto fumble around like this trying to find a way to offer him that drink when ten years ago, he would have just handed him the bottle. Maybe they weren’t involved right now, but did Prompto really care that much if they drank from the same flask? They’d shared saliva in much more intimate ways.

Prompto shrugged timidly when he found his efforts to be futile, and he strode back over to Noctis, and passed the bottle to him.

“Shoulda’ just done this in the first place,” he said, flushing. He wished he hadn’t looked for alternatives at all. Now not only did he look like an idiot, but he probably also appeared rather rude. Noctis didn’t seem to care—or he at least didn’t show it—as he brought the bottle to his lips and took a sip.

“Mmm, it’s good,” Noctis approved, baring his teeth as the last of the alcohol’s sting went down his throat. He could taste a mix of lemon and ginger, not a combination he’d ever had growing up within the Wall. He eyed the bottle once more before handing it back to Prompto.

“Take another drink, if you’d like,” Prompto smiled, trying to recover from his earlier attempts at keeping him from doing such a thing. “We probably won’t get another taste of it for a while.”
“Next trip to Galahd, drinks are on me, then,” Noctis said, waving a finger at Prompto as he pushed the bottle further into Prompto’s hands.

Prompto seemed hesitant this time when he brought it to his lips, though when he finally did take a swig, Noctis couldn’t help but notice the way his bottom lip ducked inside his mouth—to taste him or the liquor, Noct wasn’t sure, but secretly hoped it was the former.

“So, Prompto? Are... we okay?” Noctis managed to ask, his eyes worried and tender as they met his friend’s.

“Y-yeah, why wouldn’t we be?” Prompto nervously took another drink and swished it around in his mouth, swallowing hard and feeling it burn all the way down.

“It’s been eight months since I came back. I guess I sort of thought... that you and I would be back together by now,” Noct said. It was weird. They had never even had an official breakup—only an involuntary ten-year separation—but with the distance between them now, their rapport could hardly be called a relationship.

“I know,” Prompto breathed, lowering his head. “And I’m sorry, Noct. But it’s complicated.”

“Okay...” The response came out sounding more like a question that an affirmation, and Noct began to ramble as he paced across the room. “I just don’t get why it’s complicated. I mean, was there someone else? Or is there?”

The possibility that Prompto may have been unfaithful to him had entered his mind several times over the past eight months. As much as he hated to think of his Prompto in someone else’s arms—or someone else’s bed, for that matter—he wouldn’t have blamed him for finding someone else. It would hurt, yes, but there would be no blame. Ten years was a long time to be alone.

Noct stopped his pacing, halting in front of Prompto and reaching for his hands.

“Whatever it is, Prompto, I can take it. Just tell me what’s going on,” the king begged, and Prompto thought it was so strange to see such royalty wanting someone like him so badly. It had always been that way, but the scale had changed somewhat. Instead of the prince yearning for the pauper, the king yearned for the kingsglaive.

Prompto felt this sense of guilt inside him. Would Lucis be proud to see their king begging for him like this? He doubted it, and he hated feeling like he was taking priority over the kingdom. He didn’t doubt that Noctis would rule it well—didn’t doubt it for a second—but still...

“Noct, there’s only ever been you,” Prompto assured him, squeezing his hands gently as they wrapped around his own. “But Lucis is just getting back on its feet, and I don’t want to get in the way of your duties.”

“Get in the way?” Noctis choked out. He’d only ever thought of Prompto as a support system.

It was strange; Prompto had always been Noctis’ escape from royalty, his way back into the normal world when he needed to forget about his duties for a little while. While he thought he should perhaps be a little apprehensive about him becoming a part of his life as a royal, he was instead comforted by it. He couldn’t run from his duties anymore; he had to embrace them now, and maybe he was ready to do that, especially if he could perform those duties with the person of his choosing.

Although in the past, he wouldn’t let himself dream that someday Prompto would rule by his side,
he had since allowed himself to at least consider that it might not be so impossible now that they were adults. Maybe Prompto didn’t have to be something separate from the world of royalty; maybe he could be a part of it.

“You know, like, I don’t want to distract you.”

“What are you saying?” Noctis frowned, looking utterly disgusted. “You don’t think I can keep my personal and professional life in order? I know what it takes to rule a kingdom, Prompto. I watched my father do it for years!”

“Whoa, I’m not trying to insult you—” Prompto backed up, hands in the air in surrender. Noctis’ emotions were on a high, and Prompto knew that he had caused this; avoiding him for so long had finally come back to bite him. Noctis realized how much he had raised his tone now that he saw the vulnerable, frightened look in Prompto’s eyes. He released a sigh, and lowered his head in apology.

“Something’s just not adding up,” he whispered, then his eyes darted back up to meet Prompto’s. “You still...?”

“Yes, Noct. Of course, I still. I still love you like we were sixteen years old,” Prompto assured him, his eyes watery now as he spoke, his voice soft and desperate.

“Then what...?”

A knock at the door startled them both, and Noct stared at Prompto with pleading, angry eyes, begging him to give him an answer before he even considered opening the damn door. Prompto solemnly shook his head, but his firm voice and stiff posture told Noct that he was standing his ground.

“More time, Noct. I just need more time,” he said, before going to answer the door. He pulled it open slowly to see Gladio standing there.

“Hey. Me ‘n some of the guys are going out for some drinks. Thought you might want to come with us, so we could catch up,” Gladio offered, catching sight of a clearly distraught Noctis further inside the room. Next he analyzed Prompto’s face, and quickly decided that Prompto was thankful he had given him an escape from...whatever had been going on.

“Sounds great. I’ll meet you downstairs in a few?”

“Yep. See ya there,” Gladio said, then dragged his gaze back to the pouting former-prince. “You’re welcome to come, too, Majesty, as long as you remove that stick from your ass first.”

Noctis scowled at him before he walked away. Prompto turned back to him slowly, intentionally leaving the door open to prevent their earlier conversation from picking up again. With so many high-ranking glaives and council members living on this floor, the last thing Noct wanted to do was shatter their trust, or have rumours start.

“Like he said, you can come with us if you want to,” Prompto reminded him.

“No thanks. Too much work to do. Got a kingdom to run, like you said,” Noctis muttered, with a sarcastic wave of his arm. He strode out of the room with his cloak billowing behind him, leaving Prompto alone to battle silent tears.
“You gonna finish that?” Gladio asked, noting the half-full mug of beer sitting in front of his friend. Prompto was slumped over the bar counter, his chin resting on his folded arms. Absentmindedly, he stared through the amber liquid. He tilted his head ever so slightly towards his ally and let his eyes lazily travel the rest of the distance to see him.

“Oh,” Prompto mumbled, realizing he’d been doing more staring than actual drinking over the past while. He didn’t have enough in him to dull the ache of his fight with Noctis—only enough to make him feel slightly more miserable than before.

“No, you can have it.” He pushed the mug towards Gladio, and continued to watch the liquid as it sloshed from side to side; it neared the rim of the cup, but settled down before any contents were spilled.

“You okay?” Gladio peered down at Prompto with worried eyes and crinkled brows. Prompto forced a tiny chuckle—one that was doused in pain and heartache—and sat up.

“Actually, no. I think I’m gonna head back.”

“By yourself? Looking like that? Nah-uh,” Gladio objected, taking in the sight of Prompto’s dark, tired eyes and the way he could hardly lift his own head up.

“I’m barely drunk, man. Just let me go,” he said, pushing himself off the barstool, but Gladio stood in his way, and Prompto realized just how big the big guy was. He sidestepped, and headed for the exit, but Gladio forced his way in front of him again, hands reaching out for the younger man’s shoulders. He could see so much pain in Prompto’s eyes, and in his tight features. He couldn’t let him head out the door like that, not without getting the truth out of him. He was too worried.

“Hey, what’s goin’ on? We can ditch those other guys, just... talk to me,” Gladio said, gently. He could see the change in Prompto’s gaze as he spoke, the way his eyes began to shimmer, the way his chin began to tremble. He looked like he wanted to speak, but the threat of oncoming tears were hindering him.

“Gladio...” Prompto whimpered, lowering his head, and just barely holding back his emotions. “I... I don’t know what to do.”

“Come on. Let’s go over here,” Gladio offered, guiding Prompto to a secluded table in the corner of the bar, a giant hand resting comfortingly on his back as he led him over. This area of the bar was dimly lit and out of earshot of any other customers. Gladio pulled out a chair for Prompto, the one facing the wall so that no one would see him cry if tears were to come.

Gladio sat down across from him once he had taken a seat, and once Gladio was sure he wouldn’t try to bolt—not like he’d get very far anyway. Gladio folded his hands on the table, waiting patiently for Prompto to speak. It took a while. The young man must have been fighting off sobs for a good thirty seconds before he got the first words out.

“I’m ruining everything with Noct,” he weakly explained.

“Come on, I’m sure you’re not,” Gladio said, and hoped Prompto would continue. His brows were
curved upward in a sympathetic manner as he patiently listened.

Prompto found it a rare sight to see Gladio so quiet and open-eared, not gruffly interrupting to get in his two-cents worth. It was an opportunity that Prompto was willing to take advantage of, an opportunity that couldn’t have come at a better time. As much as he dreaded talking about this, he knew he would feel better if he did; besides, he’d promised Ignis he would if it became too much to handle.

“I’ve been avoiding him ever since he came back, ever since he brought back the sunlight,” Prompto went on, rubbing his arm and keeping his sad eyes pointed toward the table. “I didn’t want to get involved when... you know. I didn’t want him to get attached when everything’s gonna go to hell in the end. But knowing that he wants to be with me... It just makes it so much harder to stay away,” he said, with a shiver, and Gladio leaned forward in his chair, giving an understanding nod.

“What’d you tell him?”

“That I needed more time,” Prompto sniffed, trying to rein in his emotions, and succeeding for the time being.

“You told him you needed more time? When that’s exactly what you don’t have?!” Gladio frowned. He would have shouted those words if Prompto didn’t already look so vulnerable. He didn’t need a scolding when he was already on the verge of breaking down.

“Stupid, I know. I just don’t know what to do. I want to be with him, Gladio, but it wouldn’t be fair to him. He needs to find someone who can continue to rule by his side.”

“Ever think of just telling him?” Gladio asked, lowering his voice to a gentler tone than his previous comment. Prompto shook his head, his eyes looking even more tired all of a sudden, the skin beneath them appearing dark and bruised.

“He’s got enough on his plate trying to rebuild his kingdom. He doesn’t need something else to worry about.”

“My advice? Prince Charming’s going to be worrying about you whether or not you let him in on what’s going on. He already knows something’s up with you, the way you’ve been keeping your distance,” Gladio said, and Prompto nodded numbly.

It made sense, he knew, but dragging Noct down with his own troubles seemed like bad timing right now. Noct had just saved the world, had worked so hard to reconstruct his broken kingdom. He had dodged the prophecy that was meant to have taken his life, and had come back whole and alive and happy. Prompto couldn’t take that joy away from him. Noctis deserved time to revel in all that was good.

“I know I should, but... maybe I’m just not ready,” Prompto said, quietly.

“Well, you know I can’t force you,” Gladio sighed, and Prompto immediately looked up, a new glow of worry in his eyes as he realized he wasn’t the only one who could reveal the truth to Noctis.

“You won’t tell him, will you?”

“No,” Gladio promised. “It’s not my secret to tell.”

Prompto nodded again and wiped the last of his tears before they ever had a chance to fall. He had
this feeling that he should be more grown up by now, that he shouldn’t be breaking down in the back of a bar. While he’d been with the hunters, he’d felt he had grown up, but Noctis always seemed to transport him back in time. He was a mere high school kid again, with a crush big enough to make headlines. It could hardly even be called an exaggeration; back in the day, the press had managed to circulate a few rumours about them. All the more reason to step back now and let Noctis gain his people’s trust before any new rumours started.


“You still gonna head back to the Citadel?”

“Yeah.”

Gladio stood up, and Prompto did the same. The king’s Shield offered a small smile, but it contained the same sadness that lingered in his friend’s eyes.

“I’ll walk with ya,” Gladio kindly insisted.

Noctis was fuming when he entered his room. He charged forward, slamming the door behind him and heading directly for his desk where an enormous amount of paperwork sat waiting for him. He plopped himself down in his chair and reached for the papers, determined to make a point of ‘ruling his kingdom’, and taking care of all of the tedious tasks that went with it. It only took a few seconds before his vision began to blur with tears, and he furiously shoved the stack off his desk.

Pieces of parchment flew into the air, some plummeting straight to the floor while others floated down in graceful, back and forth motions. Noctis cursed under his breath and leaned his elbow against the desk, head falling into his palm as he replayed his earlier conversation with Prompto.

How had things gone so terribly wrong? He knew ten years was a long time, but if neither his nor Prompto’s feelings had changed, then why weren’t they clicking? Why wasn’t Prompto letting him anywhere near him? He tried to think back to their last encounter, before the crystal had ever taken him. They had rescued Prompto from his imprisonment in Zegnautus Keep. Had Noct not been kind or caring enough towards him? Was there more he should have said or done that day? Was it possible that Prompto thought so, too? He’d always feared it.

Noctis sighed. If he’d done something wrong, why wouldn’t Prompto just spit it out already? If he didn’t know what he’d done, how could he even begin to correct it? Unless there really was someone else in Prompto’s life, and Prompto was trying to spare his feelings by not telling him so. But if that were true, would Prompto have kissed him so passionately that night in the caravan?

Sometimes Noctis found himself doubting whether it had happened at all. That night seemed so far away now, their closest encounter since being the one in Prompto’s room a mere half an hour before, when he and Prompto had shared the Galahdian drink. He wasn’t used to the distance, wasn’t used to them being at odds, as they had rarely ever fought. Thinking back, he could really only remember the incidents that had led him to snap that one time...

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“So, it’s more like a… marriage of convenience?” Prompto asked from the front seat of the Regalia, in response to the newscaster’s words over the car radio.

“Her Ladyship seems nonetheless amenable to the prospect,” Ignis replied.

“And Noct here likes the idea,” Gladio added, jovially. Noct grimaced at him and let out a long,
loud sigh; in their dreams, he liked the idea. Did they really believe that he was okay when they knew about him and Prompto? Was he really hiding his feelings so well that they couldn’t tell he wanted to puke his guts up every time anyone so much as mentioned Luna or the wedding?

“What’s that?” Prompto playfully responded to the silence that followed. “I do?”

“Buzz off.” Noct snarled, not sure why Prompto would tease him like that. All it did was hurt his poor heart. Didn’t he know that?

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“Wow. Still can’t believe you’re actually tying the knot, dude. How does it feel now that it’s finally happening?”

“Fine, I guess?” Noctis replied, so Prompto wouldn’t know how much he was hurting, since it seemed Prompto wasn’t hurting at all. The fact that Prompto was even asking the question felt like another knife to the heart. Why did he sound so okay with it when Noct himself so wasn’t?

“Ahh, come on! You can’t fool me! Any guy would be over the moon to marry her.”

“No big deal,” Noct waved him off, airily, unable to look him in the eye.

“Yeah… whatever,” Prompto sighed.

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“You reckon Aranea has a boyfriend?” Prompto asked, completely out of the blue as they sauntered through the streets of Lestallum, trying to find the broken steam valves under Holly’s instruction. Noctis frowned, a familiar stabbing pain grinding its way into his stomach. First Prompto’s infatuation with Cindy, now this? Back in high school, he’d thought Prompto only had eyes for him, and—perhaps selfishly—he’d hoped it would stay that way.

“She is surrounded by guys, but who knows?” Noct asked, successfully suppressing a sigh. If Gladio and Ignis hadn’t been tagging along, he most definitely would have cornered Prompto and given him a piece of his mind. He would have demanded why he was asking when they hadn’t called their own relationship off yet, even if its future did appear dismal.

Instead, he swallowed his frustration and simply asked, “Why? You fancy her?”

“No! My interest is purely hypothetical,” Prompto replied, with a wave of his hand and a smirk at Noctis, earning only a glare in return.

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“Everyone looks so happy. And it’s all because of this one dress,” Prompto marvelled, admiring the dress in the glass store window.

“Yeah,” Noct replied, simply, as uninterested as always with anything involving the wedding.

“Real glad for you that Lady Lunafreya is safe and sound,” Prompto said, but this time—finally—he sounded solemn. Unfortunately, Gladio felt that Prompto’s statement was the perfect opportunity to jump on the wedding bandwagon; if Prompto was finally letting his guard down and was ready to let Noctis go, why not push for it?

“That settles it. You gotta make it happen—become a symbol of the peace. After we tie up the loose
ends, let’s think about the ceremony.”

“A fine idea,” Ignis added, and Noct felt another stab in his heart. Was everyone ganging up on him now?

Irritated, he strode forward to get a better look in the window. There was the dress, and next to it, Luna’s portrait. Noct stared, trying hard to feel anything for her, some inkling of a romantic feeling, but he couldn’t. There was nothing. She was a stranger, a kid he’d only known years ago. Besides, even if she wasn’t, he’d never be able to love her the way he was supposed to… the way he loved Prompto. It just wasn’t in his makeup.

“Yeah, I’ll think about it,” he said, if only to get the others off his back for now. If anyone said anything else about it, he might just start weeping, and that was the last thing he wanted anyone to see, so he simply continued to stare at the glass until the possibility of tears had passed.

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That had been the last straw. After dinner that night, Ignis and Gladio went to stock up on some groceries so they could have a quick breakfast in the morning, and they allowed Prompto and Noctis to return to the Leville for some downtime. As soon as they were in the room, Noctis slammed the door behind him, startling Prompto.

“What the hell was that today?” he demanded, voice trembling with a feebleness that Prompto had grown to hate, for it meant Noctis was terribly upset. He spun slowly to face the prince, who was slightly red in the face, his breathing hitching like he was going to cry.

“What?” he asked, wishing he didn’t have to. Making Noct explain what he meant would probably only upset him more.

‘Real glad she’s safe and sound?’ ‘Think I might still pull off a wedding?’ Why would you even think about spewing shit like that?! I don’t want to get married!”

“I-I know, but—”

“I thought the one and only good thing about Insomnia falling was that the wedding got called off, and I was in the clear, so why is everyone still pushing for this? Especially you?!” Noct cried out, his hand waving relentlessly as he spoke.

“It’s what Eos wants, Noct! It seems like it would make a lot of people happy,” Prompto said, eyes sad and desperate and sorry.

“Everyone but me. I know it’s selfish, but I’ve always been under someone else’s control. I didn’t ask to be a prince, I didn’t ask to be part of this obscure prophecy, and I sure didn’t ask to marry some girl I barely know!”

“I know, Noct!” Prompto promised him, taking a step closer, his hands looking like they wanted to reach out for him, but were scared to.

“You always got that! You always knew how it felt to be stuck with things you couldn’t change, and made me feel like I wasn’t alone. So… why do I feel alone now? Like you don’t care what happens to us?!” Noct hollered, and Prompto pulled his hands back, the sharpness of his prince’s tone making him think twice about physical contact.

“I do care!” Prompto insisted, tearfully.
“Then show it!” Noct cried, giving Prompto’s shoulders a shove, so hard that Prompto stumbled back a step. He gazed at Noctis with scared eyes, but when he saw the regret in Noct’s, he simply lowered his head, and listened as Noct began to quietly sob. There was a long pause before Prompto spoke again.

“The truth is, Noct… I’m just barely holding it together. You know me. Joking around is the only way I know how to cope with things sometimes,” Prompto murmured. He forced a glance up at Noct again, who was shamefully rubbing his arm, his gaze on the floor as he prayed for a way to take back his actions.

“The things I said about Cindy and Aranea, about Luna and the wedding... It was all my own weird way to prepare myself for what’s coming. I guess in some ways, I feel like it will make it easier... when the time comes, and we have to say goodbye for real,” Prompto went on. Noct still said nothing, his gaze fixed on the carpet of the hotel room. He swiftly wiped at his eyes with his arm, and felt Prompto move in against him, arms tentatively wrapping around him. They seemed to relax after a few seconds, when Prompto was sure Noct wasn’t going to shove him off again.

Noctis inhaled, but his breath went in with a shudder, and he felt Prompto’s gentle hand guiding his head onto his shoulder. Noct rested his chin there, and waited for the words he felt were coming.

“I’m sorry if you felt like I didn’t care. I do. I don’t want to lose you, either, believe me,” Prompto said, softly, holding back a whimper. Noct had never been good at words, nor apologies, so he simply nestled his nose in a little deeper against Prompto’s neck and let out another shaky breath as the young man he loved continued to hold him.

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Noct let out a heavy breath as he got up from his chair, and began to gather up the papers that he had pushed off of his desk earlier. He and Prompto had still had an unbreakable friendship back then, and had maintained a beautiful relationship thereafter under much more difficult circumstances. Couldn’t they rebuild now? Shouldn’t it be easy now that the world was at peace?

Noctis’ thoughts were interrupted by a loud knock on the door. It sounded again before he was even halfway across the room.

“Hold on to your chocobos. I’m right here,” Noct grumbled under his breath, throwing the door open to see Gladio standing there with a perturbed look on his face. His arms were folded across his chest, the dent between his brows a clear sign of frustration.

“Mouthin’ off again, were ya?” Gladio growled, pushing his way into the room.

“Hello to you, too,” Noct huffed, shutting the door as Gladio headed for the edge of his desk, his arms remaining folded as he leaned there against it.

“Why are you bein’ so damn hard on Prompto? You know the kid’s had it rough this past while.”

“Yeah,” Noct chuckled bitterly. “Everyone keeps saying that, and yet nobody will tell me what the hell’s going on with him!” he said, his voice gaining volume as he went on.

“He’ll tell you when he’s ready!”

“So, you know something?! What’s he hiding?”

“I never said that! I said to cool it until he’s ready to talk!” Gladio raged, pushing himself away
from the desk to stand up straight. Noctis glared upward as he towered over him, his fierce
eexpression never faltering despite the height Gladio had on him.

“He’s had eight months to talk!” Noct went on.

“And he was away on assignment for most of that! What? You can’t keep it in your pants long
enough to give him time to settle in here?”

“Hey!” Noct fumed. “You will not speak to me that way.” The king’s eyes were dark and powerful
as he addressed Gladio now, and he watched his Shield back down, resuming his position against
the side of the desk.

Noct breathed in and ran a hand through his long hair as he stumbled toward his bed. He sat down
on the edge and let his arm fall back down to his side. He folded his hands in his lap, his gaze
downcast and unfocused.

“I miss him, Gladio. And I don’t know what to do to win him back,” he said, his tone defeated.

“I know it sucks, but you gotta be patient. And apologizing might be a good start. He was pretty
upset tonight,” the Shield said, and Noct glanced at the clock on his bedside table, realizing their
evening of drinks hadn’t lasted long at all.

“Is he okay?” Noct asked, voice low and gentle, eyes travelling warily towards Gladio, who finally
gave a sigh and let his anger fall by the wayside. Noctis was trying his best; he’d might as well,
too.

“He will be. Give him tonight to think things over. Apologize tomorrow once you’ve both had
some time to settle down,” he said, reaching over to give Noct a pat on the shoulder before he
headed for the door. Noct continued to stare at his hands as Gladio left him to his thoughts, only
looking up when the door clicked shut behind him.

Noctis’ eyes settled on a photo frame that sat upon his window sill. A picture of him and Prompto
rested inside, one of Noct’s favourites from their journey. Their heads were pressed together as
they grinned at the camera, the city of Lestallum all lit up behind them. It had been one of their
only real date nights on the journey, when Gladio and Ignis had given them some free rein to roam
by themselves, though it was more out of sympathy than anything else. Everything they had known
and loved and believed in was falling apart, and they had deserved a little time to enjoy the
nightlife. Noctis remembered it clearly—eating snacks by the fountain, listening to the musicians
play; stargazing through the viewfinders at the lookout; warpstriking to the top of the Leville and
kissing under the moon. They had been so young, so happy.

It was the photo Noctis had taken with him when he had entered the throne room to take down
Ardyn, and it was those joyful memories of being with Prompto that had pulled him through that
final battle. They had made it through so much together, lending each other their strength, leaning
on each other for support. If they could make it through all those years, they could make it through
the problems that were upon them now. Noctis would make sure of it.

Breakfast the next morning was particularly hard to get down. Noctis sat alone in the dining hall,
the table seeming longer than ever, even now that he had fully grown. As a child, he’d always felt
his father was too far away, the large expanse of shining black wood creating a great distance
between them. Now that distance seemed impossibly big, as if his father had never existed in this
hall at all.
Noctis felt hollow inside, like the food he swallowed wasn’t even finding its way to his stomach. He was already lonely, and knowing that he had to speak to Prompto today made it worse. Having Prompto back should have made this place feel more like home again, but everything felt off, so eery and dark. He had to make things right between them, even if his efforts remained one-sided for now.

To his surprise, his meal was interrupted by not a kitchen waiter, but rather Ignis, who knocked on the doorframe of the dining hall; Noct had gotten in the habit of leaving the door open to hear the hustle and bustle of his early morning workers, to prevent feeling so alone in the large room.

“Come in,” he coaxed, giving a wave that he forgot Ignis couldn’t see. He still wasn’t used to everything being so different in this place he’d called home. He missed the way Ignis’ eyes used to light up with pride when he looked upon him. He missed the sounds of Iris playing in the garden outside, and Clarus’ voice humming a little tune that put her to sleep at night. He missed his own father’s voice, even when it was muffled behind meeting room doors.

“We’ve received word of something that I think you’ll find rather unsettling,” Ignis announced, his voice containing hints of apology, even though Noctis doubted his advisor had anything to do with the cause.

“Oh, great. What is it?” Noct asked, sarcastically, seeming uninterested as he poked at his omelette with his fork.

“I think it best if we discuss it with the rest of the council.”

“Oh, right. Can it wait?” Noct grumbled. “I have something I need to do this morning.”

“Something more important than your duties?” Ignis queried, and Noct scowled. Technically, keeping good relations with his Crownguard was part of his duty, wasn’t it? He wanted to get this Prompto business through with first so that he might actually be able to stop worrying and concentrate.

“It shouldn’t take long,” Noct answered, coyly avoiding the details of his other obligation. “Can we meet in an hour?”

“I don’t see why not, but no later. This isn’t something I want to ignore for long,” Ignis said, appearing a little displeased.

Okay, okay,” Noct sang, waving him off, and stuffing another bite of omelette into his mouth. He tried not to cringe when he detected a sliver of onion on his tongue. Deciding to be an adult about it, he chewed and swallowed the vegetable, shivering only slightly as it went down. He let his fork fall to his plate with a clatter, which startled Ignis.

“Alright, enough of that. See you in a bit,” Noct said, abandoning his meal, not to mention scrapping any sense of formality this morning as he got up from the table. He reached for his napkin, quickly wiped his mouth and let the cloth fall onto his plate, before heading for the exit.

Ignis sighed, staring blindly after Noctis as he left, and he heard Umbra’s quiet whine as the messenger came to stand beside him. Ignis reached down, and stroked the top of the dog’s furry head, Umbra replying with some appreciative panting.

“What are we going to do with him, Umbra? I believe he still needs guidance,” Ignis uttered, worry evident in his voice. Umbra barked in response, letting the advisor know his words hadn’t fallen on deaf ears.
“Knock, knock,” came the king’s smooth and timid voice from the other side of the door. “Is it alright if I come in?”

Prompto gave a sigh, letting the shirt he was holding fall back into his suitcase. There was a dull ache in the pit of his stomach at the thought of facing Noctis, but he didn’t really have a choice, did he? He couldn’t simply ignore the king, even if he was his best friend. Could he still even call himself that? He hadn’t exactly been there for Noct as of late.

Prompto pushed the thoughts aside and grabbed the door handle, pulling it back to reveal Noct standing there in his kingly robes, looking rather dispirited. Prompto said nothing even as he stepped back to let him in, his lips pressed hard together, mostly in fear of how this conversation would unfold. Noctis gave a nod of thanks as he inched past Prompto and into the chamber. He took in the sight of the room, not sure if it was comforting to him or not. He couldn’t tell whether it looked more like Prompto was settling in or packing up to leave.

Clothes lay strewn about on the bed, some still half-draped over the side of his suitcase. The drawers of his dressers were open, with even more clothing hanging out over the sides, as if tossed there haphazardly. He wondered if Prompto himself was debating whether or not he would stay.

Noctis turned to his friend, who had softly closed the door behind him. Prompto was peeking up at him now with shy, nervous eyes that were partially hidden beneath long lashes. His head was low, his expression uncertain, and though Noct hadn’t seen Prompto display any lack of confidence since they’d met again as adults, the look he was wearing now was identical to ones he’d seen numerous times over the years. It was that look Prompto had worn when he was questioning his worth, when he was afraid he had done or would do something to disappoint Noctis, when he was just so painfully unsure of himself.

“I’m sorry about last night,” the king spoke up, meeting Prompto’s eyes. “I was trying too hard to push you into things that maybe you’re just not ready for yet.” Prompto still said nothing, his eyes flickering nervously from side to side, avoiding the king’s stare, so Noct ducked his head to better meet his gaze. “I was a jerk, I know. Prompto, please... say something?”

“You’re forgiven,” Prompto said, with a nod, and the smallest flicker of a smile Noct had ever seen; the upward quirk of the corners of his lips was so subtle, Noct wasn’t even positive it could be called a smile. Prompto proceeded toward his suitcase again, lifting out a pair of jeans and looking them over for damage before tossing them toward the dresser. Noctis let out a quiet breath of relief. If the clothing was still travelling in that direction, it probably meant Prompto was staying—for now, at least.

“Can I help you with anything? No offence, but this place looks as bad as my old apartment,” Noct chuckled hoarsely, the laughter clearly forced, but he also seemed careful not to overdo it, like he feared Prompto would take offence under the circumstances.

“I’m fine. I’ll put things away properly once I decide what’s worth keeping,” Prompto said, his eyes on his belongings now, rather than on his friend. It made Noctis uneasy. Prompto withdrew a brown t-shirt from the pile and held it up, easily spotting a few tears up near the collar. He balled it up and tossed it into the trash can under the desk. It seemed his aim hadn’t deteriorated over time. He still had the accuracy of a wicked gunman.

“Why are you throwing things out?” Noctis quizzed, bravely taking a few steps closer to Prompto and peering into the suitcase.

“Some of these things were fine for hunting, but aren’t really Citadel material. I’m sure you don’t
want your Kingsglaive looking like slobs,” Prompto explained, simply. Prompto wasn’t being mouthy, but there was a coldness that still wrapped around his voice, and Noct wondered if it was a defence mechanism to keep him away. Prompto retrieved another pair of pants and carried them over to the dresser this time, folding them properly and setting them down in the drawer before reaching for the other pairs that were hanging there in disarray.

Meanwhile, Noctis’ eye was caught by a silver glimmer in the top section of Prompto’s suitcase, zipped inside a mesh pocket. He brushed a hand over it, finding two metal pieces that separated when he touched them. That was when he recognized them. Dog tags, just like the hunters had—like Dave, and so many others who had been killed in action.

“Wow,” Noctis marvelled softly.

“What?” came Prompto’s voice from behind.

“It never really occurred to me that you were a hunter,” Noct said, remembering all those hard-looking guys who had frequented the Meldacio HQ. Back then, Prompto had looked like a pipsqueak next to them, but now, on top of the fact that he had filled out and built so much muscle, Noctis could see that same hardness in his eyes that must have come from living in those conditions and seeing so much death.

He wondered how much those experiences had changed Prompto, and if they were partly to blame for the distance between them now. He shuddered to think of the things Prompto must have seen over the past ten years—victims of the Sturcsoure, violent deaths of hunters and friends, daemons taking over the places they had once visited and where they had captured so many joyful memories, and of course, that eternal darkness.

Noctis felt Prompto at his side, and he felt suddenly comforted to have him so close to him—safe and alive. Prompto reached for the pocket, and unzipped it, placing a brown cord necklace in Noctis’ hands, adorned with the two dog tags.

“Yep. Official hunter. A lot of the people I met there are now your glaives,” Prompto said, heading back towards the dresser to fix up the last of the trousers in the drawer. Noctis stared down at the first tag on his hand, and read the engravings in the metal.

_PROMPTO ARGENTUM_

_HOME BASE: LESTALLUM_

Carefully, he flicked the first tag out of the way to reveal the second one, his stomach clenching as he read it.

_FIGHTER RANK: *****_

_IDENTIFICATION NO.: 05953234_

Not only had Prompto been taking on the most difficult hunts, he had chosen the same number as
the barcode on his wrist as his identification number. Was it possible that this was Prompto’s way of finally accepting himself, and that mark that he’d always felt had set him apart? Noctis hoped so.

With a glance behind himself to make sure Prompto wasn’t watching, he closed his fingers over the tags and brought his fist to his chest, holding them there with closed eyes. Images of finding these tags abandoned in the grass flooded into Noctis’ mind. So many times, he, Prompto, Ignis, and Gladio had had to recover tags just like these from fallen hunters, and he couldn’t bear to think about how he might have felt if Prompto hadn’t been there to greet him in Hammerhead eight months ago.

What if he, Gladio, and Ignis had had to put off going to Insomnia in order to search for Prompto’s tags? What if they had found the proof that their friend had died, the only evidence of him ever existing being two tiny pieces of metal buried beneath dirt or grass or rock? Noct brought the tags to his lips now, pressing a brief kiss against the knuckles that protected them, eyes remaining tightly closed. He couldn’t stand the thought.

“Everything okay?” Prompto asked, quietly. He’d turned around to see Noct’s head low, his shoulders hunched around himself, almost looking like he was trying to keep warm. Noctis jumped at the sound of the voice, and looked back at Prompto, hand returning to his chest. Prompto’s heart warmed a little at the sight; the cord of his necklace dangled from Noct’s fist, the dog tags apparently clutched in his hand which he had pressed close to his heart.

“I’m… I’m just glad you’re alive.” Noctis had stuttered over the first word as he pondered what to say, but the following words came easily, and there was nothing he could have said that would have better described what was in his heart. There was a twitch at the corners of Prompto’s lips, and Noctis couldn’t tell if Prompto was touched by those words or perturbed by them. He desperately hoped it wasn’t the latter.

“Me, too,” Prompto eventually said, pushing forth a tiny smile, but his voice was weak, his eyes wandering to the floor, away from Noctis’ gaze. Noctis tried to identify whatever he was feeling, wondering if Prompto was truly thankful to be alive, but decided he couldn’t tell for sure, and wasn’t convinced he wanted to know the answer anymore anyway.

“So, what’s with your barcode number? You used it for your identification?” Noct asked, changing the subject so that Prompto might stop wearing that unidentifiable expression. Thankfully, Prompto’s eyes flickered back up towards him, looking somewhat curious and surprised that Noct had posed the question.

“All hunters had to memorize their identification number, so I figured my barcode would be the easiest to remember,” Prompto said, simply. He didn’t sound bothered by the fact, which at least put Noct at some ease. It was comforting to know Prompto had finally come to accept the mark that had set him apart all his life. It made sense to use it for something positive. Noct himself had memorized that number long ago while lovingly tracing patterns on his partner’s tattooed wrist, so he was sure Prompto, too, would have no problem recalling it.

The day Prompto had told the group about his barcode, Noctis had played dumb, pretending for Ignis’ and Gladio’s sake that he didn’t know. Of course, he had never known the whole story behind it—only that Prompto was originally from Niflheim. Noctis had feared that telling his father or his Crownguard about it would only mean trouble for his best friend. What if they deported Prompto? What if they turned against him, or decided they couldn’t trust him? Noctis had refused to let that happen, so he’d kept his mouth shut about it for years.

“Your really fascinated with this hunter stuff, huh?” Prompto went on when he realized he’d lost his friend somewhere along the way. Noct’s gaze was distant, as he was clearly occupied by his
thoughts.

“Oh, uh, no, I just find it… surreal, I guess? To think you were one of them,” Noctis explained, glancing back down at the tags in his hand. He held them up by the cord, letting them dangle and catch the light from the window, causing the top edges of the silver pieces to sparkle. Noctis’ arm reached slightly towards Prompto, who accepted the tags back with a gentle smile and a nod of thanks. Gracefully, he clasped them around his neck, feeling Noct’s eyes on him the whole time.

Noctis was in awe of him, of his beauty that seemed to have blossomed since their roadtrip days. He took in the sight of his closed eyes as his hands fiddled with the clasp at the back of his neck, his lashes long and a darker blond than he remembered, making them stand out against his light complexion. His face was wider now, his slender features filled out, giving him a strong jaw and a matured, masculine appearance. Although less prominent than they used to be, his freckles remained a comforting familiarity, and Noctis smiled as he admired them, knowing that no matter how much he had changed during their time apart, this was still his dear Prompto.

“If we’re being honest, those whole ten years were surreal. With you gone,” Prompto solemnly admitted. It took him a while to raise his head, but once it was high enough for their gazes to meet and lock, Noct swallowed hard. “And I know I haven’t said it enough, but I’m glad you’re alive, too, Noct. I really am,” Prompto continued, the corners of his lips curving upward slightly. Noctis nodded, unsure of what to do or say now. This was the first time he was absolutely certain that Prompto was glad of his return. Lately, he'd been doubting it, but it was nice to hear that he had been missed.

“You’re so grown up,” Noctis said, almost weakly, giving Prompto a smile.

“Oh man, is it my sappy speeches? ‘Cause I can try to stop those,” Prompto grinned, rubbing the back of his head. His actions in that moment so strongly reflected the boy from ten years ago that it made Noctis smile wholeheartedly.

“Don’t stop.” Noctis’ voice was so quiet, so velvety, his smile small and tender, almost like he wanted to say more with those two words. They made Prompto’s insides feel like they were curling up in the best of ways. If Noct had said that in much more intimate circumstances, he knew he’d have no choice but to oblige.

“So,” Prompto sang, voice cracking a little. He cleared his throat and shook his head, trying to make the awkward moment pass.

“Right. So,” Noctis said, eyes flickering around nervously as he realized he’d made Prompto uncomfortable. Or turned on. Maybe both. “Ignis is calling another meeting in a little under an hour. I’ll see you there?”

“Yeah. Okay,” Prompto said slowly, his eyes focused on the carpet. He rubbed his opposite arm timidly. “But, you know, Noct. You don’t have to keep me on the council if you don’t want to.”

Those words made Noctis pause, a deep frown nestling between his brows.

“‘The hell makes you think I don’t want you on the council?’”

“N-nothing. What I mean is, I’m just another one of your many protectors now. It’s not like it’s only the three of us anymore,” Prompto shrugged. “If you think there’s someone more suited for the job, that’s fine.”

“Prompto,” Noctis addressed, taking a step forward. Their eyes locked as Noctis courageously
reached out for Prompto’s hands, holding them loosely enough that Prompto didn’t feel trapped. He had the option to escape, but he didn’t take it.

“Do you still want to be here?” The frown on Noctis’ face had warped the other way, his brows now curved up into a sad look of longing.

Prompto bit his bottom lip. Everything he had done in the past ten years had been for Noctis—fighting for the light, for the people who needed help to survive the darkness, for hope. To be honest, everything Prompto had done since he was a child had been for Noct, since the day he’d received that letter from Lady Lunafreya, which had indicated the young prince was in need of a friend. He had bettered himself, had made himself feel worthy of a prince’s friendship.

Of course, he wanted to stay here. He was comfortable here, soothed even, to be this close to Noctis, but for the first time he found himself wondering whether it was really fair. Was it fair to stay when Noctis wanted to close the distance between them, and Prompto wouldn’t let him? Was it selfish to stay because being far away from Noct altogether was simply too hard? This was the first time in so long that Prompto could say he was home—back in Insomnia, with Noctis alive and well. Noctis had always been home to him, so even though his brain wanted to answer with an, ‘I don’t know,’ he couldn’t lie to his heart. He wanted to be here, despite how difficult it was.

“I do,” he promised, those two words transporting Noctis to the wedding altar in his head, but he quickly purged the thought, knowing it was a distant dream at the moment. Before he knew it, Prompto was brushing his thumb lightly over the backs of his hands. The contact only lasted a second or two before Prompto slowly pulled away, letting his hands drift back down to his sides, and pulling away the last of Noct’s fantasy with them.

“Good, because I want you on the council. I want you here,” the king emphasized, giving Prompto a soft smile, but missing the contact of their previously linked hands.

Prompto could have had anything he wanted from him, and he would have willingly given it, so why was he only taking longing glances? Why was Prompto giving him those sad stares that made him think he wanted more, and yet, he never dared to make a move, or let Noctis’ advances linger? It seemed he was holding himself back, and Noctis—for the life of him—couldn’t understand it.

“Thanks, buddy,” Prompto uttered, his smile small but genuine. Noctis gave him a nod before heading for the door.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” he announced, but he halted as his eye was caught by the brown t-shirt hanging half-way out of the waste basket. He hesitated—knowing Prompto was probably watching him, but deciding he didn’t care—before walking over to it, and reaching for the garment. He pulled it out, catching a whiff of Prompto’s scent as he pulled it against his chest. It was a mix of his cologne and shampoo that always reminded Noctis of peaches, though Prompto had always denied using such a product.

“Hey, you mind if I keep this?” Noctis asked, running a hand along the frays in the fabric. Prompto’s eyes were locked onto him when he turned back around. A warmth settled in Prompto’s heart to see his friend clutching his shirt like that. Noctis was putting himself on display, letting Prompto know that he was willing to settle for any little piece of him he could get. It made Prompto feel so unbelievably loved.

“Of course, you can, buddy. Anything you want there is yours.”

“Thanks,” Noct murmured, holding the shirt close against him as he headed for the door.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all the support I’ve been receiving so far on this story!! The feedback has been so much more than I was expecting, so thank you all for your kudos, comments, views, and general love of the first chapter!! I hope you enjoyed the second one as well, and that you continue to enjoy reading. :)


Prompto’s entrance to the meeting room was much more elegant this time around. He was far less disheveled, had managed to get there with time to spare, and with no papers threatening to fall from his hands. Prompto felt better in his Kingsglaive uniform today than he had in a long time, and he suspected Noctis’ earlier words had helped to counter that feeling of not belonging—that fear that he no longer had a place in his best friend’s world, because of the secrets he was keeping.

But Noctis was glad he was alive, was glad he was on the council, was glad he was here. And maybe, for now, that was enough. It was enough to make him stay, and continue helping the king rebuild his kingdom.

“If the young glaives are here again, it must have to do with their recent mission with Prompto, does it?” Noctis asked, from the head of the table.

“Not exactly, but I thought they might provide some insight as to why this has happened, and whether they experienced negativity from anyone during their trip,” Ignis replied.

“What does that mean?” the king frowned.

“Well, Iris, tell us what you know,” Ignis announced.

“Alright.” There was a suppressed sigh in Iris’ voice, a sorrowful sort of tone, which for the first time since Ignis had mentioned the meeting, made Noctis worry. The girl brought forth a piece of paper that had been resting in her lap, under clenched hands. It was torn at the edges, marred with dirt and black ink that had soaked right through the page.

“We received a threat this morning. It was found outside the front gates,” Iris told the council, pushing the parchment into the centre of the table for everyone to see. Several people stood up to get a better view. Prompto’s stomach twisted at the sight of Noctis’ name scrawled on that page, all in capital letters, in someone’s angry, messy handwriting:

You may sit on the throne, but you are not our king.

Your father put you before his people, and we don’t doubt you would do the same for a loved one.

You may have brought back the sunlight, but we haven’t healed from the darkness.

Sleep with one eye open, King Noctis. Galahd hasn’t forgiven you yet.

“It’s just a letter. It doesn’t necessarily mean anything,” Noctis said, calmly, and Prompto looked up to verify whether or not there was any hint of fear in his eyes. He didn’t see any.

“You believe it’s an empty threat?” Cor questioned. Noctis shrugged.

“It’s possible.”

“What concerns me is their use of the words ‘our’ and ‘we’. It would seem whoever is doing this is not acting alone,” Ignis spoke up.
“Unless it’s just their way of talking big,” Gladio added, folding his arms across his chest as he considered the possibility.

“That’s not all. After this letter turned up, I did some digging. Apparently, signs of resistance are popping up all over the place,” Iris said, producing a few more papers from her lap. These ones looked to have been recently printed, as she had researched the info herself earlier that morning.

“People seem to be trying to form resistance groups against you, even on the net, Noct,” Iris said, pushing the papers into the centre of the table again.

Right now, Noctis couldn’t be bothered to read the conversations between these anonymous haters, and Prompto simply couldn’t stomach it. He couldn’t bear to think of anyone trying to hurt Noctis, or attempting to destroy the city they were working so hard to make whole again.

“So, we shut ‘em down. Get the authorities on it, Iris, and they should take care of it right away,” Noctis instructed.

“Galahad, I can understand. They’ve had their grudges with us since Niflheim took over. And Gralea, yeah, I guess not everyone’s happy about losing their Emperor. But why is resistance popping up in some Lucian regions? Or Altissia, for that matter. I thought you said Claustra was good with us,” Gladio said, turning his gaze from the papers to address Prompto. Prompto’s eyes widened at the sudden attention, and he sat forward, giving a confident nod.

“She was, but... I guess she can’t control the minds of all Altissian citizens. I mean, it would be crazy if she could.”

“And people might still be bitter about how everything went down with Leviathan. They did lose a lot that day,” Dustin added, regretting his words when he saw the look of sharp pain that took over Noctis' features. That day in Altissia all those years ago, Luna had tried to cover for Noctis, had told the public it was her idea to awaken the Hydrean, all for the sake of keeping him safe and keeping the fact that he was still alive a secret, but the truth had been long since come to light.

“Still bitter?” Elea spoke up, raising a skeptical brow. “Ten years is a long time to hold a grudge, especially after so many people came together in Lestallum to bring back that power,” the glaive went on, knowing first-hand how powerful the connections between everyone had been at that time. They had all leaned on each other so much for support, had done all they could to help out and make the world safer.

“Ten years. It’s not really all that long. It depends on how you look at it,” Prompto mused, quietly. There was something in his tone that made Noctis uneasy, some hint of sadness, or longing, but he couldn’t identify exactly what it was. Still, it was enough to keep his worried eyes on Prompto even as the next person began to speak.

“So, all of that travelling... was it all for nothing?” Fae asked gently, her eyes darting to Prompto. They shared a sorry and defeated glance.

They had tried their best to make good connections with all of the different regions; they’d thought they had, but like Prompto said, even a strong leader couldn’t control the minds of its people. Not to mention the fact that leaders these days were often of common status, put in charge by the popular vote of the community. Their main purpose wasn’t to know how to rule, but rather to merely be a face of authority to put people’s minds at ease. Niflheim had no Emperor. Tenebrae had no Oracle. As far as actual monarchs went, Noctis was the last, and even he had barely survived long enough to be able to make that claim.
“I don’t believe it was for nothing,” Ignis stepped in, folding his hands in front of him on the table. “Making alliances with other regions was something that needed to be done anyway. Now, all we can do is try to strengthen those bonds, which is why, Noct, it might be in your best interest to plan a voyage yourself.”

“Wouldn’t that be a tad too dangerous when a resistance is forming?” Cor asked.

“It is because the resistance is only in its infancy that I believe this is the right time. The king will be much safer now than he would be later on, if we cannot stop the resistance from gaining more recruits and making solid plans,” Ignis went on.

“In that case, your Highness, you should choose one of your glaives to accompany you on this voyage. A small party will no doubt raise less suspicion,” Cor said.

“And you should probably take someone who has already made connections with the leaders,” Gladio added.

Noctis perked up at the sound of that, his eyes travelling immediately to Prompto who, to his dismay, ducked under his gaze, making himself look smaller as he slouched in his seat, his attention on the table rather than anywhere near the king. Noctis swallowed that harsh sting of rejection, the one that he’d been getting a lot lately, to the point where it was really starting to hurt his feelings. He pushed his gaze to continue along the table, finding the next candidate who also happened to meet the qualifications.

“Fae. You will accompany me, please,” Noctis announced, and Fae looked rather bewildered before she gave him a considerate nod, closing her eyes and placing a hand over her chest as she bowed.

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Excellent. The Marshal and I will begin making preparations for your departure. Hopefully this plan can come into motion by the end of the week. Everyone, please do not inform others of this voyage, as we would like to keep it as confidential as possible for the sake of the king’s safety,” Ignis announced.

Finally, Prompto dared a glance up, figuring Noctis’ attention must be elsewhere by now, but he was met with a pair of cold, blue eyes. They were full of hurt and confusion, but Noct refused to show those vulnerabilities for long. He tore his gaze away, his nose rising into the air in an arrogant manner, making Prompto continuously slink down further in his seat; thankfully, Ignis dismissed them from the meeting before he hit the floor.

The Great Hall was louder than usual when Prompto headed down for dinner, which, on top of the already growing stress, gave him a pounding headache. He got in the lineup, filled up his tray, and went to find a seat along one of the two long dining tables, which ran at least thirty feet down the room. Even despite the fact that Noctis didn’t have quite as many Kingsglaive as his father had, the room still held an abundance of glaives now, all dressed in uniform, as was expected of them when reporting for their posts or meals. Prompto somehow doubted that Noct was the one who had chosen to keep this rule in place, as he seemed much more relaxed about such things. It was more likely that Ignis or Cor had argued to keep uniform as a requirement.

Prompto looked up from his sandwich to see a glaive before him, and it wasn’t until she sat down that he realized he was probably about to get an earful. Fae’s head was tilted forward, but her emerald eyes were pointed up at him, looking unimpressed. Prompto swallowed, and pushed forth
one of his standard grins.

“Hey, girl, good to see ya.”

“Why did you do that in the meeting?” Fae asked, voice serious.

“Do what?”

“You were avoiding King Noctis’ gaze so he wouldn’t pick you.”

“I did no such thing!” Prompto squawked, raising his nose up into the air, feigning hurt.

“Yes, you did,” Fae rolled her eyes, before resting her arms on the table and leaning forward so she could speak more quietly, suspecting this conversation would quickly turn into something Prompto wouldn’t want to be overheard. “Why didn’t you want to go with him?”

“Well, you know. I don’t know if now is the best time,” Prompto sighed, setting his sandwich down, and playing with the edge of a lettuce leaf that threatened to fall out of it.

Fae had known about his feelings for Noctis for a while now. It had been back in their hunting days that she had discovered who he was: that he had been one of Noctis’ personal guards. That bit of knowledge had sparked her memory regarding an old newspaper article, one that had piqued a lot of people’s interest years ago. After the prince had been spotted on several occasions in particularly close proximity to a blond teen his age, it had been rumoured that the two might share more than just a deep friendship.

When Fae had first carefully inquired about the matter, Prompto had playfully shrugged it off, not wanting to drag a kid down with such personal affairs. After she’d found him drunk and devastated one night after a hunt, however, he had been upfront with her, realizing she was one of the few people in his life at that point that he could trust. She admired him, looked up to him, and Prompto felt confident that this information would not shake her.

“The best time for what? What are you waiting for?” she asked, and this time there was worry in her eyes, for she, too, knew that time was a concern. Prompto shied away from her gaze again, pulling the lettuce right out of his sandwich, which only left mayonnaise and mustard coming out in a sloppy mess. He tried to correct it as a distraction, pulling the top piece of bread off and attempting to stuff the leaf back in.

“Prompto,” Fae addressed, desperately, and Prompto shyly brought his gaze up to meet hers. Her brows were tilted upward, her lips pressed tightly together. “I’m worried about you. I don’t want you to regret not spending more time with the king.”

“I know,” Prompto said, and let out a soft chuckle. Finally, he left the sandwich alone, and leaned back in his chair. “Thank you for caring so much, but I don’t think I’m ready for this. Besides, you’re just as qualified to go on this voyage as I am.”

“Oh, right. Because I’ve spent an extended period of time alongside the king as one of his personal Crownsguard,” Fae sarcastically grumbled.

“Oh, okay, you’re right, but you’re still an excellent fighter, and you’re as devoted to Lucis as I am, and... Look, I’m just not ready. Can we leave it at that?” Prompto pleaded, eyes begging her. Fae nodded, but looked both stern and dejected as she drew her attention to her lunch. Despite the chatter throughout the hall, Fae and Prompto ate the rest of their meal together in silence.
Prompto took the long way back to his room after dinner. Instead of heading straight for the ground floor elevator, he went in the opposite direction down the long hallway, which eventually turned a corner leading to another corridor. About halfway down this corridor was a set of double doors, and a series of arched windows on either side. Prompto paused when he reached them, and stepped closer until he could lean his head against the glass. Longingly, he peered inside.

He had only been in the room once, and while the memory was clear enough for it to have been yesterday, it also felt like a lifetime ago. It was hard to believe he’d been so young and carefree dancing with Noctis in that very room, feeling like they were the only two people in the world, and Prompto feeling, for once, like he was important.

Shaking his head, Prompto pulled away, but he continued only a few steps down the hallway before reaching for the iron bar door handle instead. The door was heavy as he dragged it open, feeling like he was opening a door to the past, which was equally difficult to face. He walked inside, hearing the door slide shut behind him, and he gave himself a moment to take it all in.

Everything was just as he remembered—the tall ceilings, the shiny black walls with grey and gold trim, the candelabras that hung from the ceilings and walls, the shimmering patterned floor. Prompto breathed in, closing his eyes, and as he felt himself falling into the memories—his own, as well as those Noctis had shared with him—he stumbled over to one of the window sills and sat down, allowing himself to drown just for a moment.

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Noctis shut his locker, only to have his friend appear behind the door as he slammed it. Noct jumped back, startled, but quickly recovered at the sight of Prompto’s unnaturally wide grin.

“What are you smirking at?” Noct queried, the corner of his mouth lifting into a smile. Prompto lifted his hands out in front of him, his fingers clutching either side of the colourful school newsletter. Noctis rolled his eyes, fully aware now of what the upcoming conversation would be about.

“What about your mind yet?” Prompto asked, waving the paper enthusiastically.

“About going to prom? Why do you want to go so badly, anyway?” Noct sighed, reaching down to scoop up his backpack and slinging it over his shoulder. They started side-by-side down the hall, Prompto pocketing the newsletter and waving his hands while he spoke.

“Come on, Noct! It’s like a rite of passage for kids our age.”

“Isn’t graduation the rite of passage?”

“Prom is a part of graduation. C’mon, whaddaya say?” Prompto prodded, leaping forward a few steps so he could walk backwards in front of Noct. He could keep his eyes on him that way, and make him less likely to dodge his questions entirely, like he was so good at doing.

Noct sighed, and thought back to the conversations he’d had with his father weeks ago. He had been timid to interrupt his work, but with a small knock on the meeting room door, he had peeked inside.

“Dad? I’m sorry to interrupt, but can I speak to you about something when you’re done?”

Clarus and Drautos had been in the middle of a meeting with the king, and their eyes travelled to Regis to await his response. Noctis rarely interrupted Regis’ work for anything, so he knew it must be a matter of importance that had brought his son here.
Come in, Noctis. We were just finishing up."

Drautos looked slightly unimpressed, but he and Clarus got up nonetheless and said their goodbyes before leaving the two in peace. Noctis took a seat adjacent to his father, though he appeared rather uncomfortable doing so. Regis waited patiently for the young prince to find his confidence, his gentle greyish-green eyes ever watchful, and gnarled hands folded gracefully in front of him.

"So, our school prom is coming up, and Prompto has been hinting that he’d really like to go. I know I’m probably not allowed, but I just thought I’d ask… if he and I could go together?" Noct avoided his father’s gaze the majority of the time he had been speaking, but he had at least noticed his father’s expression soften at the words ‘not allowed’. Now, when he looked up, there was guilt in his eyes.

"Noctis, son, you know I want you to experience all you can, and that I only want the best for you," Regis started, and Noct shied away from his touch when he tried to reach for his hand. This was a speech he’d heard so many times, it hardly meant anything anymore. Noctis folded his arms across his chest, and flopped back in his chair coldly.

"Yeah. Got it."

"Noctis, I did not yet give you an answer," Regis said, his tone containing only a hint of scolding for his son’s cheek, though Noctis probably deserved more. Noctis raised a brow, his head still low, but his eyes darting to his father for further explanation. Regis let out a soft breath, and tried to reach for his son’s hand again. Noctis grudgingly allowed it to be tugged out from against his chest.

"As much as it would please me to give you a simple ‘yes’, we must be cautious that we don’t give the press nor Niflheim any ammunition to use against you. So, please, let me think on it,” he said, with a kind wink, that made Noctis realize he was on his side.

Of course, once the council got wind of it—Noctis blamed Drautos for that one—most votes were not in favour of the prince taking another young man of common birth to a high school dance. And so, Noctis was forced to obey the rules, and would have been happy to skip the stupid prom altogether if Prompto hadn’t wanted to go so badly; knowing that he did made it impossible for Noctis to ignore the guilt in the pit of his stomach.

"You know we won’t be allowed to... you know, be each other’s dates,” Noct said, quietly, lowering his head as he came back to reality, fingers tapping nervously against his locker. His eyes darted from side to side, making sure he hadn’t been overheard.

"Yeah, I know. The rules of royalty,” Prompto sighed, voice solemn. “But it’d still be fun to go.”

"Why? It’s just another event where I’m forced into formal wear.” Noct looked unimpressed when he spoke this time, wondering if he could maybe turn Prompto off of the idea, but Prompto smiled at the sight of his distaste.

"But it looks so good on ya,” he winked, and he knew by the flustered look on Noct’s face that he’d found that little gesture quite irresistible. Noct cleared his throat as they continued to walk. He stole another glance at Prompto, who still wore a hopeful smile, but it was obviously fading.

Parties had never been Noct’s cup of tea, having been to so many formal events through his royal obligations, but this was more than just a party, and it was more than just a little bit important to his friend. Ever since Noctis had known Prompto, the poor boy had been searching for ways to
belong, and Noct would be damned if he let Prompto feel left out now because of him.

It wasn’t a huge sacrifice. One night. A few hours of mingling. He could certainly do that for the guy he loved more than the moon and stars, even if they wouldn’t be experiencing it exactly the way they wanted to.

“Tell you what,” Noctis said, as they made their way through the double doors. They came to a halt in the courtyard, just outside the exit. “I’ll go with you for a little bit, as long as you come back to the palace for the night afterwards. We can spend some time together, hang out,” he suggested, remembering the offers his father had made him after he’d delivered the bad news that they couldn’t go as dates. They had seemed like stupid suggestions at the time, lame ways to try and make up for the night he and the council had ruined, but now they sounded much better than nothing.

“Sounds good to me,” Prompto smiled. Both jumped at the sound of a car horn, and they glanced over to the side of the road where Ignis was parked and waiting. He stared at the boys patiently, but Noct didn’t like to keep him waiting, especially when he still wasn’t sure how his Crownguard felt about his ‘significant other’.

“That’s my ride. I’ll see you later?” Noctis’ hand slipped into Prompto’s just long enough to give it a tender squeeze, then he headed for the car with a wave.

“Yeah, see ya!” Prompto waved wildly back, before reaching into his pocket for the newsletter. He scanned the vibrant print, and smiled to himself. The shopping district wasn’t far from the school. If he headed there now, he might have time to find something to wear before the stores closed.

Two weeks, three days, and four hours later, Noctis was holding the door of the luxurious black limousine open for Prompto, who gave him a grin as he climbed inside. Like a true gentleman, Noctis had picked Prompto up right at the door to his home. From there, the plan was to return to the Citadel so King Regis could see them off.

“Ridin’ in style. I like it. You’re so chivalrous,” Prompto sang as Noct closed his door for him, then proceeded to the other side of the car to get in.

“Don’t get too used to it,” Noctis smirked, and Prompto chuckled, knowing full-well that his lazy slob of a boyfriend would be back to his usual self tomorrow.

“Well, I’ll just enjoy it while I can,” Prompto said, airily.

It wasn’t until they were back on the road and away from the bright city lights that Noctis reached for one of his hands in the darkness, pulling it into his own. Prompto looked at him with curious eyes.

“You look good,” Noctis smiled, softly. It was true. It looked like he had spent extra time on his hair, as it was styled to perfection, and his black suit and tie looked like it fit his slim figure perfectly. Prompto blinked in surprise, and turned his head back toward the seat in front of him.

“You clean up good, yourself.” Prompto’s gaze was equally gentle as they stared at each other. Noct leaned in, and two pairs of smiling lips met, eyes drifting slowly open when they eventually
pulled away. Noctis brushed his fingers through the back of Prompto’s hair in thanks before they drew their attention to the road ahead.

Ignis watched them in the rear view mirror, adjusting it enough to spot their linked hands resting in the seat between them. He had caught them in a similar position the first time he had begun to suspect their ties went beyond friendship. He had been driving them home from a concert one night. The two of them had been drained from a night of singing and cheering, and had fallen asleep in the backseat, their hands linked, and Prompto’s head on Noct’s shoulder, still dressed in their band t-shirts and ball caps that they had purchased earlier that evening. Ignis looked on them fondly now, with far less confusion and far more compassion. The prince deserved to be happy for once.

They arrived at the Citadel before they knew it. Ignis drove through the circular courtyard and came to a halt in front of the main steps.

“Take your time. I will wait here,” he said, and Noctis uttered a thanks as he went around to get Prompto’s door again. He held it open, and Prompto grinned sheepishly as he got out. Noct closed the door, and turned to Prompto with anxious eyes.

“You ready for this?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Prompto shrugged, but he still wore a smile. He was nervous as ol’ heck as he and Noctis ascended the steps together, his heart beating a mile a minute. This was the first time he was meeting the king, and he was thankful that he was at least dressed to the nth degree. First impressions were everything, after all.

Prompto was led into a huge lobby, with a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The tile floors were spotless, shimmering in the light, just like he remembered them. Prompto had only been here once before, one summer when Noctis had invited him to come and stay a week with him. They had lounged in Noctis’ room almost the entire time playing video games and watching movies, only surfacing to get something to eat before returning upstairs, taking plenty of snacks with them. Noctis had also taken him up to the top balcony of the Citadel, where Prompto had snapped pictures of the gorgeous sunset with Noct at his side, watching their beautiful city being painted with pink and orange below.

“I just need to text my dad. Let him know we’re here,” Noctis informed him, digging his phone out of the convenient inside pocket of his suit jacket.

“No need. I’m here,” Regis called from down the hall, as he and Clarus emerged from the elevator. Prompto swallowed his fear, silently telling himself that everything was okay, that the king would like him because Noctis liked him.

King Regis looked different in person than he did on television. Instead of tall and powerful, he was hunched with gentle eyes, a cane in his hand as he made his way through the hall and into the lobby. Clarus gave a tender smile to the boys as well, and Prompto forgot to breathe until Noctis took his hand. Eyes met, Noctis’ expression soft and encouraging, and Prompto managed a smile of his own, which lingered even after Noct let go. He could do this. He was okay.

“Prompto, it is such a pleasure to meet you,” Regis greeted, reaching out to shake his hand.

“And you as well, Your Majesty. I’m honoured,” he said, sticking out his left hand by accident. He panicked when Regis chuckled lightly and tried to switch his cane to his other hand. Prompto internally kicked himself; why now, of all times, had he made that mistake?
He squeaked out an apology before shoving his right hand out instead, managing to do so before Regis could shift his cane around, and the king shook it with a fond smile. He continued to grasp Prompto’s hand tightly, in a hold that was strong, but caring.

“I’ve heard much about you, Prompto. All good things, might I add,” the king announced, his voice smooth and kind.

“Phew, that’s good to hear. And I-I mean, you as well. Noctis has told me all about you. Good things,” Prompto grinned, feeling his face heat up. Not all the stories Noctis had told him about his father had been good ones; he’d had his fair share of complaints, too. Prompto just hoped the king couldn’t see that written on his face.

“Well, I won’t tie up your evening too much. I know you’re eager to attend your prom,” Regis said, turning to Clarus, who handed over a white box, which Regis traded him for his cane.

“Noctis?” Regis summoned.

“Right.” Noctis stepped forward, and Regis opened the box for him. Prompto tried to peek at what was inside, but he couldn’t see with his friend’s back in the way.

Noctis turned around soon enough, holding out a small bundle of vibrant yellow flowers on a pin. Noctis’ years of lessons in etiquette and princely behaviour had paid off; he could certainly pull out all the stops when he actually felt like it.

“A boutonnière for you, sir, made with Lucis’ finest saffron crocuses and baby’s breath,” Noct announced, as he headed towards Prompto, whose surprised eyes met Noctis’ calm ones.

With a smile, and a quiet ‘May I?’ Noct reached for Prompto’s collar and pinned the boutonnière in place. When he finished, his hands lingered on Prompto’s chest for a moment—not long enough that they would feel awkward in front of his father, but just long enough to make Prompto feel like he was special and loved.

“Wow, it’s beautiful, Noct,” he awed, gazing down at the flowers and running his fingers over the satiny petals. “I’m… such a dork, though. All my time gawking over magazines and working with the prom committee, and I didn’t even think to get you one,” Prompto stuttered out, his flush increasing when he heard Regis and Clarus chuckle softly.

“No need to fret, Prompto,” Regis assured him.

“He’s right. I got Specs to pick out a couple of different ones, and I thought you’d like the yellow best. I’ll wear this one,” Noctis affirmed, heading back towards his father. He picked the other boutonnière out of the box—this one with light blue crocuses. Carefully, he began to pin it on himself.

“Wait, let me at least put it on for you,” Prompto rushed in, taking the flowers into his trembling fingers, and being cautious not to stab himself with the pin as he fastened it to Noctis’ jacket. Thankfully, it went smoothly, with no injuries, nor embarrassing mistakes to report.

“Such fine young gentlemen, Regis,” Clarus commented, with a smile that made wrinkles appear beside his eyes. It was a warm smile.

“Yes, they are,” Regis agreed, fondly.

“Hey, um, you mind if we get a picture together?” Prompto asked, reaching for the camera strap
on his shoulder, eyes uncertain as he addressed Noctis. He wasn’t sure whether photography was allowed in the Citadel, especially by someone who wasn’t a reporter, but Noctis nodded confidently.

“Sure.” They were about to lean in for a selfie when the king spoke up.

“Would you like me to take it for you?”


He trotted over to the king, and handed over his camera, giving him a few quick instructions on how to adjust the viewfinder, make sure the picture was in focus, and click the shutter. He quickly made his way back over to Noctis, and stood beside him with his arms behind his own back, feeling very self conscious now about showing too much affection, but Regis simply shook his head.

“No, no, get in close, now,” he coaxed, waving a hand to usher them together. Noctis met Prompto’s nervous gaze with an amused shrug, and stepped closer, his arm making its way around Prompto’s waist, and Prompto decided to do the same. They smiled at the camera—Prompto giving a wide grin, albeit a bit more anxious than his usual one, and Noctis with a closed-lipped, but sincere smile.

“That’s it. Perfect,” Regis practically cheered, and Clarus nodded in agreement.

“Very nice, indeed.”

“Now, I’ll be expecting a copy of one of these when you get them printed, Prompto,” Regis said, with a stern look in his eyes, but a teasing smile that let Prompto know he meant well. Prompto accepted his camera back from the king, and held it tightly against his chest.

“Yes, sir! I can do that,” he smiled.

After taking a few goofy photos outside the school, they found themselves standing near the wall of the school gymnasium. Prompto’s hips swayed loosely to the booming bass line, and he glanced around at his schoolmates’ dancing, a cup of fruit punch in hand. He took a sip every now and then, in between having to avert his eyes from some of the more inappropriate ‘dancing’ in which some of his classmates were taking part.

Noct, too, was a little disgusted by the lack of etiquette from his peers. This was a nice event, and the teachers and prom committee—Prompto included—had done a good job of decorating the place and making sure everyone would have a safe and enjoyable time. Of course, that didn’t stop some guys from trying to get themselves under the girls’ poofy skirts, nor did it stop the girls from letting them do so.

It wasn’t like Noct didn’t think Prompto looked incredible in his spiffy black suit and bowtie, nor was he opposed to getting him out of it later, but events like this—at least in his experience as a prince—called for proper behaviour. Noctis may have been a slob at his apartment, and a lazy bum when he felt like it, but he could also be a gentleman, and that was what Prompto deserved. He had put too much of his heart into painting that banner that was now a backdrop for people’s makeout spot. He had put too much work into pinning all those coloured streamers to the tables, tables that people were now drunkenly spilling drinks all over. Noct despised the amount of disrespect. Prompto had been too excited for this to end in disappointment.

“It’s not quite what I was expecting,” Prompto mused, glancing over at Noct to make sure he’d
been heard over the blaring music. Noctis nodded in agreement, and stirred his drink around with his straw.

“I’m sorry. I know you were looking forward to this,” he sympathized, the corner of his mouth lifting into a bitter-sweet smile. Prompto bobbed his head from side-to-side as he strolled over to lean against the wall with his friend.

“Sort of. I was just kinda thinking... Nah, never mind,” he smiled, shaking his head with a soft chuckle. Of course, a statement like that was always going to pique Noct’s interest, and he never liked letting Prompto keep secrets to himself; they always seemed to eat him up inside when they did, and often made him sadder than if he’d simply told Noct in the first place.

“C’mon, spill. It’s only me,” Noct coaxed, giving him a nudge in the elbow before taking a sip through his straw. Prompto watched Noct’s unrelenting, but gentle stare as he drank up his fruit punch, and with a sigh, he let his guard down.

“I just thought it might give me a little insight into your world. I mean, I obviously can’t go to your fancy dinners or formal parties, but I thought this might feel like... like we were both royalty,” Prompto shrugged, meeting Noct’s gaze with a timid smile before lowering his head.

Noct’s heart thrummed hard against his chest at the mere sight of Prompto’s insecurity. There he was again, struggling to find ways to belong. Noct wondered, why wasn’t it enough to simply belong to him?

“Prompto? Let’s get out of here.”

“Wha—? But, it’s not even over!”

“I’ve got something else planned. Please?” Noctis asked, begging Prompto to trust him. Of course, with a confident nod, Prompto followed Noctis out of the gym to wait for their drive.

“What are we doing back here? I mean, I know I’m staying the night, but it’s only... eight o’clock?” Prompto asked, as the limousine pulled into the round courtyard of the Citadel. “Thought you’d at least take me somewhere nice to eat,” Prompto joked now, nudging Noctis with his elbow.

“Just be patient, okay? Geez,” Noct waved him off. They got out of the car and headed inside, and it was then that Noctis finally took Prompto’s hand. Eyes met—Prompto’s curious and Noctis’ smiling—as Noct led him to the left, around a corner, and down the hall. A set of double doors were on the right wall, and Noctis hauled one open, holding it aside while Prompto entered.

“Noct? Is this... the ballroom?” Prompto asked, spinning slowly around with his gaze on the elaborately painted ceilings.

Noctis adjusted the dimmer on the wall, lowering the lights until they gave off a soft yellow glow. He reached inside his coat for his phone and flicked through it until he found the song he was looking for. He put it away again once the song had begun to play over the room’s loudspeakers. With a gentle smile, he followed Prompto into the centre of the room and offered him a hand.

“My dad said we can use it until our hearts’ content,” Noctis murmured.

Prompto looked stunned for a second, before his expression softened into one of disbelief and pure joy. He took Noctis’ hand, and they moved in against each other, Prompto’s hand falling upon
Noct’s shoulder, and Noct’s upon Prompto’s waist. Their linked hands remained in the air as they
danced, the slow piano piece in the background the perfect soundtrack for Prompto’s first dance
with his prince.

They moved slowly, feet swaying from side to side as they danced in a circle. The more they moved,
the closer Prompto inched towards Noctis, until he was able to rest his chin on his shoulder.

“Your dad is super nice,” he uttered. His voice was low and soft, full of adoration and a small
amount of sadness that Noctis knew came from thoughts of his own neglectful parents.

“He’s super embarrassing,” Noct rolled his eyes. “Sorry he wanted to see us off before we went to
the dance.”

“Why is that embarrassing? You’re lucky that he fusses over you like that. Really takes an interest
in you,” Prompto said, voice higher in pitch now, as he tried to understand Noct’s slight disgust. ‘

‘When he has the time’ was the reply Noctis wanted to give, but he didn’t. Even if his dad was busy,
the small amount of time that they did spend together was still more than what Prompto ever got
with his parents.

He knew that all the love that Prompto had ever received had come from him: his first hug—his
first human contact, really—and his deep, real, unconditional love. Feeling needed was a concept
that Prompto had been unable to comprehend at one point in his life; he was always struggling to
understand why his parents never took an interest in what he was doing, never hugged him when it
was his birthday, nor praised him up when he did well in school.

He’d known love had to exist. He’d seen the parents of his classmates showing affection to their
kids when they picked them up from school, or attended parent-teacher events. As he grew up, he’d
watched more and more couples grow close, and he continued to struggle, always wondering why
he couldn’t find the same for himself. Of course, Noctis had changed all of that.

“You’re probably right,” Noctis gave in. He smiled as he pulled back, holding his and Prompto’s
hands up high and waving to encourage Prompto to spin under them. Prompto laughed as he did
so with little grace, then he moved in against Noctis again.

It was warm in their suits, and yet, Prompto couldn’t stand being away from the warmth that came
from being so close to his best friend. There was nothing like being in Noctis’ arms, being pressed
against his chest, or having their hands woven together, for in those actions, he knew he was safe
and loved.

“Noct? Thanks for the amazing night,” Prompto whispered. Noctis leaned in to brush their noses
together as they continued to sway in a circle.

“You’re welcome,” Noct whispered, before Prompto captured his lips.

Noctis’ blood was boiling as he headed down the hallway, his stomach so unsettled, he had hardly
gotten his dinner down. He was hurt and angry, and full of confusion as to why Prompto would go
to such lengths to avoid him, but he knew he had to calm down. Staying this worked up would only
make him feel worse, and would hamper his judgement about other things, so he headed for the
ballroom—his old thinking spot.

Through the large windows, he caught sight of a figure, and realized he wasn’t alone. There sat
Prompto, so hunched and solemn. The sight made Noctis’ anger fall away as if it had never been
there. Noctis opened the door, and Prompto didn’t even seem to notice the noise. He sat with his head turned slightly away from the king, and even though Noctis could see very little of his face, he could tell he was crying. The skin around his eyes was red and blotchy, and even the dim lights of the room were enough to give away his tear-stained cheeks.

Whatever was going on with Prompto was serious; Noctis knew that now. Prompto’s life had been hard from the very start, with no support from friends or parents. He’d lived alone, struggled with self-confidence and body image. After meeting Noct, he’d had a few near-death experiences, had been captured and tortured by Ardyn. And if all of that wasn’t enough, he’d lost the love of his life to a magical crystal, and was forced to go back to living alone. He had survived all of that without ever showing weakness, rarely ever letting himself cry, which could only mean that something worse must have happened during their time apart to make him feel so vulnerable now.

Maybe he wasn’t ready to jump back into a relationship, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t happy that Noctis was back. Besides, right now, it looked like he was suffering a hell of a lot more than Noct was. Maybe Gladio was right. Maybe he shouldn’t be so hard on him.

“Hey,” Noct greeted softly, startling Prompto, who looked over at him with red, wet eyes. “Looks like we both had the same idea tonight.”

Prompto touched a hand to his face, and when he felt tears, he became rather embarrassed to know his memories had been strong enough to induce such emotion. Prompto wiped at them with his palm as Noct proceeded in from the doorway. He stopped when he reached the window ledge, waiting until Prompto looked up at him again to seek permission.

“Do you mind?” he asked, motioning to the ledge.

“No at all.” Prompto scooted over to give his friend some room. His response had been instinctive, which made him aware of how much he was yearning for Noct’s company tonight, despite not wanting him to see him like this.

Noctis listened closely to Prompto’s breathing, the way he tried to steady it to suppress sobs. Noctis’ eyes travelled slowly towards him, his gaze so calming and tranquil. There wasn’t an ounce of judgement in his eyes, nothing that said Prompto should be holding back his tears; quite the opposite. Noct was allowing him to cry, without even saying a word about it, never drawing attention to the fact that he was witnessing his friend’s breakdown.

“It’s hard not to miss the way things were,” Noct said, not needing to be told where Prompto’s thoughts had been.

This used to be one of Noctis’ favourite places to escape the busy comings and goings of the Citadel. It was normally empty, and granted a good place to think, as well as blow off some steam when all Noct wanted to do was run around and scream. He was sure he’d told Prompto that this was a good, quiet thinking spot. If Prompto was here now, it was probably because he, too, had too much on his mind.

Noctis tugged a handkerchief out of the chest pocket of his suit, and handed it to his friend. Prompto graciously accepted it, and dabbed at his eyes, his chin continuing to tremble.

“What’cha thinkin’ about?” the king asked, softly.

“You remember the night of our prom?” Prompto sniffled out, staring out into the room until he felt Noct turn his head towards him.
“Perfectly,” Noct assured him, eyes meeting for a moment that was fleeting, but meaningful. Prompto nodded and pulled his attention back to the empty dance floor.

“That was one of the best nights of my life,” he went on, managing a weak smile, and Noct felt a tug in his heart at his honesty. “You made me feel so special. And the efforts you and your dad went to to make sure I had an amazing time… I’ll never forget it. You made me feel like royalty that night, like I actually belonged in your world.”

Noctis stared at him now with utmost care. His expression held so much adoration, and yet so much pain as he considered the parts of Prompto’s life that didn’t have him in it. Those parts were the darkest parts, the ones that had made him feel unworthy of Noctis’, or anyone’s, love. As happy as it made him to know he had brought light and meaning into Prompto’s life, there was still a sadness that came with that truth.

“You do belong,” Noctis promised him, and he heard Prompto try to disguise a somewhat bitter chuckle.

He saw Prompto reach for his barcode out of the corner of his eye, his fingers rubbing over it almost guiltily, and Noct reached for that hand, pulling it away from his wrist and keeping it safe within his grasp. He knew the contact was a risk, knew that Prompto might very well pull away, but he didn’t. He must have needed the comfort.

Prompto stifled another sob as Noctis stroked his hand with his thumb; he didn’t deserve such kindness after he had been so cold towards Noct, did he?

“He, I know you’ve got something you’re afraid to tell me, and if you’re still not ready, that’s fine. I just want to know…” Noct trailed off, and leaned forward a little so he could better meet Prompto’s eyes. Prompto timidly looked his way.

“If I did something to break your trust, please, tell me,” he pleaded. Prompto’s gaze lingered this time, and eventually he shook his head and laughed softly.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, Noct. I’ve always trusted you,” he said, but Noctis was going through a list of what-ifs. What if he had lost Prompto’s trust when he had gotten engaged to Luna? Or what about when he’d pushed Prompto off of the moving train after trying to kill him?

“Then what?” Noctis gently pried. His brows were so deeply slanted in worry, his stomach twisting as he felt like he might be getting closer to the truth.

“It’s just that this thing that’s going on with me… is not an easy thing to talk about,” Prompto admitted, his voice so very meek. He blinked back a new onslaught of tears, and allowed himself to lean his head on his friend’s shoulder, letting out a shaky breath as he rested there, but it felt good.

He soon felt an arm around his back, holding him close as Noct’s head fell atop his own. The position was so familiar, and so very soothing. Bravely, Noctis pressed a long kiss into Prompto’s hair.

“I wish I could help you,” he whispered, feeling at a loss now.

“I wish you could, too,” Prompto half-chuckled, eyes remaining teary. But Noctis couldn’t help. Even if Prompto told him the truth, there would be nothing he could do for him this time. Prompto’s stomach twisted with that sickening feeling of being trapped. Sadly, this was one of the few things that Noctis couldn’t make better with hugs or kisses.
Noct rubbed his arm gently, hoping to bring him some comfort. Prompto still didn’t pull away, but rather seemed to sink into his touch, into his warmth, and despite how solemn the moment was, there was a part of Noctis that still wished it could last forever. It had been far too long since they had been this close, and Noct wondered if this might be as close as they ever would be again.

Noctis struggled to think of what Prompto could possibly be hiding from him. What was so hard to talk about that he couldn’t tell him? Was it something Noct wouldn’t like? Something that might hurt him, or jeopardize the Crown? He honestly had no idea, but he wished he would never have to leave Prompto’s side until he knew. He didn’t want him struggling with this alone, didn’t want him suffering, like he so obviously was.

Noctis’ mind rushed back to that sweet, young teenager who had always been cracking jokes and making him smile even when he didn’t feel like doing so himself. What had the world done to change him so much? When he looked at Prompto now, his heart ached as he longed to know where that precious young man had gone. How he longed to see Prompto smile the way he used to—so wide, and carefree, and unafraid.

Was it Ardyn who had taken Prompto’s smile away? Had he stolen it when he’d held Prompto captive, replacing it with horrid memories that were impossible to forget? Memories that made it too hard to ever show genuine happiness again? How could he smile after he’d been tortured in ways he would never be able to erase from his mind?

Or was this all Noctis’ fault? Had his betrayal on the train been too much for them to recover from? Had his rescue from Zegnautus Keep come too late? Had Prompto been expecting more from him when he’d told him the entire story behind his barcode? Had he let Prompto down when he had been taken by the crystal immediately after? Or when he’d returned years later prepared to disappear again, this time forever?

When Noctis had come back from the crystal, when they had spent their last night together, both had avoided a proper goodbye because they knew it would only hurt more when Noctis gave his life for the world. Maybe that was when the distance had formed.

It seemed there were a number of reasons why Prompto could be angry with him, but Noctis certainly didn’t sense any hostility from him now, not in the way he was leaning into him, head resting on his shoulder. He was where he belonged, Noctis thought, everything feeling so right when they were together like this, even in the saddest times. Perhaps that was when they truly needed and appreciated each other the most.

“Prompto? Will you accompany me to Galahd?” Noctis inquired. Had he known the question would make Prompto lift his head from his shoulder, he might have reconsidered asking it. He missed the contact already.

“Huh? But you asked Fae to go with you,” Prompto reminded him, wiping under his eyes with the back of his hand.

“I know, but I feel like you need a break from this place. Maybe a change of scenery will do you good.”

“I’ve only been back here for, like, a day.”

“Still, it seems like...” Noctis paused to reach a hand to Prompto’s face. Prompto looked hesitant when he let his fingers rest upon his ear, but as his thumb brushed against the wet skin under his eye, Prompto simply let his lids fall closed to soak up the feeling. “You need a good distraction.”
“I don’t know, Noct,” Prompto breathed, as the hand left his face. He felt colder now that the moment had passed, and when he opened his eyes, the warmth in Noctis’ eyes had lessened. “I just have a lot to work through, and I think if I went with you, you and I would start falling back into old habits.”

“Would that be such a bad thing?” Noctis asked, but when Prompto averted his eyes, the king cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I’m pushing again.”

“No, it’s okay,” Prompto assured him. Though his eyes didn’t move from their spot on the floor, his hand reached over to rest on Noctis’ knee, giving a gentle squeeze that made his heart flutter. This was his Noctis, the Noctis he had known so well, and loved so very much. It hurt to touch him and know that he couldn’t make it anything more than what it was—a mere touch.

“If you change your mind, let me know, okay? I know Cor said that a smaller party is best, but I might even be able to take you and Fae both, if that would make you more comfortable,” Noctis said, giving Prompto’s leg a pat in return before getting up from his perch. He stretched his arms lazily above his head, and Prompto managed a half-smile at the man who resembled that young prince from years ago. As he let his arms fall back down, he turned to look over his shoulder at Prompto.

“Will you be alright now?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Thanks,” Prompto said, maintaining as much of a smile as he could. Noctis took a few steps toward the door, but halted, staring back at his dear companion with gentle concern in his eyes.

“Hey. Take care of yourself, okay?”

“I will,” Prompto said, folding his hands in his lap as Noctis left the ballroom. He leaned his head back against the window in defeat. He would try, but... that request was much easier said than done.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, everybody. Hope you're still enjoying the story so far. It's a little bit slow moving at the beginning, but I promise, the boys won't be apart forever, and there are a lot of things that just had to be set up for later. Also wanted to mention, Fae is my original glaive character that I made on FFXV Comrades. I thought it would be cool to incorporate her into the story as someone who was with Prompto during those years without Noctis, since they said in the game that Ignis, Gladio, and Prompto all went their separate ways during that time. Anyway, I posted a few pictures of her on my tumblr/twitter (under my same username), so if you want to get a visual of her, go take a peek! As always, thank you for reading!
“Move your feet, Noct,” Gladio scolded, arms folded as he watched the king from the sidelines. The air in the training room was warm and stale. They had been in here for far longer than they were used to; the king was out of practice as far as fighting went, and with the voyage coming up soon, he needed to be well prepared to defend himself. Noctis hadn’t fought at all since the final battle with Ardyn. All of his efforts after that had been put into rebuilding roads and buildings in Lucis, as well as reconstructing the parts of the Citadel that had been damaged during Insomnia’s fall.

Noctis knew that this training was important, knew that he had to be on top of his game when he was going out into the world with only one glaive to accompany him, but he couldn’t focus. His mind was on Prompto—poor Prompto who he had found in tears the night before. Noctis had gone to the ballroom for some peace and quiet, to think on his own like he used to do as a child, but instead it had cured some of his loneliness for Prompto, and also allowed him to dry his tears, despite not knowing the cause of them. It killed Noct to not understand what was going on with him, to know he was suffering and have no idea why.

“I said, move your feet!” Gladio huffed, evidently more irritated this time around. Noctis ignored the instruction and warped forward. Ignis heard the whoosh of magic, and sidestepped just in time to dodge him. Noctis tripped as he landed, having fully expected to make impact with his advisor, and he landed on his hands and knees, panting hard, his training blade vanishing into purple sparks on the floor.

“‘The hell is wrong with you today?’ Gladio huffed, raising his hands above his head, intending to wave them accusingly, but he restrained himself and rested them behind his head instead. Noctis grunted and pushed himself to his feet, marching over to the bench to grab a towel. He dried his damp face with it before tugging it around his neck and letting it hang there.

“I’m just out of practice, alright? Give me a break.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing bothering you, Noct? It’s not that I lack confidence in my abilities, but I would have thought of the two of us, it would be the blind man who fell to the floor first,” Ignis said, pushing his glasses up, appearing amused. Noctis shook his head wildly at Gladio who was silently daring him to reply to that.

“I said I’m out of practice. I’ll do better tomorrow,” Noctis huffed, and plopped himself down on the bench. He pulled his towel from side to side to dry the back of his neck before dabbing at the line of sweat that ran down the front of his tank top. It had been quite some time since he’d sweat this much during a training session. Maybe he was out of practice, but the blame went primarily to the fact that he was distracted.

The buzzer for the training room door gave a harsh honk, and Gladio strolled over to the entryway, pressing a few buttons to deactivate the lock. He pulled the door open, and Noctis caught sight of reddish-pink hair before Gladio disappeared outside.

“Did Gladio leave?” Ignis asked. He had come to stand before Noct now, waiting patiently until the king was ready to either quit for the day or go one more round.
“Yeah. With Fae.”

“Ah, might be beneficial for the two of you to train together before you leave, so she can get used to the feel of your magic again. It’s probably much stronger now that you are nearer to us,” Ignis said. It made sense, Noctis supposed, but he had never thought about how him being stuck in the crystal or tucked away in Angelgard might reduce the strength of his magic for the glaives who borrowed it.

Noctis let out a sigh, and leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees and his hands lacing together in front of him. Ignis seemed to perk up at the sound of his heavy breath, waiting for any other cues as to what Noctis was doing or thinking.

“Do you know Fae very well?” the king asked.

“Hardly at all. Prompto seems to know her better. Why do you ask?”

Noctis’ lips pressed harder together at the mention of Prompto, and he let his head fall forward, feeling some sense of defeat before even opening his mouth again.

“Prompto said he used to fight alongside her in his hunting days, right? I just wonder… was there something going on between them?” Noctis asked. Ignis paused for a long while, before taking a seat beside his liege and crossing one leg atop the other.


“Has hardly been paradise since I got back.” Ignis silently pondered this, too, before continuing.

“To answer your previous question, I never had any reason to believe the two were romantically involved. Prompto certainly never mentioned it.”

“Did he mention anyone to you?” Noct asked, looking at Ignis with a sad and desperate expression that the man couldn’t see. The question was a little hard to get out, and if he had been a bit younger, he probably wouldn’t have had the courage to ask it at all, but the roadtrip ten years ago had taught him just how much he could trust and confide in his friends. It was better to let them in than to try and hide from them—especially in Ignis’ case, since the man seemed to know everything Noctis wasn’t saying anyway.

“He did not,” Ignis shook his head.

Noctis remained silent, his laced fingers sliding against each other anxiously. As much as he hoped Prompto’s heart still remained with him, finding the truth would at least stop this painful wondering and worrying.

“Are you disappointed?” Ignis queried.

“Heh, not sure what to think,” Noct admitted, gruffly, and Ignis offered a small smile.

“I understand your struggles, Noct. Prompto has played an extremely important role in your life, but may I just add that perhaps this is not the best time to be pursuing romance? You are trying to rebuild a kingdom, after all.”

“Ugh, now you sound just like him,” Noctis grumbled. “I can rule a kingdom and still love someone at the same time.”

“My apologies. I merely meant that perhaps this is not the best time to become attached.” Noctis
frowned at the way Ignis had said that last part, not quite understanding what it meant, nor what
the odd tone in his voice indicated. He didn’t have time to dwell on it, for the door swung open
again, and Gladio poked his head inside.

“Hey, you think we can call it a day? Got some stuff to do, and I don’t want to miss training with
His Majesty. He might just fall on his ass next time, and I wouldn’t want to miss the show,” Gladio
smirked, and Noctis swatted the air, shooing him off with a wrinkle of his nose that reminded the
Shield of the spoiled brat with whom he used to train.

“I wouldn’t count on that show, if I were you,” Noctis taunted.

“We’ll see about that.”

Prompto jumped when he heard the pounding on his door, and knew by the sound of those familiar
giant fists that Gladio was outside, trying to get his attention. That loud knocking had quickly
ushered him and Noct out of their hotel rooms plenty of mornings on the road, when Prompto was
scrambling to pack up their stuff and Noctis was still half-asleep and buried in blankets.

Prompto uncrossed his legs from where he’d been lying on his bed, and set his phone down on the
nightstand beside him. He sighed as he made his way across the room, knowing that whatever
Gladio wanted probably wasn’t something he wanted to deal with at the moment. He’d already
been caught crying—twice, actually. Was it too much to ask for a little time on his own to recover
from everything that had happened?

“Hey,” Gladio greeted, his voice much softer than Prompto would have expected from the urgent
knocking.

“Hey,” Prompto greeted back, opening the door for Gladio and strolling over to sit on the edge of
the bed. He waved toward the chair at his desk, but Gladio politely declined.

“I’ll stand. Thanks.” He looked like he was about to start speaking after that as he rubbed the back
of his head, but he returned to the door and closed it over first.

“Look, kid. Everyone’s worried about you,” Gladio started, his hands splaying out in front of him
in a manner-of-fact manner. Prompto’s mouth twitched into an amused smile that didn’t last.

“I don’t know why. I’m fine,” he fibbed.

“Really? Is that why a certain young glaive asked me to talk some sense into you? I have to agree
with her. I think you should go on the trip with Noct.” Prompto’s eyes shot up toward his friend,
fear sparkling in them amongst the shades of violet. So, Fae had gotten Gladio involved. Did the
distance between him and Noct feel as wrong to everyone else as it did to him?

“No, no way. I mean, I appreciate that you’re all trying to help me out, but I’m fine,” Prompto
sang, getting up and heading for the wooden cabinet across the room. Gladio watched as he
reached for a bottle and a couple of glasses.

“Right. You’re fine. That’s why you’re gonna drink in the middle of the afternoon, after you were
too depressed to even finish your drink when we went out the other night?” Gladio dryly asked.
Prompto frowned at the comment, and halted his hands halfway, setting the drink and glasses back
in the cabinet before swinging the doors shut. He sauntered back over to the bed and flopped down
on the edge again. Out of habit, he reached for his tattooed wrist and rubbed it shamefully.

“I can’t do this, Gladio,” he whispered, gaze fixed on the floor.
“Yes, you can. You need to tell Noct what’s going on. That’s the only way either of you is going to feel better. And this trip might give you a good opportunity to talk it all out.”

“How do you know it’s going to make us feel better? Even if it takes a load off my mind, there’s no way Noct’s not going to be hurting after this.” Prompto knew that for a fact. Noctis was dying to get back together as it was. If he knew how dire the circumstances was, he would be heartbroken, devastated, and so desperate to fight the inevitable that might cling to Prompto and never let go. Oddly enough, that last thought was sort of a comforting one.

“Keeping secrets is never easy. It’s much better to share than to carry the burden alone. You of all people should know that,” Gladio said, stepping forward. He pointed to the barcode that Prompto was still relentlessly rubbing, and Prompto blinked in surprise before dropping his hands to his sides, fingers curling around the edge of the mattress.

He’d often wondered how different things would have been if he had told the truth from the beginning. If Ignis had known about his codeprint, he probably would have helped research it, and Prompto wouldn’t have had to find out the darkest truths about it in the very lab in which he’d been created. He would have had the support of his friends, of Noctis, and he might not have had to live in so much fear—fear of being shunned for his origins, fear of being torn from Noctis by King Regis or others who protected the Crown, fear of being sent back to Niflheim.

“You’re… you’re right about that one,” Prompto sighed, and Gladio knelt before him. He stretched out a hand and rested it on the younger man’s shoulder, his golden eyes hoping to meet Prompto’s cautious ones; eventually, they did.

“Look, I know this ain’t easy. On any of us. But you shouldn’t have to suffer alone. If Noct knew you needed him and he wasn’t there for you, he’d live every last day filled with regret. You get that, don’t you?” Gladio asked, his eyes so sad and gentle, a sort of desperation in his eyes as he tried to get his point across. Prompto nodded meekly, that statement hitting home.

It was still hard to grasp how someone like Noctis could love him so very much, but regardless of the reasons, Noctis did, and Prompto knew he had to be fair to him. When people loved like they did, they were supposed to stick it out together through the good and the bad. And they’d had so, so much good. He wanted to believe they could handle that sprinkling of bad, too.

“I do. Thanks, Gladio,” he breathed, and the older man gave his shoulder an appreciative squeeze before getting to his feet.

“Go tell Noct you’ll go with him. I want to see you spending lots of time in the training room this week. You guys will be leaving in a few days, and I want you both at the top of your game. Who knows what kind of trouble you’ll run into.”

“Yes, sir.” Gladio headed for the door, giving Prompto one last glance, making sure he didn’t look like his resolve had wavered in the last few seconds. Once he felt confident enough that the young man wasn’t going to change his mind, he disappeared down the hall.

It wasn’t until the next day that Prompto mustered the courage to finalize his decision. With shaking fingers, he’d texted Noct to see where he was, which was met with a response within seconds.

‘In the training room. You coming, too?’

It was an eager invitation that Prompto couldn’t say no to, even if he had changed his mind about
accompanying him on the trip. But he hadn't; he was committed.

In fact, upon reflection, he'd found he was thankful for the night Noctis found him in the ballroom. It had been the first time since his return that Prompto had felt comforted by Noctis instead of ridden with guilt. It made it a lot easier to approach him now, knowing that Noctis was on his side, and that all he really wanted to do was help.

When he opened the training room door, he was caught off guard by the sight of Noctis in a sweat. He warpstruck from one end of the room to the other while his phone timer dinged once every second; he tried to keep up with it, and managed to do so surprisingly well, despite the difficulty of the task. Noctis stopped when he saw Prompto enter, and he gave him a smile before heading for the bench and turning off the timer. He reached for a towel and patted his face with it before tossing it aside.

“You made it,” he greeted, heading for his friend. “I’ll just apologize now for the smell,” he smirked, picking up the front of his damp shirt between two fingers, and eyeing it with disdain.

Prompto regarded his friend, whose face looked so much like the late King Regis’—so regal and charming—and yet, from the neck down, he was the young prince who never cleaned his shambolic apartment. The contrast made Prompto burst out laughing.

“No apology necessary. I, uh… I just came to talk to you about the trip.”

“The trip?” Noct’s eyes lit up, his expression cautious, but hopeful. “You thinking about going?”

“Well, yeah. If you’ll still have me, I’d like to go with you,” Prompto said, hesitantly at first, but by the end of his statement, he was smiling softly. Noctis watched him for a moment, drinking in every facial feature for clues as to what Prompto was really feeling on the inside. Why the sudden change of mind? Noctis decided not to dwell on that question, and simply revel in the fact that he had.

“Of course, I’ll still have you. In fact, I… I already asked Cor about having a party of three. He said he guessed it was okay, as long as we’re careful not to draw too much attention.”

“Right,” Prompto nodded, slightly stunned that Noctis had been eager enough to inquire about the specifics already, even when the possibility of Prompto going had been a very slim one. It was just another reminder of how nice it was to feel wanted.

“So, you sticking around for a bit? We could train together, if you want,” Noctis suggested, heading for the weapons room, and waving for Prompto to follow. Prompto leaned against the doorframe, and watched as Noct looked over the weapons with his hands on his hips. He selected a neat little handgun from one of the shelves and tossed it to Prompto.

“Huh. There’d be no way out of this, even if I said no, right?” Prompto playfully grinned, thumbs grazing the firearm in his hand. Noctis merely raised his eyebrows and smirked as he headed back into the main training room. He was pleased to hear Prompto at his heels, and once they were in the centre of the room, he turned to face him.

“Don’t hold back,” Noct warned him, a competitive gleam appearing in his eye. Prompto had missed that look—that look he got when they used to play King’s Knight or spend the day at the arcade.

“You better hope that this thing is only loaded with foam bullets, then,” Prompto chuckled.

“It is. I already checked,” Noct grinned, before warpstriking across the room, just as he had earlier.
The space between them worked to Prompto’s advantage, as it gave him a good shooting distance. With two hands on the gun, he launched a few bullets at Noctis. Noct had clearly taken advantage of his Black Hood accessory, as he dodged and ducked under the bullets with ease.

“No fair,” Prompto groaned, and Noctis chuckled, huskily, knowing he’d been caught optimizing his equipment before battle without giving Prompto a chance to do the same.

Noctis launched himself at Prompto this time, his sword landing right in front of Prompto’s feet before he catapulted after it. Prompto took a step back as Noctis yanked the blade out of the ground. Prompto thrust his hands out in front of him, summoning a semi-circle of protective magic. Noctis’ blade collided with the shield, and he bounced backward, watching the pink and purple hexagons shimmering in front of him before dying out.

“A glaive’s magic,” Noctis stated, as it occurred to him. Prompto wasn’t a mere Crownguard anymore. He was a hunter and a glaive, probably with more new tricks than Noctis could imagine.

Prompto began to shoot again as the shield dissolved, and Noctis warped across the room to avoid the bullets. He turned back to face Prompto, only to see Prompto’s gun in the air right before him, and Prompto launching himself after it in a blue blur. They collided hard, and fell to the ground. Noctis stared up at Prompto who lay atop him, both breathing hard, and getting immediately lost in each other’s eyes. Neither moved. Perhaps neither wanted to. It wasn’t until Noctis bravely reached up to brush Prompto’s bangs out of his eyes that Prompto flinched, and backed off. He scrambled to his feet, and offered the king a hand, pulling him up as well.

Noctis rubbed his wrist, which had taken a good brunt of the fall, and nervously brought his eyes to Prompto.

“So, you can warpstrike, too.”


“It’s alright. I cheated, too,” Noct smiled. “If, uh, if you don’t mind my asking, how did you learn?” Noctis’ head was tilted slightly in curiosity, and Prompto found himself biting his lip. It hadn’t been so much a learned ability as it was a happy accident.

“Not long after I started fighting alongside the hunters, we were in this battle with a bunch of big magitek armours. They were shooting at us, and were blocking so many of our escape routes that we couldn’t even retreat. I was hurt, and I honestly thought I was a goner.” Prompto paused when he saw the intense look of worry on Noctis’ face as he listened. He felt his heart swell, but swallowed his emotions, and pressed on.

“I got knocked down, my gun went flying out of my hand. I was terrified, but when I stretched my hand out to reach for it, I felt myself being warped right to it. I’m pretty sure I just lay there on the ground for a while in disbelief, and then…” he trailed off.

He remembered looking to the sky, and fondly whispering Noctis’ name, thanking him for lending him his magics. The magics were normally a comfort anyway, as they were confirmation that Noctis wasn’t dead—merely sleeping. But to have those warping abilities, those same powers that had once helped Noct take down so many enemies… it was invigorating.

“Then?” Noct gently coaxed, and Prompto smiled, snapping back to reality.

“I was able to warp up to one of the rooftops, and I recovered enough that I could help fight the rest of the battle.”
“Wow,” Noctis murmured. “I’m glad you were able to do that.”

“Me, too,” Prompto chuckled. Silence followed their conversation, and after a few awkward seconds passed of them searching for something to say, Noctis wandered over to the bench and pressed the button on his phone to light it up. He gaped when he saw the time.

“Oh, didn’t realize it was this late. I have to go get cleaned up now, but we should do this again before we leave for Galahd, okay?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Prompto agreed with a smile. He headed for the weapons room and set the gun back on its shelf. He felt Noctis watching him before he even turned back around.

“Hey, I’m glad you’re coming with me,” Noctis said, and Prompto felt himself relax at the sight of his smiling mouth and gentle eyes.

He looked so happy, not that most people could tell with how mildly Noct showed his emotions, but Prompto could see it. He was genuinely excited. Prompto wished he could say the same. He wanted to be, but he honestly wasn’t sure how he felt about this trip yet. His nerves weren’t letting him feel much besides fear.

“Yeah, I think… it will be good for us,” Prompto smiled anyway, as he headed for the training room again. Noctis raised a hand as he passed by, and Prompto high-fived him, their hands remaining clasped together a few seconds longer than necessary, before Prompto continued on his way. He left the room before he could hear Noctis whisper,

“I hope so.”

The week came and went quickly, and Prompto was a bundle of nerves as he headed for Fae’s room to collect her. It had been a good week—lots of training with Noctis, and lots of pep talks from Gladio to convince him he was doing the right thing—but still, it had gone too fast. Prompto wasn’t ready for this. He was even less ready for what greeted him when he arrived at Fae’s dormitory.

“Fae says she’s deathly ill,” Elea said, as she stood in the doorway, holding the door open just wide enough for her to block the entrance. Still, Prompto stood on his tip-toes to try and peer around her.

“What?! N-no, she’s not! Let me see her!” he nervously squeaked. Elea was startled as Prompto bolted forward, easily nudging her out of the way and making his way through the rows of bunks until he came to his friend’s. Fae lay on her back with a hand draped over her forehead, her hair stuffed into a messy bun on top of her head, and the blankets pulled up to her shoulders.

“What’s going on? Why aren’t you ready?” Prompto blurted out in a panic.

“I’m not going. I’m sick,” Fae stated. Prompto scanned the area, where tissues littered her bed and the surrounding floor, though from the look of them, they’d merely been balled up and scattered there in a hurry, never even used.

“You’re not sick! This is a setup!”

“I already told King Noctis I’m not going. Calm down. You’re going to be fine,” Fae said, mustering the most hoarse voice she could, but the smirk that played on the corners of her lips confirmed Prompto’s suspicions about her.

“Don’t do this to me! Come on, get dressed,” he huffed.
“This is a girls’ dormitory. Technically, you can’t be in here,” Fae said, pushing herself to sit up, though she still appeared amused.

“Don’t much care at the moment,” Prompto sang back, even though he was starting to notice small groups of girls watching them and whispering.

He searched his surroundings for a bag or suitcase, but it looked like Fae hadn’t packed anything at all. Feeling at a loss, he reached for the backs of her shoulders, urging her to dig her clothes out of the drawer under the bed. Fae fought back laughter as Prompto began gathering up tissues from the floor in a frenzy. The sooner they cleaned up this mess and got her packed, the sooner they could go. Unfortunately for him, that wasn’t in the cards.

Fae sighed and caught Prompto by the arm, making him stop his relentless actions.

“Prompto.” The stern tone made him halt and listen. Carefully, she moved her hands to grip his shoulders. “I know Gladio told you that King Noctis would have regrets if you kept him in the dark about everything, but think about it. You would have regrets, too.”

Prompto stood there staring down at her, her green eyes holding so much wisdom for such a young soul. She was right. Prompto wished he’d had the same level head on his shoulders when he’d been her age. Heck, he still wasn’t sure if he did.

“Every day you keep this a secret, you hurt both of you. Please, just do this. If not for anyone else, then for yourself.”

“But... fighting alongside the king is a big deal. This could be a great opportunity for you. It’s a chance to prove yourself to Noctis.”

“Honestly, with how down you’ve been lately, that is the farthest thing from my mind,” the girl said, with a stern mouth and even more serious eyes.

They stared at each other for a minute, before Prompto pulled her into a hug. She tensed like a cat in water, but she quickly settled into the embrace, reminding herself that this was the one adult in her life that she could trust, and if she didn’t let Prompto know that, then... Well, she would have regrets, too.

“Take care of yourself,” Prompto said.

“You’ll be in more danger than me, remember?” She rolled her eyes, and Prompto chuckled softly, knowing that was her way of telling him to stay safe, too.

“I’ll see you when I get back.”

They quickly said their goodbyes, and Prompto headed for the lobby, where Noctis was waiting for him with a duffel bag in hand. He was dressed more casually than Prompto had seen in a long time, and it made him smile as he remembered the old days. He was dressed in a dark grey t-shirt and a pair of black jeans that hugged his form. It was a nice contrast to Prompto’s white tank and light blue jeans. He wondered if they looked good together, like they used to.

“You all set?” Noctis asked, with a smile that looked like he was fighting from becoming too wide. So, he was still excited about this. Prompto swallowed his fear, and decided that he should be excited, too. It had been a while since he and Noct had been adventuring on the road together.

“All set,” Prompto agreed, and Noctis reached over to take his bag.
“I’ll get this for you,” he offered, grabbing it from Prompto’s hands before he could even protest. Prompto stuttered out a response, then hurried toward the heavy Citadel doors, pushing one open with his back and holding it there so Noctis could go through.

“When did you turn into such a gentleman?” Prompto teased, and Noctis kicked him lightly in the ankle as he passed by, making them both laugh. It was hard for Prompto to believe that the man ahead of him was a king now, but it was nice to be this close again, for everything to feel like they had never been apart. He hoped this feeling would last.

They headed down the steps together, to where a shiny, black car was parked in the courtyard. It wasn’t as big, as expensive, nor as luxurious as the Regalia had been, but Noctis had tried to be wise with his money, and had put it towards what his people needed the most—like food, and houses, and employment.

Noctis loaded their bags into the truck, and climbed into the driver’s seat. Once they were both inside the car, he glanced at Prompto, who was already fixing his bangs in the rear view mirror. He grinned nervously as he caught Noctis staring with admiration, and the king smiled as their gazes met and lingered.

“You ready for this?” he asked. Remembering something Noctis used to say, Prompto cheerfully opened his mouth to reply.

“Born ready.”

Prompto had expected a long car ride with Noctis to be horribly awkward, but instead, they quickly fell into their old ways, telling jokes and stories of the old days, and catching up on what had happened in each other’s lives over the past several months apart. Any gaps in conversation were filled by familiar Lucian tunes on the radio, ones they used to listen to in their school days.

It was weird to be on the road with so many of their old pit stops being a pile of rubble or a barely recognizable version of what they had been; it was even weirder for Noctis than it was for Prompto, as Prompto had been to most of these places either during his hunting days or during his previous mission of peace.

It made Noctis sad to see how much the world had changed, but he was relieved that Prompto was with him; it made it easier to know that Prompto had been through the worst of the damage and lived through it, and that things were now back on the upswing.

Prompto often glanced at Noctis as they drove, catching sight of his smile and listening to the sound of his laughter. It was nice to see him like this, so joyful and full of life—life that had almost been taken from him eight months ago. It didn’t matter where they stood with each other now, Prompto would always be glad that Noctis had survived, and had been given this second chance.

The drive to Galahd wasn’t overly long, since it was only a bit northeast of Insomnia. Prompto had filled Noctis in on the way there about how the man who was in charge—Libertus Ostium—had had to surrender the battered Galahd to the daemons during the World of Ruin, but had hoped to restore power to it someday. He told Noctis about how he and so many other glaives and hunters had spent their time fighting daemons and collecting meteorshards to send power to other places from Lestallum. In the end, they’d been able to bring back the light to Galahd for a brief period before Noctis had permanently brought back the light.

“Just park up here,” Prompto pointed, as they came to a fork in the road. Noctis obeyed, steering them off of the main road and onto a bumpy dirt path. They drove up a long stretch, and Prompto
instructed him to leave the car a distance from the actual town.

“Why?” Noctis asked, even though he’d already parked and taken the keys out of the ignition, listening without question to Prompto’s request.

“Until we know whether or not we should keep your identity a secret from the people here, I think we should keep your presence on the down-low. It’s probably become a well-known fact that you travel in a fancy black car, and I don’t want anyone to target you. I have to keep you safe, Your Majesty,” Prompto said, placing a hand over his chest, and bowing his head, and Noctis wasn’t sure if he was playing or not. He decided to keep the mood light, and did his best to let Prompto know that.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to stop you from doing your job,” he teased, nudging his friend in the shoulder. Prompto chuckled lightly, and they both got out of the car.

They headed down the dirt road side-by-side, and within five minutes, they reached civilization. Prompto could feel the shift in Noctis’ mood as they approached. Never in his life had he seen poverty like this.

Tents were set up everywhere, some which appeared to be little shops, and others that seemed to house families—or whatever was left of them. The small buildings that still remained between piles of debris were badly damaged, some with giant claw marks in them, some with partially collapsed roofs or broken windows. Noctis surveyed the land around them, noticing tiny patches of grass here and there that tried to poke out of the dirt. It seemed the land had been burned at one time, and this was the result of the earth trying to restore itself to its former state.

“I didn’t realize things were this bad,” Noctis said, under his breath, and Prompto gave him a side-long glance, one that was full of sympathy.

“I know. I thought it might come as a shock.”

They continued forward, earning stares from the locals that were anything but welcoming, making Noctis feel like an intruder. He was thankful when Prompto gave a wave to a heavier man a few feet away, his long hair snugged back in braids against his scalp.

“Hey, Libertus!” Prompto called out, and they headed for the open canopy that the man was standing under.

Noctis stuck close to Prompto, the frowns and scowls from those around him making him uncomfortable. Did people recognize him? Was that why he was getting these dirty looks? Because his father hadn’t been able to save Galahd from imperial invasion in the past, and he himself hadn’t yet done enough to help them restore what was lost?

“Hey, it’s been a while,” Libertus greeted, leaving the pot he was stirring to shake Prompto’s hand. Prompto hadn’t been here since the beginning of his trip with the other glaives, which had been not long after Noctis had brought back the light. He wondered if Libertus remembered his name, as he stared at him with what looked like slight discomfort.

“Sorry, you’re…”

“Prompto.”

“Of course. I recognized you right away, but the name slipped my mind,” Libertus chuckled, before returning his hand to the wooden spoon in the big, metal pot. He stirred slowly, the smell of curry wafting up into the air, and making the men a little hungry. Libertus’ gaze travelled from the
food back to Prompto, and then to Noctis, where his gaze lingered. Noctis felt his stomach clench.

“And this is…?”

“Oh, this is my partn— I-I mean, my prin—“ Prompto stuttered, the word spilling out of habit, and he suddenly didn’t know how to correct it. No other words would come to him.

“He’s my glaive. I’m… Noctis?” Noctis announced, raising his brows nervously, like he hoped Libertus would catch on to his identity. Libertus’ eyes widened, and he quickly shook the man’s outstretched hand.

“It’s a pleasure, Your Majesty, but you shouldn’t be here,” Libertus said, lowering his voice so that even Noctis and Prompto could barely hear him.

“And why not?” Noctis tested. Libertus glanced around to see who was listening, then he set one of the dials on the tiny stove to simmer, and put the lid on the pot.

“Come with me. We should speak more privately.” Libertus waved for the men to follow him, and they crossed the street to a small, square, wooden building that looked to be mostly intact. He opened the door and allowed the men to enter before he followed them inside, closing the door behind him.

The room was pretty dark, with only one small, square window letting light in. In the centre of the room was a round, wooden table and four chairs around it. Noctis wondered if this was where some people chose to dine on a rainy day. It wasn’t much, but it did provide a bit more shelter than some of the more rugged-looking buildings or tents.

“Why did you come here?” Libertus asked, addressing Prompto this time, as they all took a seat around the table. Noctis flinched at the abruptness of the question, and felt yet again far from welcome. He wondered if he perhaps should have taken those threats against him more seriously at their last council meeting.

“We came to try and strengthen the bonds of peace with Galahd. I know we ended on good terms when I was here with my two fellow glaives, but we’ve since received threats against our king, and we’re worried for his safety,” Prompto explained. He dug out his phone, and flipped through to the picture Ignis had insisted he take of the threat letter. He slid the phone across the table to Libertus, who scanned it with a frown.

“You can’t blame all of Galahd for one threat,” Libertus asserted, and Prompto shook his head.

“I know, and we’re not. We’re just concerned. Could you maybe talk to the people? Tell everyone that Noctis is not a threat?” Prompto asked, with hopeful eyes and a worried glance at Noct. Libertus bit his bottom lip, pensively.

“Look, kid, I appreciate that you fought so hard with those hunters in Lestallum, and helped restore the light here. And I’m glad you were able to leave us on good terms after your previous visit, but the truth is, Lucis still hasn’t earned Galahd’s trust. You promised us provisions, which we never received.”

“I—“ Prompto started, but Noctis cut in.

“That was my fault, and I am deeply sorry. Prompto called me while he was here and asked me to send a delivery truck with fresh food and water, as well as some building materials. The building supplies took longer than expected to be delivered to the Citadel, and when they did arrive, our driver was ill. By the time he recovered, I’m afraid it had slipped my mind. I promise you, it will
never happen again. I am not a man of excuses, nor empty promises. That’s not what my father was, and nor will it be what I become,” Noctis assured the man before him, and Prompto smiled softly at his speech, at how strong he looked in that moment. His jaw was firmly set, his beard a reflection of his father, but his eyes were sincere, and so purely Noct—the Noct that had grown up alongside Prompto and helped him through so much.

“I will call my advisor immediately and request the truck leave within the day with provisions,” Noctis announced, taking his phone out of his pocket so he absolutely would not forget.

“Thank you, your Highness. We really could use the help, but trust takes a lot of time and effort. You’re not going to win the people over with a few gifts,” Libertus said with a wave of his hand. Noctis knew it was harsh, but it was also the truth.

“I realize this, but I’m afraid at this time, I am in a tough position. I have a fair number of able-bodied glaives now that I would gladly send to your aid to help you with some of the manual labour to rebuild this town, but my council doesn’t think it wise to send any glaives away from the Citadel when my security is at risk,” Noctis explained. “I sincerely wish there was more I could do at this time, but I’m afraid provisions are all I can deliver right now. Is there anything Prompto and I could do for you in the immediate future to help out? We had planned to stay for a couple of days,” Noctis explained. Libertus put a hand to his chin as he pondered.

“My best advice to you would be to mingle with the people, and help out with whatever little jobs need to be done, but I wouldn’t alert them of your royal status yet, if I were you. Tell them you’re both glaives. Gain their trust first, and maybe once these threats against you come to an end, we can tell them the truth.”

“You believe the threats will eventually end?” Noctis asked.

“If you continue to help us in whatever ways you can, then yeah. I at least hope so,” Libertus said, giving the men a smile for the first time since they’d gotten here. It put them both at a bit more ease.

“I guess it’s a good thing Prompto already made some connections here. It should make things easier to earn their trust,” Noctis said, turning to Prompto briefly with a proud smile, and Prompto lowered his head, flushing.

“Well, actually, since you say that…” Libertus trailed off, looking guilty. He gave a sigh before continuing, his fingers playing nervously with the edge of the table.

“Someone here did some investigating after you left last time, Prompto. He remembered something from an old newspaper years ago that reminded him of you. He managed to get his hands on a copy, and the picture confirmed it was you. You were rumoured to be the prince’s sweetheart,” Libertus said. Prompto turned a deeper shade of red, and slunk down a little in his seat. Noctis spoke up to avert Libertus’ attention from him.

“And? Why does that matter?” Noctis folded his arms.

“He decided he couldn’t trust Prompto because of his association with you. He circulated that idea pretty well with the people around here, too,” Libertus explained.

“But Prompto helped out here for weeks. And, even if the rumours were true, shouldn’t it be a sign of my will to help if I sent someone so personally close to me?” Noctis asked. Libertus shrugged.

“I wish I could help, your Highness, but like I said, trust is a hard thing to earn, especially when it’s
been so brutally broken.”

All were silent for what felt like a long time, and Prompto struggled to figure out how things had so drastically gone downhill since the last time he’d been here. Was Fae right? Had everything they done here been for nothing? *Wait... Fae.*

“You remember that young glaive that was with me last time? Fae?” Prompto asked, and he saw Noctis perk up beside him, looking curious. “She told me you saved her long ago. She said she had been attacked, and you rescued her and got her safely into the back of a truck with you and some other glaives.”

“Yeah, I did. She was a skinny little thing back then. Looked like she was going to keel over, but she turned into a fierce little fighter,” Libertus said, fondly.

“You know she went through hell, too. She lost everything thanks to the imperials, but she still believed in King Regis, and she trusts Noct, too. She’s actually hoping for a life of service to protect Lucis and the king,” Prompto said, with a hand over his heart, hoping that the story would help. “If she trusts him, and she went through the same sorts of tragedy that Galahd has, then surely the people of Galahd can have some faith in him, too,” Prompto said. “Please, can you pass that along to the people here?”

Libertus gave a sigh. He wasn’t cut out to be an authority figure. This position as town leader had come about simply because he had been a glaive once, and he knew a lot about war and survival. He, too, had once lost his faith in Lucis, after Crowe had died, the woman he’d loved like a sister. But his buddy, Nyx, had believed in a better world. He had given his life so that the Lady Lunafreya might pass the Ring of the Lucii unto the young prince Noctis. If Nyx had believed his sacrifice was worth it, then Libertus felt obligated to believe the same. His best friend had died for the man in front of him now, and he couldn’t disrespect that choice.

“I’ll admit, I certainly haven’t been provoking these threats against you, Your Majesty, but I haven’t been doing my part to stop them either. I assure you now, I will do what I can,” Libertus promised, bowing his head.

He got up from his seat and pushed the chair in, giving the men a smile. “Feel free to stop by my tent across the way. Lunch is almost ready.” He dismissed himself with a brief nod and closed the door behind him, leaving the two in silence. It took a minute before either of them decided to talk. There were many things Prompto expected Noctis to say, but this wouldn’t have been his first guess.

“Fae wants to keep serving as a glaive, huh?”

“Yeah. Her dad was a glaive. Her mom passed away before she could remember. She and her dad lived in the Citadel until he was killed in battle. She was only young when it happened, but apparently, King Regis allowed her to stay at the Citadel.”

“Oh, really?”

“What, you never ran into her over the years?”

“Don’t think so. ’Course, I was probably too wrapped up in myself to notice,” Noct said, a little regretfully.

“Well, she swears your dad’s the only reason she survived. He gave her a home, kept her clothed and fed, paid her as a glaive even when she was technically too young to do the job. I know she’d
never come right out and ask, but she’d love it if you let her stay at the Citadel permanently as a glaive.”

“I don’t see why not. She’s performed admirably so far. Would have liked to see her in action during this trip, but if she’s sick, she’s sick. Can’t blame her for that.”

“Uh, y-yeah,” Prompto stuttered, inwardly cursing her for her little trick.

“Besides, it’s not like I’ve had glaives lining up at the door to serve. I can’t exactly afford to lose any,” Noctis shrugged.

“Thanks, Noct. I know she’ll appreciate it,” Prompto smiled, getting up from the table, and breathing a sigh of relief. “I appreciate it, too. She needs a home so badly, and I really wanted her to find one before I—” He halted abruptly, and Noctis looked up, eyes appearing startled and cautious.

“Before you what?”

Prompto bit his lip.

“I, um,” he said, nervously rubbing the back of his head. “I honestly don’t remember what I was going to say there. Hehe,” he chuckled. Noctis drew his gaze back to the table, and Prompto frowned when Noctis didn’t move from his spot.

“Prompto? What is she to you?” Noctis asked slowly, keeping his gaze on the table. Prompto scrunched up his eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what relation do you have to her? Were you and she ever…?” He trailed off, not wanting to say the words if he didn’t have to. Thankfully, Prompto caught on, and he shook his head in amusement.

“No, no way, dude! It wasn’t anything like that. She’s, like, twelve years younger than me, and if anything, I… I mean, I know it’s a little strange, but I almost think of her like a daughter? I don’t know,” Prompto said, tentatively, like he didn’t quite know how to describe it himself.

Noctis swallowed hard, suddenly seeing his friend in a new light. It was strange to wake up and realize the world had continued on without him, that his friends had continued their lives, had grown up, had had new experiences. Before he’d ended up in the crystal, Prompto had been so young. He couldn’t believe that he’d grown up enough to see himself in a parenting role. Noctis was almost a little jealous. He felt like he was struggling with being adult enough to even do all the paperwork that needed to be done back home, let alone take care of another human being.

“I see,” Noctis said, pausing to let the information sink in. It may have been a little hard to understand, but at least it was better than the scenarios that had been swirling around in his head before. Prompto offered him a hand, and helped him up from his seat with a smile.

“You ready to eat, buddy? I’m starving, and that curry smelled delicious.”

“Yeah. Let’s go,” Noctis agreed, savouring the feeling of his hand in Prompto’s long after the contact had ended.

Prompto had a hard time sleeping that night. He thought he should be tired from the events of the
day, from the drive to Galahd, and helping the townspeople chop lumber for firewood. He was wide awake, however, as he lay beside Noctis in the shack in which Libertus had met with them earlier that day. He had loaned them a couple of spare blankets, and they set them up on the floor—one underneath them for padding, and one on top of them for warmth.

Prompto felt a little awkward since this was as close to sharing a bed as they’d come in a while, but even that wasn’t what was keeping him awake. The image of the threat letter was burned in his mind, and he regretted showing it to Libertus now, as it had only reawakened his fears that Noctis was in danger. *Sleep with one eye open, King Noctis. Galahd hasn’t forgiven you yet.*

The words made Prompto feel unsettled. The culprit behind that threat could easily be here among them. He and Noct could have helped this villain earlier in the day and not even known it.

Prompto lay on his back, restlessly, and turned his head towards his king, who was peacefully sleeping. One of their lamps—which they used to pin to their jackets—sat on the floor while they rested. Prompto was thankful for it, as it would have been pitch dark without it. In the light blue glow, Prompto could see that Noctis’ lips were slightly parted, each of his breaths coming out slowly and heavily. His eyelids twitched ever so slightly as he dreamed, and Prompto had the urge to kiss them ever so gently, but he resisted.

He’d sworn to himself he would stick to his guns. If he let himself get attached now, it would only hurt Noctis more in the long run, and that was the last thing he wanted. Sure, he could tell him the truth eventually, but that didn’t mean they had to spark up their old flame.

It would have been far too easy to give in to old habits, though. He was highly aware of how badly he wanted to just snuggle in against Noctis, to wake up with Noctis’ arms around him. When Noct had been gone, that was all Prompto had wanted. Now… this was reality, and there would be consequences if he did get involved, unlike when he merely dreamed of being with him. He was here on a mission to protect Noctis, and that was what he’d do.

To his dismay, Noctis stirred beside him, his face scrunching up at the extra light in the room that the magic had created. Prompto quickly let his gun dissipate again, but Noctis still caught the vanishing flash of purple and blue as he opened his eyes.

“Everything okay?” he slurred.

“Yeah. Sorry I woke you,” Prompto said, softly. “Go back to sleep.”

“Something on your mind?” Noctis asked, after he’d blinked a few times to prevent falling immediately unconscious again. Their eyes met, the blue glow of the lamplight making both pairs of eyes look radiant.

“Just a little worried about the threat, but it’s fine, really,” Prompto promised. Noctis pushed himself to sit up, and he rubbed his eyes, trying to rid himself of the fatigue that threatened to take him again.

“Noct, really, it’s okay. You sleep,” Prompto insisted, sitting up beside him.
“It’s no good if you’re exhausted tomorrow. Let’s just take shifts,” Noctis suggested, though he barely looked in any shape to do so.

There was no more time to debate, as there was an eerie scratching coming from outside. Both looked to each other with surprise and unease, and listened hard. It happened again, the scraping of what sounded like claws on the wooden door. Prompto raced to his feet, summoning his gun again, and Noctis clambered off the floor as well. Prompto stood beside the doorframe, flat against the wall and his weapon at the ready. He gave Noctis a nod as the man reached for the door handle. Quickly, he yanked it open, and Prompto pointed his gun at the intruder, expecting to be launched at by a coeurl or voretooth. Instead, a little dog with dark grey fur stared up at him with smiling eyes.

“Umbra!” Prompto beamed, letting out a sigh of relief as he let his gun disappear. Noctis scooted around from behind the back of the door to see the creature for himself.

“Really?! What are you doing here, boy?” he grinned, kneeling immediately as the dog rushed towards him. Noctis looked like a kid again in that moment, rubbing and patting Umbra behind the ears and around his neck. Prompto smiled softly as he admired the sight.

“You got a message for us, Umbra? Or are you just here for moral support this time?” Prompto chuckled.

”I wonder,” Noctis mused. “You followed us all the way from the Citadel, huh? For added protection, maybe?”

”Who knows,” Prompto shrugged. “But I know I feel better with a guard dog around.”

”Me, too,” Noctis agreed, standing up and allowing the dog to enter. He closed the door to the shack again, sliding the heavy metal lock over before settling back down under the blanket on the floor with Prompto. Umbra curled up at the boys’ feet, laying his head on top of their ankles. Prompto hummed contentedly.

”Feel better?” Noctis asked, with a glance in his friend’s direction.

”Yeah, a lot, actually. Umbra will let us know if there’s any danger.” Noctis smiled softly at Prompto, who looked much more relaxed now than when he’d first awoken.

”Sleep well, Prompto,” he uttered, before closing his eyes and turning his head away, his hands falling upon his chest as he sought sleep.

”Sweet dreams, Noct,” Prompto whispered, stealing a glance at his king before settling down himself. Within minutes, he was lulled to sleep by a warmth by his feet and the sound of Noctis’ breathing.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, readers! Just wanted to write a quick note. I know Fae was mentioned a lot in this chapter, and I understand that sometimes people don’t always take to original characters (I tend to be this way, unless the OC is well-developed and has a purpose to
the story). So, I just wanted to give you a bit of reassurance that she does have purpose to the story, and that the focus will always remain on Noct and Prom. I just didn't want to deter anyone from continuing on with this by thinking she was going to dominate the story. My goal is always going to be creating wonderful Promptis moments throughout. I hope you're all enjoying this fic so far, and thank you so much for reading!
The next day passed quickly, thanks to the large number of tasks the boys had set out to do. They had done everything from mending clothes to canning food to constructing chocochick coops. Prompto thought a lot about what Libertus had told them—about the guy who had identified Prompto from the newspaper all those years ago, and had spread the word to the townspeople not to trust him or the king. He wondered how many people recognized them, how many people were faking smiles for them, and how many were plotting their demise behind their backs.

The following day was a little more laid-back, as Libertus had asked the two to go to the Galahd river and do a bit of fishing. Noctis was more than happy to help them stock up on as many fish as he could catch, and Prompto had naturally gone along with him, standing guard with Umbra while the king cast his line time after time into the river.

It was a beautiful place. They were far enough from town to escape the burnt landscape and dirt paths. Out here, the grass came up past their ankles, and conifer trees lined either side of the river. The trees continued up into the mountains as far as the eye could see, and the bright sun glistened on the water.

After a long while of waiting for Noctis, Prompto and Umbra took a short stroll around the area, never straying out of sight—only out of earshot. Prompto found a nice log to sit down a little distance from Noctis, allowing Umbra to take a seat in front of him. He affectionately ruffled the fur around his neck, fingers sifting through slightly matted hair. The ends were stuck together like they sometimes did after a swim at the beach.

“Seems like Noct needs to brush you more often,” Prompto chuckled, softly. “I’d do it myself if I had a comb or something with me, but I guess for now, this is the best I can do.”

Umbra tilted his head, easing himself further into the man’s gentle touch. Prompto combed his fingers through the dog’s fur, tugging lightly as he reached the knotted ends, not wanting to hurt him. Umbra didn’t seem to mind.

“I guess you must miss Pryna, huh? Is it true what they said? That she passed away?” Prompto asked, watching for a response, but Umbra merely continued to pant in front of him, the slight lowering of his ears the only indication that the tragic news could be real.

“I know what it’s like to miss someone like that, someone who was like a part of you,” he said, his eyes flickering briefly to the figure fishing in the distance, but he quickly directed them back. “Pryna helped me back when I was separated from Noct and the others. I was in the snow all alone, and she guided me to where I needed to be. She made me realize I was more capable than I thought. I’ll never forget that.”

Umbra looked like he was listening intently now, his head cocked to one side as he watched Prompto through yellow eyes.

“You’ve helped us so much, too. I know Noct would be lost without you.”

At this, Umbra seemed to almost frown as he let out a grunting sound, and he stepped forward until he could rub affectionately against Prompto’s torso. He stuck his nose in the air, and licked at
Prompto’s chin. Prompto squawked and wiped at his goatee with the back of his arm.

“What was that for?” he laughed, giving Umbra one last scratch behind the ears before getting up from the log. He stretched his arms above his head, and when he dropped them back to his sides, Umbra nudged him along with a wet nose against his forearm. Curious about his intentions, Prompto allowed the dog to guide him, back towards Noctis.

“How’s it going?” Noct asked, turning his head as the pair reached the dock, and eyeing the way Umbra was ushering Prompto forward.

“Noct, no offense, but your dog’s acting kind of weird,” Prompto grinned, looking slightly uneasy, even after Umbra finally stopped pushing him along and sat down beside him.

“Hey, don’t forget he’s a messenger from the Astrals. He’s probably smarter than the both of us,” Noct smirked. Umbra tilted his head up to look at Prompto before swiping his tongue affectionately over Prompto’s barcode. Prompto yanked his hand back and caressed it with the opposite one, wiping away the slobber with disgust.

“Yeah? Well, I think he’s still a canine at heart.”

“Maybe,” Noct laughed, warmly. His eyes lingered on Prompto’s wrist now, the way he rubbed his fingers over the black ink that he used to keep concealed and hidden away from the world.

Noctis wondered what it was that had made Prompto finally take off the leather band. Was it the fact that his friends had been accepting of that mark in Zegnautus, that they had convinced him it was not the mark of a traitor? Or had the world of ruin and darkness really brought people together so much that Prompto didn’t feel the need to hide? He supposed it didn’t matter. Prompto was brave enough now to not have to hide his past, and that was significant progress.

“What is it?” Prompto quizzed, noticing Noctis’ stare. Noctis shook his head apologetically.

“Sorry. I’m just... not used to seeing you leave your codeprint out in the open like that. Guess the world really has changed, huh? Or you have,” he smiled, fondly, hopefully. Prompto stared down at his wrist.

“To be honest, no one really ever asked about it, or even commented on it. Maybe most people don’t even know about the magitek facility’s procedures. Or maybe they don’t care. I guess a lot of people probably just thought it was a weird tattoo,” Prompto chuckled, softly. “But, yeah. It’s weird to finally feel... safe.”

“I guess, during that time, everyone had their own scars, huh? Their own pasts?”

“Yeah. We’d all lost something, and had to set aside our differences.”

“And you?” Noctis asked, eyes meeting Prompto’s in question. Prompto brushed his fingers over his barcode one last time before he let his hands fall back down to his sides.

“I decided I couldn’t keep living in fear, you know? Life is short, so... you just have to embrace who you are.”

Noctis gave him a small, sad smile, but his eyes shone with pride. He couldn’t describe how happy he was to see how strong Prompto had become, and he found himself wanting to recreate that accepting environment that Prompto had lived in during the years of darkness. He didn’t want anyone else to have to live the way Prompto had—terrified that someone would discriminate against him for origins that were beyond his control. The war was over. It was time that Eos knew
true peace.

“Hey, I meant what I said back then,” Noctis announced. Prompto looked up at him with piqued interest, but found Noct’s gaze had wandered back to his wrist—to the mark that Prompto had once feared would eventually pull them apart. He supposed the fear wasn’t gone, but the reasons why it could tear him from Noctis had changed.

“I want us to unite the two nations. I want everyone to be at peace,” Noctis went on, leaning on his fishing rod as it stood beside him. He looked so pensive, so serious. He wanted to ask whether Prompto was still with him in this, but he was scared of what the answer might be, so he kept his mouth shut. It was just as well. To Prompto, ‘ever at your side’ felt like an empty promise now.

Prompto watched him intently as he stared blankly at the grass, his face looking so regal, despite the casual clothes in which he was currently dressed. Prompto smiled softly, wishing he could give Noctis anything and everything he needed to make his dream a reality, but he didn’t know how, or if he even could.

He wondered what the world would be like if Noctis really did succeed in making that dream a reality. Things had come a long way in the past ten years; since people had needed to ban together to fight off the daemons, Niffs, Lucians, Tenebraens—citizens from all over—had come to enough of an understanding to work together, without much hate or prejudice. They had all been stuck in the same boat, and in the end, they’d all needed each other’s help. Blood hadn’t mattered so much anymore.

Prompto wondered if Noctis’ ruling might rid the world of the last of its distrust of those born in Niflheim. He wondered if Noct might succeed in creating a world of peace. He wondered if he himself would ever get to see that world. All he knew was that whatever Noct did as king, he would make his father proud. He would give everything he could to better the lives of not just Lucians, but everyone in Eos. For that, Prompto was beyond proud as well.

“Noct?” he eventually murmured, drawing his friend’s eyes to him. They were gentle, but curious, and Prompto thought that maybe Noctis was hoping for something more than just words. “You’re going to be an amazing ruler.”

Noctis lowered his eyes and blushed slightly, rubbing the back of his head.

“Thanks,” he chuckled, meekly. “I’m just trying to survive the first year as king.”

“Well, you’re doing a great job. Honest,” Prompto continued to tenderly smile.

“I don’t feel like I’ve done much,” Noctis shrugged, with an upward quirk of his lips.

“What? You’ve rebuilt or restored pretty much everything in Insomnia. It’s actually a city again! You don’t give yourself enough credit, dude.” Prompto’s fist nudged against Noctis’ shoulder, which made Noctis’ heart flutter the way it used to when they were teenagers, and every small touch was exhilarating. He rubbed his shoulder after Prompto’s hand had fallen away, as if it might make the contact sink directly into his skin.

“And you probably give me more credit than I deserve,” Noctis smirked, but his eyes looked genuinely happy. Prompto merely grinned at him, before drawing his attention to the large bucket of fish that his friend had nearly filled.

“You think that’s enough to take back?”

“I sure hope so. The sun will be setting soon, and we’ve been out here for hours. Not that I’m
complaining about the freedom to fish, of course, but I am starting to feel a little gross from being out in this heat all day,” Noctis sighed, wiping his forehead with the back of his arm.

“Me, too. This place is nice and all, but I’m about ready to call it a day,” Prompto agreed. On top of getting himself cleaned up, he was also looking forward to a good meal and something to cure his parched throat.

Noctis reached for the bucket of fish, and lifted it, finding it heavier than he’d anticipated, but he was sure he could manage. He walked alongside Prompto, while Umbra trotted close by, nudging their knees every so often to coax them closer.

“What’s he doing?” Prompto laughed, as the dog’s nose tickled the back of his knees through his pants.

“No idea. Playing matchmaker, maybe?” Noctis chuckled back. He glanced at Prompto, who didn’t seem to have enjoyed the joke nearly as much. He looked like he’d swallowed something distasteful, his eyes big and solemn. When Noct looked closer, Prompto appeared guilty, his head hung low and his gaze on the ground. Noct regretted saying anything at all.

“I’m kidding,” the king said, forcing a chuckle and nudging Prompto playfully with his elbow. Prompto pushed forth a strained smile in return.

They walked for a few minutes after that in silence, with Noctis glancing over every so often to make sure Prompto was okay. He still didn’t look well. His bottom lip was constantly being tugged between his teeth, so much that Noctis worried he would bite right through it if he tripped in the long grass.

He wished he hadn’t made the comment about Umbra trying to get them together, but at the same time, he wondered why the thought was so unsavoury. When Noctis thought back on all their time spent together—lazy afternoons curled up in a blanket in front of the TV, nights cuddled close together in the warmth of a tent or hotel bed, heated kisses that took Noctis’ breath away—all he could do was yearn for those days, yearn for Prompto. He had to wonder, how could Prompto not miss those things, too?

Prompto seemed to pick up on what Noctis was thinking, or at least felt the need to explain his earlier reaction and the silence that had followed.

“You know that when I was growing up, things were far from perfect. Things with my parents… the way I felt about myself…” Prompto started, and although his gaze didn’t venture towards Noctis’, Noctis still watched him with a slightly turned head.

“That’s why, when I fell for you, I fully believed I couldn’t actually have you. You were royalty and way out of my league, but for some reason, you fell for me, too. It didn’t make sense that you did, but I was so happy. It was the first time I felt what it was like to be wanted. To be loved,” Prompto went on, his voice still soft and somewhat sad, but there was a tiny smile playing on the corners of his lips. Noctis remained so still and quiet, not wanting to do anything that would stop this beautiful speech from continuing. Finally, Prompto drew his eyes to his friend, and there was a seriousness in them.

“Noct, you have to understand how hard it was to get over you, to tell myself that you might not be coming back. I had to find out who I was without you, and it was hard,” Prompto said, his voice coming out hoarse, like it was difficult to even choke those words out. It was.

He would never forget how miserable life was after Noct had entered his crystal slumber. He
couldn’t rid his memory of how hard he’d cried, so hard that Gladio and Ignis had come into his room some nights to settle him down before he made himself sick. He couldn’t forget that painful lump in his stomach that had been a constant reminder that something important was missing, something he wasn’t sure he could live without.

Ten years of loneliness had passed, and at some point during that time, yes, Prompto had used all the strength he had in him to shut his feelings of Noctis away. The man probably wasn’t coming back. If he ever did, Ignis had told him he wouldn’t be back for long, barely long enough to say a proper goodbye. It was a devastating reality that Prompto had hardly known how to cope with until he’d learned to ignore it.

“My defences went up big time because I was scared of getting attached to anything I might have to lose one day. So, please, forgive me for having some trouble opening up right now. It’s not that I don’t care... It’s that I probably just care too much,” Prompto admitted, softly, taking comfort in the fact that every word he spoke to Noctis this time was the absolute truth. Sure, he was leaving out a vital reason as to why he was keeping his distance, but at least this confession played a part.

It took a minute for Noctis to drink in all of that information, and when it finally had time to settle in his brain, he placed a hand on Prompto’s shoulder as they walked. He was thankful that Prompto didn’t shy away from his touch.

“So, you… are having a hard time letting your guard down because of all those years you had to spend alone?”

“That’s the gist of it,” Prompto nodded, solemnly.

“It’s okay to let your guard down, Prompto. Especially around me,” Noctis said, eyes sad, but caring. He could tell Prompto wanted to shrink under his gaze, so he spoke on.

“But I get that it’s hard. And thank you. For telling me all of that,” Noctis whispered, his dark blue eyes digging deep into Prompto’s.

His gaze was so intense, Prompto wanted to look away, but what kept him there was how much that expression reflected that of their last night around the campfire, when they had all shed some tears for the man who was going to give his life for them the next day. Noctis looked so concerned, so sorry, and Prompto’s heart wanted nothing more than to lean in and kiss that expression away, replacing it with smiles and laughter, but he couldn’t—not until the truth came out, until Noctis knew what he was getting into, until he knew it would all eventually end up in ashes.

It still came as a slight surprise to him to witness just how much this man of royal stature wanted someone like him. It still made Prompto’s heart flutter when Noctis looked at him like that, or said something that proved that his love still ran extraordinarily deep. Noctis still loves me. Noctis still loves me. He wanted to set the words on repeat in his head, as they were so incredibly comforting after everything Prompto had been through, but it would only hurt him more in the end. His heart wanted to echo back I still love Noctis just as endlessly, but it had taken months to convince himself that he couldn't act on those feelings. He couldn’t let his walls break so easily.

“For me, those ten years in the crystal were kind of a blur, and I don’t think I really tried to comprehend what it must have felt like for you to be alone for so long,” Noctis admitted. “I… I think that’s why I was so taken with your hunter tags and clothes. They sort of connected me to that time in your life that I was unaware of. A time I had completely missed.”

Prompto thought about that, and smiled softly, reaching for the clasp around his neck. He undid it,
and unveiled the brown cord and tags that had been hidden beneath his t-shirt collar. He handed them over to Noctis, who let his hand fall from Prompto’s shoulder to accept them.

“You should hang on to these,” Prompto said, earning an uncertain look from Noctis. “I want you to feel connected to me. And maybe these will help, especially right now while I’m having some trouble… letting myself feel connected to you.”

Noctis appeared touched by those words, as well as completely grateful, and with a gentle nod, he laced the tags around his neck, assuring the clasp was tightly secured. As he finished, he let his fingers drift down to the pieces of metal that adorned the cord, his thumb brushing over the engraving of Prompto’s name.

“Thank you, Prom. This means a lot,” Noctis murmured, and Prompto smiled tenderly at the sound of his nickname that he hadn’t heard in far too long. He reached over to give Noctis’ shoulder a squeeze.

“You’re welcome.”

They reached the outskirts of town within a few more minutes of walking, but this area was abandoned, having suffered the most damage from daemon and imperial attacks. The buildings here seemed to crumble more as they merely walked by. The sounds of small, tumbling pebbles and creaking wood accompanied their footsteps as they proceeded down the dirt road. They stuck close together, with Umbra at their heels, feeling a little uneasy in this section of Galahd. Whether the eeriness came from being in a place that had undergone so much tragedy, or the feeling that they were being watched, they weren’t sure, but they quickened their pace regardless.

“Is it just me—?”

“It’s not just you,” Noctis said, with a frown. Before they had time to check their surroundings, Umbra let out a sharp bark, and gunshots fired.

“Noct, get down!” Prompto shouted, slapping an arm around Noctis’ back, and pushing him into a deep crouch. The fishing rod and bucket of freshly caught carp went tumbling to the ground without a second thought.

Noct barely had time to catch his breath as Prompto ushered him behind a partially intact brick wall—the only wall left standing of an otherwise crumbled house. They made it behind cover just in time for a few more shots to fire. Prompto manoeuvred Noctis to sit against the wall, so quickly Noctis hardly realized he was moving. Was he just out of practice? Was he stunned by the mere shock of the attack? Or was there something endearing in the way Prompto was protecting him that made him stay put?

He found himself unable to do anything but stare up at the man above him, a frown on Prompto’s matured face as he summoned his own firearm, and Noct felt the familiar tug on his magics as he did—a feeling that was somewhat intoxicating whenever it involved Prompto. The way his energy entered Noctis’ body and pulled the magic straight from his veins… It made Noctis yearn for him more.

Back when the four of them used to fight together, it was hard at times to single out Prompto’s energy when he, Gladio, and Ignis had all been summoning their weapons in a frenzy, but those moments when it was only Prompto drawing from him were rare and beautiful. Noctis wanted to drown in the sensation.

He watched this older, stronger Prompto with his back against the wall, both hands on his gun as he
held it up against his chest, barrel pointed to the sky. In that moment he looked like a hunter, with his muscular arms, firmly set jaw, and eyes of steel. His sweet, timid Prompto was a man now, and quite honestly, with all that strength and confidence, he was breathtaking.

When the shots from the other side of the wall ceased, Prompto leaned out to the side, firing a few shots back. Umbra barked and growled, and Noctis had a moment of panic when he realized the dog was still out there.

“Umbra! Come!” Noct hissed, urgently, and the messenger obeyed, scurrying out of the danger zone to come and sit in front of his king.

Noctis reached his arms out for him, pulling the dog’s head in close to his chest, protecting him and silently telling him that he’d done well. His heart pounded in his throat as Prompto leaned out for a second time, shooting at the villain, and then, in an instant, he was gone. Noctis spun his head towards the spot where he’d been, catching a mere flash of blue as he warped toward the enemy on the other side of the street.

Panic struck again, and Noctis got to his feet, startling Umbra in the process. The dog hobbled backwards as Noctis pushed him out of the way, and he stepped out from behind the wall. His heart was in his throat as he caught sight of more blue flashes and bright orange gun flares from within a broken window of a house across the way. Noctis summoned his blade and warped forward to get there faster. He darted around the side of the house, where a wall had completely fallen in. By the time he had made it inside the rubble, Prompto was standing by himself, panting, looking down at an unconscious man on the ground.

“Prompto! Prompto, are you okay?” Noct scrambled to ask, hurrying over the debris of bricks and reaching his hands out for his friend’s shoulders. Prompto flinched at the touch. He was holding his opposite bicep tightly, one eye squinting in pain, his face quite pale.

“You’re hurt,” Noctis gaped, before Prompto could get any words out, eyes wide and full of alarm.

“He just grazed me,” Prompto grunted, his pained voice and hitching breath not making Noctis any less worried. He continued to hold Prompto’s shoulders as he studied the man on the ground. He looked like a man of Galahd, with worn clothes of similar fashion to those they’d seen in town, his face dirtied and bruised where Prompto must have knocked him out with the end of his gun.

“You’re not safe here, Noct,” Prompto strained to get out.

“Ssshhh, it’s okay,” Noctis hushed, and gently moved his hands to Prompto’s injured limb, guiding his protective hand out of the way. Prompto made a quiet noise of discomfort as Noctis pressed a palm against the bloody gash that the bullet had left on the outside of his arm. His squinted eyes and furrowed brows lessened at the green glow of Noctis’ healing magic, the cool sensation relieving the pain and closing the open wound.

“Noct,” Prompto breathed peacefully, in a manner that Noctis had heard in much more intimate circumstances. Noctis pushed that thought aside, and focused on all that was precious in this moment—the feel of his skin on Prompto’s, and the fact that Prompto still trusted him enough to let him take away his pain.

“Does it feel okay?” Noctis eventually asked, letting the glow die out, and carefully lifting his hand from the injury. A small patch of slightly reddened skin was all that remained now, and Noctis silently praised himself for a job well done.

“Yeah, it does. Thanks,” Prompto smiled softly, looking relived, but a little weak. He skimmed a
hand over the previously marred skin, and was thankful to find next to no pain. His attention quickly fell back to the man on the ground, and he inched closer to Noctis.

“He might not be out for long. We should hurry,” he insisted.

“Right. Umbra? Oh, there you are,” Noct confirmed, spying the dog who had at some point wandered over to stand behind him.

“Maybe I should...” Prompto trailed off as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. He crouched to take a few shots of the unconscious man, before standing upright again.

“In case we need to identify him later,” Prompto explained.

“Right. So, if you’re okay to move, we should probably head out,” Noctis said, with one last glance at Prompto to make sure he was alright.

“I’m fine. Let’s go,” Prompto agreed with a nod. They hurried back towards town, so close that their arms brushed for the rest of the trek.

Prompto didn’t risk letting Noctis go back into town. Instead, he sent him to wait in the car with Umbra, while he discreetly went into town to collect their belongings. He slipped a haphazardly written note to Libertus, letting him know what was going on, before sneaking out undetected by most.

Noctis sat forward in his seat, relieved when Prompto came into view over the hilly dirt path. He reached for the keys in the ignition and started up the car, driving down the bumpy road until he met him, not wanting to make him walk the whole way when he was probably still shaken from the attack. Prompto tossed their bags into the backseat, next to Umbra, before hopping into his seat next to Noctis.

Noctis had an elbow on the door of the car as he waited for Prompto to buckle up, biting absently on the knuckle of his index finger.

“I’m nervous, too,” Prompto assured him. “I’ll be glad when we make it back to the Citadel.”

“The Citadel?” Noctis queried, shooting a shocked glance at Prompto. Prompto shrugged under that intense stare.

“I thought that’s where we were going. You remember getting attacked, right?”

“It’s because we got attacked that we need to keep going. We need to lay the groundwork for good relations. If I just go and hide in my fancy castle, that’s not going to change the people’s opinion of me,” Noctis reminded him harshly, and Prompto rubbed his red arm with a sorrowful, downcast face. Noct swallowed as a pang of guilt set in.

“I’m sorry. I guess that’s easy for me to say, huh? I’m not the one who got shot.”

“Ah—” Prompto gasped in mock offence. “I was barely shot, thank you very much,” he jested, but drew his serious, blue eyes to Noctis. “But, hey, if you want to keep going, that’s okay. I just want you to be sure. Looks like you will be in danger out there.”

“I know, but…” Noctis exhaled heavily. “I feel like this is something I need to do. Maybe I could make some grand speech when we went back, but would it really change anything? Actions speak much louder than words, they say.”
“Yeah. So they say,” Prompto mused, but so far, actions hadn’t done much for getting the truth across to Noctis, and as far as words went, no suitable ones would come to him.

“Where to next, then?” he asked, letting Noct know that he was up for this adventure. Noctis met his eyes with surprise and genuine thanks at his eagerness.

“Altissia.”

The drive to Cape Caem was long and silent. Prompto felt like he’d opened his mouth a hundred times, and snapped it shut again, convincing himself each time that it was best to wait until after their business in Altissia to deliver the news to Noctis. Noct needed to be focused, and Prompto was sure that if he told him anything now, that focus would be thrown out the window.

Once at Cape Caem, they headed for the lighthouse and down to the harbour below. It was funny, Prompto thought, to see it so empty now. There had been a time in his hunting days when Cape Caem had been bustling with people as they worked to bring back the sunlight. He couldn’t say he missed those days, as they were tiring and lonely, but he did miss the people—Cid, Holly, Vyv… They had all played a part in making the world as safe and good as it could be, and they had made Prompto feel like Noctis wasn’t really so far away. All the people who had met him and cared about him were still here, each one of them carrying their own memories of the young prince, and reminding Prompto that he wasn’t alone in his suffering.

He continued to think on this as Noctis drove the boat out of the harbour and into Altissia, though he helped out with any small tasks on deck that Noctis asked him to do. It was nighttime when they got to the city, and they were both relieved to see the bright, round lights on top of striped lamp posts, welcoming them to Altissia. They grabbed their bags, and coaxed Umbra along as they stepped onto the dock, taking in the sights and smells of a city that Noctis feared would be different than when he’d last seen it.

After the dealings with Leviathan, the city had lost entire sections of its architecture, and the citizens had been forced to either watch or be swept along as the great beast lashed its tail around, dragging broken chunks of land straight into the ocean. At least, in this part of the city, none of that damage was evident. Noctis hoped Prompto wouldn’t want to venture through the entire city, because he was scared to see the destruction firsthand. He didn’t want to see what was missing, didn’t want to see how much had been lost, all because of his inability to tame Leviathan in time.

A hand on his wrist brought him out of his dark thoughts, and he was thankful for it. He met Prompto’s excited eyes, a bright gleam in them that Noctis had not seen in years.

“Look, Noct! They reopened the gelato stand! It wasn’t open when I was here last time!”

Noctis turned to view the rounded, glass case of gelato which seemed to contain every colour of the rainbow. He chuckled softly as Prompto ogled the variety of flavours, his open mouth already watering.

“You want to get something? My treat,” Noctis offered.

“That’s alright, Noct. I’ll get it,” Prompto said, reaching into his pants pocket for some loose change. There was a hand on his in an instant, stopping him.

“I don’t think so,” Noct smiled, warmly. “You took a bullet for me today. I think the least I can do is buy you an ice cream.”

Prompto flushed slightly, unable to argue with that. He felt oddly timid as Noctis stepped forward.
to order their gelato cups. He was sure the woman at the booth thought they were a cute couple as she smiled shyly at them, and Prompto found himself missing the days when that was true. They probably still looked cute together, but the couple part was definitely lacking.

Being out here with Noctis, though, in one of the most magical places they used to frequent, made Prompto want—more than ever—to let his guard down. He wanted to hold Noctis’ hand as they roamed these beautiful streets, and never let go.

“One coconut cream,” the girl announced, placing one cup on top of the case, before reaching out to scoop up the next. Noctis reached out for the cup and popped a plastic spoon into it.

“Your order, sir,” he chivalrously announced, handing it to Prompto with a playful smile.

“Thanks,” Prompto grinned, sheepishly. He swiped his spoon over the top of the dessert, gathering up a thin layer of the creamy, frozen treat and bringing it to his lips. It was as scrumptious as he remembered.

“And one peach-flavoured,” the worker called out, cheerfully. She traded Noctis the gelato cup for a handful of gil, and the two boys headed for one of the nearby tables. They pulled out a couple of white, plastic chairs, and sat down, careful not to drip any gelato on the blue, velvet tablecloth.

Umbra sat down patiently beside Noctis while they ate, all of them enjoying the Altissian nightlife. The orange reflection of the moon shimmered on the water like streaks of vibrant paint. Numerous food-carts filled the air with a plethora of delicious aromas—freshly cooked meats and home-fries, sweet pies and desserts.

“Thank you, Noct. This is so good,” Prompto marveled, taking larger bites of his gelato now that Noctis was settled with his own as well.

“No worries. Mine’s good, too,” he agreed, taking a spoonful into his mouth.

“So, what’s the plan? Head to the Leville for the night, and talk to Secretary Claustra tomorrow?”

“Well, I figured that would be best. We can ask her what she needs, and I’ll call Ignis to have him send provisions here, too. That truck should be arriving in Galahd anytime now. I just hope the driver’s okay,” Noct said, and Prompto was disappointed when a frown appeared between his brows. He looked so much better when he was carefree.

“I hope so. With any luck, the people who are threatening you won’t target everyone from the Citadel. Uh, I-I mean, I don’t want them marking you a target either, but… Ugh, you know what I mean,” Prompto stuttered, and Noctis laughed.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. You want everyone to be safe, just as I do,” he replied, his kingly tone returning to his voice, and Prompto had to admit, he really admired how much he’d matured. At times, he took on so much of his father’s grace, it was stifling.

“I… sort of feel like a coward for taking off like that in Galahd. Maybe we should have stayed, and proved that we weren’t going anywhere. Proved that we weren’t afraid, despite their threats,” Noctis said, lowering his voice as well as his gaze. Prompto swallowed a mouthful of gelato and shook his head.

“No way. Don’t feel like that. We have no idea how many people are out there who are looking to kill you. If the world loses its king, then what’s the point of this second chance that the Astrals gave you?” Prompto reminded him, with a crease between his own brows now.
Noctis briefly met his eyes, but quickly averted his gaze again. He opened his mouth, but it took him a few breaths before he was actually ready to speak.

“Can I… can I tell you something?”

“Of course,” Prompto agreed, a mix of curiosity and worry appearing on his face. The tone of Noctis’ voice was fragile—scared, even—and Prompto had no idea what had his king suddenly looking so shaken. He wanted him to know he was there for him.

“You remember when you found me in the throne room?” Noctis asked, and he saw Prompto flinch across the table.


It was all too clear, the image of Noctis pinned to his throne by his father’s blade. Prompto and Gladio had charged up the stairs, gripping at Noctis with tear-stained cheeks as Ignis wandered up blindly behind them. They’d been unable to describe to him what was going on; it was simply too horrible. As soon as Gladio had touched the blade to remove it, however, it had disintegrated into small, purple orbs that floated up into the air before disappearing completely. One touch of Prompto’s hand on Noctis’ face, and a quiet whisper of his name, and the king had opened his eyes.

They had cried so hard it turned into laughter, had hugged so much it hurt. They had cleaned Noctis up, ridding him of the blood on his chest, and finding no wound whatsoever, despite the blade that had been thrust through him. It had been nothing short of a miracle, and when Prompto thought back on it now, he wished he had let Noctis know how truly thankful he was for that miracle. He’d had the chance that night in the caravan; perhaps he should have taken it.

“I don’t think it was the Astrals. I mean, I don’t think they were acting alone, at least. I don’t know for sure, of course. But I—” He cut off with a sharp inhale, and set his spoon down. He pushed a hand through the front of his long hair, pushing some strands away from his face.

“I kind of think it was my dad?” It came out sounding like a question, but Prompto thought it was more out of fear of being called insane than any sort of uncertainty. The look in Noctis’ eyes told Prompto that he fully believed what he was saying.

“Really? I don’t think that sounds so strange,” Prompto assured him.

“You don’t?” Noctis’ brows were creased in surprise and concern.

“Of course not. Your dad was a good king. He might have had some pull with the kings of old, you know? And besides, he devoted his life to keeping you safe. It doesn’t seem so unlikely that he would continue to do that, even after death,” Prompto said, sounding so matter-of-fact that it made Noctis feel not so crazy.

It made him wonder why he’d kept it a secret for this long. Perhaps it was because talking about his father wasn’t easy at the best of times, and something this personal was usually only shared with Prompto. So, with Prompto being so distant lately, this probably was, in fact, his first opportunity to speak about it.

“Thanks for saying that.” Noctis gave a smile that was hesitant at first, but he allowed it to grow as relief set in.

“I mean it, too,” Prompto smiled back. Noct drew his attention to Prompto’s empty gelato cup.
“You done?”

“Youp, all set.”

They got up and dumped their cups and spoons into a nearby garbage can before heading for the hotel. They asked for a room that accommodated pets, and trotted upstairs along with Umbra. Noctis swung the door open to reveal one of the Leville’s luxurious rooms, with two double-beds, a coffee table, sofa, and two comfy-looking chairs.

“Wow,” Prompto awed. “I don’t think we need all of this, but wow.”

“Think of how many nights we spent camping. I think we owe it to ourselves,” Noctis laughed, setting his bag down on the coffee table. As Prompto was admiring the view from the giant window that led out to the balcony, Noctis took his bag from his arm as well and set it down for him.

Umbra hopped happily up on the sofa, and curled in on himself, ready for a good sleep.

“Beautiful view, isn’t it?” Noctis mused, smiling softly as he ventured over to stand beside his ally. Prompto nodded, eyes still on the white and gold lights that pierced through the darkness outside, while reciprocating Noctis’ smile.

“It really is.”

“You gonna snap a few pictures?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, not sure if I have my camera with me or not. And my phone definitely wouldn’t do this justice,” Prompto frowned, returning to his bag to rummage through it.

Noctis watched with barely masked concern as Prompto looked for what was once his most prized possession. Since when did Prompto go anywhere without making sure his camera was with him? Was it possible he had grown out of photography, or lost interest in it? Noct silently decided it was probably more likely that Prompto had had less time for it since their roadtrip days.

“A-ha!” Buried in the corner of his bag, protected by balled up clothing, was Prompto’s camera, and he lifted it out with a triumphant grin—forced or not, Noctis honestly couldn’t tell.

“You mind?” Prompto asked, with a glance back at Noct.

“Of course not. It was my idea, wasn’t it? Enjoy,” Noctis softly beamed, watching as Prompto slid the glass over and stepped onto the balcony, sliding it closed again before he began adjusting his lens and snapping shots of the city.

Noctis dug in his own bag for some comfortable sleep clothes, but halted on his way to the bathroom as he watched Prompto out there on the balcony. He looked so beautiful in the moonlight—he always had—as its glow shimmered brilliantly in his golden hair. It brought out the silver when the moon was a bright white, and the yellow and oranges when the moon was as colourful and vibrant as it was now. He noted his strong arms, the lines of each muscle as he moved with his camera, the curves of his shoulder bones as they shifted under his dark teal shirt. Noctis had always thought Prompto was stunning, but growing up had been kind to him, making him just as handsome, if not moreso.

Noctis hummed softly, chiding himself for staring like that, but he couldn’t help it. Prompto was gorgeous. He was the one. If Noctis had to spend the rest of his life finding tiny, subtle ways to let him know that, so be it. He wasn’t about to give up. Not now. Not ever.
Prompto was startled by the sound of a metal door sliding open somewhere in the distance, his insides churning as he wondered who his visitor was this time, and what they intended to do with him. He summoned all the strength he had to lift his head, but the pain in his neck was too great, and he gave up instead, too tired to fight through it. He heard someone approach with quiet steps, and heard a key turning in the gate ahead before it swung open. If it was a guard, he half-wished they would put him out of his misery before Ardyn returned.

He wasn’t sure how much longer he could stand his aching arms that were holding up most of his weight, or his legs that he was barely able to keep from going numb. He didn’t know how much longer he could take the violent rumbling of his stomach, the raw pangs of hunger, or his parched throat that was like a desert. It wouldn’t be too much longer before normal bodily functions would become an issue, too. Would Ardyn let him out to take care of business? Or would he continue to be stuck here in his own mess?

The intruder continued to approach, and to Prompto’s surprise, he felt a gentle hand on the side of his face. Stunned and confused, he looked up to meet the glistening blue eyes of his prince.

“N-noct?” he whispered, hoarsely, his heavy eyelids blinking in disbelief. He took in the sight of the man’s dark Crownsguard fatigues, the details in the leather, the skulls on his shirt, the bracer on his arm. There was no way his brain could dream up this many details, could it? It had to be real. Finally, Noctis had found him.

“I’m glad you’re alive, Prompto,” Noct murmured, cupping the sides of Prompto’s face, and stroking his thumbs over his bruised cheeks.

“Noct…” he whimpered, tearfully. He allowed himself to close his eyes, but much to his dismay the warmth left his face, and didn’t return. He opened his eyes abruptly. Why wasn’t he being let free? Why was Noctis walking away?

“Noct?” he asked, so confused and utterly distraught. “Where are you going? Help! Please! Before he comes back.” He pulled hard against his restraints, but to no avail.

The prince halted mid-step, and shifted his weight to his back foot as he turned around to look at the prisoner, chained up and so pathetic.

“Help you? After you hid from me what you were?” Noctis asked, incredulously, his brows twisting up in disgust.

“Niflheim. You remember what Niflheim did to my home, right?” Noctis snarkily replied. Prompto recoiled, looking so small and wounded, but refusing to say anything more, fearful of making things worse. Noctis marched back over to him and leaned in close to his ear.

“They let my father and my kingdom die. And you… You were supposed to be a part of their enormous army. You were meant to be an MT. How am I supposed to trust you?” Noctis hissed, and Prompto closed his eyes to push out the tears that were pooling uncomfortably within them.
“I trusted you,” he whispered, continuing to silently cry. “I’ve never trusted anyone like I trusted you, Noct. And I swear, I would never hurt you.” The thought of hurting Noctis, or even anyone close to him, made him sick to his stomach. Anything that caused Noctis pain or heartache had always made him feel like his own heart was attached. When Noctis ached, he ached.

“I can’t take that chance,” Noctis said. “We’re through.” Prompto hung his head low and continued to let himself cry, far less able to keep his sobs soundless now as Noctis headed for the door.

“I loved you, Noct,” he breathed.

He hadn’t expected Noctis to hear it from where he stood, but maybe the words had come out more loudly and desperately than he’d imagined. Noctis spun around on his heel again, but Prompto didn’t bother to look up, not even when he felt hands return to his face. He was too afraid he would see hate in those eyes that had always made him feel so safe; if that look of safety and love was gone, he didn’t know if he could cope.

“I guess… a goodbye kiss wouldn’t hurt.”

“What?” Prompto asked, meekly, brows crinkling in confusion.

“For old time’s sake?”

Prompto forced himself to pull his head up, and his mouth parted in horror when it was Ardyn—not Noctis—staring him in the face. The Chancellor’s cold fingers lingered on his cheeks, a thumb grazing over his jaw where Noctis’ had been.

“Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Ardyn sang, in false sympathy. Prompto let out a half-cry, half-sob as he realized he’d been tricked in the most horrible of ways. Just as Ardyn had swapped places with him on the train, he apparently had the ability to take on Noctis’ appearance as well. Or Prompto was just too exhausted and delirious to fight whatever spell he had on him.

“You bastard!” he yelled. “Get your hands off of me!”

The gentle touch that he’d believed was Noctis’ transformed into an icy one as Ardyn retracted a hand; the one that remained cupped itself around Prompto’s jaws, squeezing them together tightly and painfully, making his cheeks pucker. Prompto flinched, one eye closing from the pain, but he tried not to let it show, for it would give Ardyn too much satisfaction.

“Now, now, no need to get hostile. You wear yourself out, and your body might just give out before your real prince comes for you. That is… if he comes for you at all,” Ardyn taunted.

“Why do you need me? Just let me go,” Prompto pleaded.

“Because, my dear Prompto, you have just confirmed for me that you are the perfect bait for bringing the young prince Noctis here. You are his heart’s desire, are you not?”

Prompto’s eyes widened in fear as he realized what that meant for Noctis. He was about to be the thing to lure Noctis into danger. He hated himself for being the prince’s weakness.

He didn’t know how to respond to Ardyn’s words, so he simply lowered his head again, avoiding eye contact.

“Please, don’t hurt Noct. If he’s the reason you’re doing this, then just… do whatever you want with me instead, okay? I don’t care what happens as long as he’s safe.”
“You misunderstand. Killing you would do me no good, really. As much as I would love to see the look on his face if he found naught but your corpse in here, I would be disappointed if you never got to tell him the truth of your origins. That expression of his would surely be even more precious,” Ardyn smirked, finally letting go of Prompto’s face, but not without giving it a harsh jerk to the side first.

Prompto stifled a groan and gingerly opened and closed his jaw, assessing the damage. Thankfully, there was only some slight discomfort. He felt the sting of fresh tears, but refused to let Ardyn see them; he didn’t deserve the proof that he’d shaken him.

“I do hope he gets here in time. It would be a pity if he never got to see you again,” Ardyn said, with a mocking pout, his cold, cruel laughter echoing as he exited the cell, leaving Prompto alone with his tears.

Noctis awoke to the sound of soft whimpers and strangled breaths. He blinked through the darkness, realizing it was nowhere near morning yet. He glanced over at the bed beside him to where Prompto appeared to be having a restless sleep. One knee was bent up against the mattress, the other tangled in a mess of sheets. His arms were spread out on either side of him, and he let out another choking breath as he lay there on his back.

Noctis threw the sheets off of himself and crossed the distance between his bed and Prompto’s in a second. In the moonlight, he could see Prompto’s tense features, his clenched jaw and frightened expression, his upward-turned brows and tightly shut eyes.

“Prompto,” Noctis murmured, placing a hand on his companion’s shoulder, which only made Prompto squirm under his touch. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Umbra perk up his head at the sound of his voice, but once he confirmed his master had everything under control, he lowered himself back down and continued to rest.

“Prompto, wake up.” With a gentle shake, Prompto bolted awake, his eyes opening wide with terror, and his breaths coming out in heavy pants. It took him a minute to focus his gaze on Noctis, but when he finally did, the panic in his eyes transformed into shame and embarrassment. He slowly pulled his arms in against his sides, and used his hands to push himself upright. Noctis eased himself down to sit on the edge of the bed, waiting patiently while Prompto caught his breath.

“You okay?” he asked, when he felt his friend was probably ready to speak.

“Just a stupid dream,” Prompto replied, hoarsely.

He ran a hand through the front of his swooped-up hair, suddenly realizing how much his arms were trembling. He was thankful for the hand that made its way to his back, rubbing gently as he tried to calm down. There had been so many nights like this—too many to possibly count—but Noctis had never been there to talk him down from his terror, despite how many times he’d wished for him to be. Now that he was here, Prompto was a little embarrassed, but still, it was nice not to be alone.

“You want to talk about it?” Noctis tried, and Prompto fidgeted where he sat. He pressed his lips firmly together, reminding Noctis of when he’d told the group the truth behind his barcode. He’d looked scared and uncertain, just as he did now, his eyes shifting nervously from side-to-side.

“I was trapped in Zegnautus with Ardyn. That’s where I always am when I dream like that.” The words came out slow, each one bringing Noctis a little more pain as it was delivered.
“You still…?” he tried again, this time failing to get out an entire sentence. You still suffer from that? To this day, you still can’t escape those memories? Either option sounded terrible.

“Yeah,” Prompto nodded, understanding anyway. “I guess there are some things people never quite recover from.”

Even with his head hung low, he could feel Noctis’ gaze on him, and he felt the hand on his back deepen its touch, rubbing circles a little more confidently. As hard as it was to speak about his nightmares, it felt good to finally get this off his chest. It was liberating to share this piece of himself that had been eating away at him, this piece that no one had known had remained broken all this time.

“Prompto? What happened when Ardyn captured you? We… never got to talk about it,” Noctis said, quietly. If Prompto was sharing his nightmares about Ardyn, maybe he would want to share the parts of his experience that weren’t mere illusion, too. Sometimes it felt good to share, even if it was painful.

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Noct, so don’t take this the wrong way, but I still don’t think I’m ready to talk about it. I… I might never be,” Prompto admitted, his voice so very meek now.

Noctis swallowed hard, desperately wishing he could have prevented Prompto from this suffering. If Prompto believed he might never be ready to talk about what Ardyn did to him, then maybe Noctis was better off never knowing. It would only hurt him, would only make him furious at that lowlife of a Chancellor, and as a result, would only make Prompto feel worse.

“I am so sorry for letting this happen to you,” Noctis murmured.

He was surprised to feel Prompto leaning backwards against him, and Noctis scooted in to meet him, his chest meeting and supporting Prompto’s back. The hand he’d had on Prompto’s spine travelled to his waist instead, and to his satisfaction, Prompto didn’t seem to mind, even when he began brushing his thumb against the bare skin between his shirt and waistband.

“It’s not your fault, Noct. None of it was. It was all Ardyn,” Prompto promised him, knowing full-well the guilt Noctis had carried around after accidentally pushing him off of the moving train to Graela, and for being so late in his rescue.

“You know,” Noctis started, with a deep breath. “One of the biggest regrets of my life is from that night in Zegnautus. Our last night together.”

Prompto turned his head ever so slowly, meeting Noct’s gaze over his shoulder. Noctis’ eyes were so tender, yet so full of hurt and—like he’d said—deep regret. Feeling close to Noctis in this moment, Prompto placed a hand on his friend’s thigh, squeezing gently.

“Why?” he dared to ask, and Noctis shrugged.

“I should have kissed you,” he replied, simply, hoping the moonlight would disguise the redness that threatened to crawl into his cheeks. “I should have pulled you into my arms and told you that everything was going to be okay. If not when we were first rescued you, then at least when you told everyone about being an MT,” he went on, and felt Prompto tense at the last word. “Maybe things would have turned out better if I had let you know I was there for you, even if everything did go to hell after that.”

Prompto continued to lock gazes with Noctis, a tender look in his own eyes now that Noctis never
wanted to look away from, but somehow, he managed. Prompto caressed Noctis’ thigh through the flannel fabric of his sleep pants, thinking to himself how vulnerable Noctis must have felt delivering those words. It had been such a sincere confession, and he wasn’t sure the younger Noct he used to know would have had the courage to admit all of that, especially when he used to have trouble with a simple ‘I love you.’

Everything Prompto had once wanted from Noctis seemed to be out on display now. Whether he wanted apologies or words of devotion, he could have them. If he wanted to hear all the ‘I love you’’s in the world, he could probably just ask and receive. He wondered what their relationship would be like now that they were adults, now that confidence and maturity were on both their sides. He wanted to know. Oh, how badly he wanted to know.

Before he could think of a way to respond to Noctis’ words, he felt a pair of lips on the back of his bare shoulder. He turned his head ever so slightly, not wanting to scare Noctis away, as those lips were so light and uncertain, they were just barely touching his skin. He waited, still and silent, to see what Noctis would do next, whether he would continue or retreat. When Noctis seemed unsure of which direction to take, Prompto squeezed his thigh again, assuring him that this was okay. Lips met the back of his shoulder again, this time with more pressure, and Prompto let out a contented sigh as those kisses continued—short and sweet, but full of meaning.

“Can I make up for it now?” Noctis asked, referring back to that last night in Zegnautus, when he felt he’d so brutally abandoned Prompto. The question was not met with words, but rather a deeper tilt of Prompto’s head as he turned toward Noctis.

His breath warmed Noctis’ chin as he exhaled, and Noctis feasted his eyes on the sight of Prompto’s half-lidded gaze and parted lips. With a quick meeting of their eyes for confirmation, Prompto let his lids fall completely closed. Both moved to close the distance, lips meeting in a gentle caress that was heated with the slightest hint of desperation. Noctis was the first to pull away, knowing that the Prompto that had been pushing him away for eight months was still buried in there somewhere.

“I take that as a yes?” he murmured, eyes half-lidded, faces just inches apart so that breaths continued to intermix. Prompto shushed him quietly, and reached a hand back to grip Noctis’ stubbled jaw, guiding him back towards his own.

They kissed with a bit more fervour, each nip and peck feeling extraordinarily good after such a long time apart. This time, Prompto broke the contact, but not without giving Noctis a small smile as they parted.

“What was that nightmare about again?” he teased, effectively ending the mood, and Noctis tightened the arm around his waist, giving him a quick embrace and one last peck on the shoulder before he stood up.

“You gonna be okay now?”

“Yeah,” Prompto assured him, reaching for the sheets that were still tangled around his legs, and attempting to straighten them out. Noctis returned to his own bed, and got under the covers. He lay on his back, but after a moment, turned to Prompto again.

“Hey, if you need anything at all—”

“I know. Thanks, Noct,” Prompto smiled, and Noctis smiled in return, feeling content in knowing that Prompto trusted him enough to ask for help.
They both rolled onto their sides, facing away from each other as they tried to calm down and let the recently shared kisses settle in their heads. Prompto couldn’t help feeling elated, because giving in and being with Noctis had felt so unbelievably amazing, but there was this feeling of guilt that had choked the mood, making him end the advances. He owed it to Noct to let him know what he was getting into. He deserved to know that this wouldn’t last forever.

But if he told him now, and he was fine with it, then did that mean they could continue down this road? Or was that selfish? Should he be pushing Noctis to find someone new instead of allowing himself this indulgence?

He didn’t know the answer to any of these questions, but he knew where they began; he had to tell Noctis first. It was best to just get it over with. Then they could continue however they saw fit, right? They could decide whether it was best to stay together or travel their own paths, right?

“Hey, Noct?” Prompto asked, rolling over with determination, his heart thudding with the nervous anticipation of finally telling his friend this awful secret.

He was actually disappointed when he only heard a soft snore in response, and he closed his eyes in defeat. He’d missed his chance, for tonight, anyway. He wasn’t about to wake him only to deliver bad news. He would let him enjoy tonight for whatever it was, even if it was just little kisses of comfort.

Chapter End Notes

Did anyone catch that Noct chose the peach-flavoured gelato, after the mention of Prompto smelling like peaches in Chapter 2? Just wanted to throw that adorable hint of Promp's in there :D Thanks for reading, and I hope you're all continuing to enjoy the story!
The meeting with the secretary the next day was fairly uneventful, with Clastra questioning why the men had come at all, when Prompto had just been there and had left on good terms. Noctis briefed her on the threats he’d been receiving and told her he sincerely hoped Altissia did not hold any grudges with him, for he was willing to send them whatever they needed. Clastra promised to keep an eye out for any suspicious or hostile behaviour pertaining to Lucis or its king, and after making a call to Ignis for provisions—during which time she offered products to Noctis which were exclusive to Accordo—the two left in silence.

“Maybe this was a stupid idea. I don’t feel like we’re accomplishing anything,” Noctis sighed, feeling defeated as they wandered the streets of Altissia. Prompto felt his tension as he walked alongside him. The people of Galahd had been so much easier to help out, as poverty had been visible and obvious. Here, it was hard to spot the homeless or the less fortunate, as the section of the city they currently explored looked just as it always had—lively, and bright, and whole.

“At least we’re trying, right?” Prompto reminded him, with a compassionate smile. “And you’re generously sending necessities to other places when Lucis is just getting back on its feet, too. So, don’t think you’re not doing a good job, okay? Because you are.”

Noctis met Prompto’s eyes to confirm the sincerity behind that statement. It was a boost of confidence that he’d been needing for a while now, and he was grateful for it, even if Prompto was perhaps a little biased. Noctis gave him a warm, gracious smile.

“Thanks,” he said, offering Prompto a hand as they reached the gondola, and helping him step inside, like a true gentleman. Noctis followed after him, taking a seat beside him a few feet away from the gondolier, so that they may have a little privacy during their conversation.

Prompto watched the beautiful scenery as they floated along, taking in the sights of the housetops, glimpses of bright green foliage, and the array of distant waterfalls. He intentionally looked towards Noctis’ side of the view so that he might also catch any sign of him wanting to talk, suspecting Noct might not hold back if he felt his gaze on him. Eventually, he did open his mouth.

“I’ve actually been struggling for a while with this whole king thing. After you left on that mission with the glaives... I’ll admit, I was kind of lost.”

Prompto watched him, gently coaxing him to go on with a tiny nod and slight concern in his eyes as he listened. Noctis folded his hands in his lap and stared down at them, too ashamed to look his faithful glaive in the eye right now when he was openly admitting that he was a king with no clue what to do. But Prompto wasn’t merely a glaive, was he? They went back so much further than that.

“Don’t get me wrong. Ignis is good at advising me on all the legal stuff and royal duties, but as for how I feel... about the decisions I make, and the weight I feel from knowing I must do the right thing, but never knowing exactly what that is... It’s a lot of pressure, and I’ve missed being able to share those sorts of things with you.” Noctis’ voice was so weak, but so honest. Prompto pondered that, and hummed softly, almost laughing.

“The Noct I knew was never much for talking about his feelings. He would probably just whine and rant,” Prompto teased.

“And that might have been all I needed this time, too. I just...” Noctis curled his lower lip inside his
mouth, looking like it actually pained him to let his guard down. When he brought his eyes up to meet Prompto’s, they were soft, teary even, and that expression Prompto brought back yet again to their last night at the campfire together when he’d told his Crownguard that they were ‘the best’.

“I miss my confidant,” Noctis admitted, eyes blinking emotionally as he gave Prompto a weak smile. “And maybe that’s selfish after you probably had to deal with ten years of feeling that way, but...”

Prompto’s expression softened, his brows creasing upward in worry and regret. Noctis looked unsure of whether his assumption was true, but Prompto was quick to assure him that it was. He reached out for Noctis’ shoulder, gripping tenderly, letting him know that he was familiar with that feeling of pure loneliness.

“Noct… I’m sorry. I never meant to abandon you. I didn’t realize you needed me like that,” he said, honestly.

“You’re an idiot. I’ll always need you,” Noct half-scoffed, half-sniffled, but when he turned his head away, he was wearing a small, broken smile.

That comment caused a twinge in Prompto’s heart, but he tried to ignore it, as it hurt far too much to dwell on its implications. He wanted to reply to Noctis with the same words, wanted to tell him he would always need him too, but he knew that that would only draw him closer. After the kisses they had shared the night before, he was leery of enticing him further when he still had such a big confession to make—a confession that looked over him like the shadow of an Iron Giant, so big and menacing.

“So, I’m sorry if I’ve been too clingy with you. I’ve just… been really lonesome since I came back. Being in the crystal was the loneliest I’ve ever felt. It was cold, and filled with glimpses of people that I could never reach. My parents, my friends… When I came back, everything was so complicated with the kingdom, and readjusting to life in the Citadel, and all I wanted was to feel warm and safe, and you… You were always so good at giving me that. At just making me feel safe and loved.”

Prompto tried to swallow past the lump in his throat.

“So were you,” he said, smiling weakly.

The gondola arrived at Listro Park North Station, and they clambered out of the gondola. Noctis skillfully tipped the gondolier with a handshake, and they continued into the next part of town. They ascended one of the white, stone staircases to reach a wide opening on the upper level, where the grand sculpture of rock and metal cords in the shape of the Tidemother still stood perfectly intact. It was ironic, Noctis thought, that the actual Tidemother—the great Leviathan—had been the one to leave Altissia in such ruin all those years ago, when its statue remained in perfect condition even today.

Prompto quickly caught the look of unease on Noctis’ face, and when they came to one of the stone benches nearby, he waved a hand, motioning for them both to take a load off. Prompto had sort of hoped that arriving at the North Station would bring about the end of their conversation, but Noctis looked like he still wanted to talk as he resumed the position he’d taken on the gondola—slumped over his folded hands, his gaze on the ground.

“I’m sorry to drag you down with all of this now. I think it’s just been piling up on me, and now that you’re here, it’s a relief, I guess?” he said, seeming unsure of how to explain it.
“Well, that’s understandable. Sometimes you just need your best bud, right?” Prompto smiled, proving he did indeed know the feeling, but it was a timid look. His own hands laced together in front of him, but they were tight and uncomfortable, like he was trying to strangle each finger as they interlocked with one another.

“It’s hard to try and deal with things without each other when we’ve done that for so long,” Noctis mused, keeping his head low.

“Not only that, but we were both really lonely before we met. We didn’t have anyone to talk to about stuff like that. Once we realized we could lean on each other, we took advantage of that,” Prompto explained. “Or, at least... I felt that way,” he added, shyly.

Noctis peeked over at his self-conscious expression, and hated that Prompto had room to doubt. He debated taking Prompto’s hand, and in the end, bravery beat out his fear of rejection. Prompto looked up curiously as Noctis tugged at his tightly locked fingers, and he let Noctis’ slip in between his own much more gently.

“Was I really gone so long that you forgot I’m crazy about you?” Noctis asked. Prompto would have thought it was a joke if he hadn’t said it so solemnly. Still, those words charged straight to his heart, and Prompto gave him a wide-eyed look of surprise before his rounded mouth fell into a smile instead.

“Alright, come on, Noct,” he chuckled, getting up from the bench, and two-handedly pulling his friend along with him. “Enough with the doom and gloom. Time to cheer you up!”

Noctis chuckled as he was dragged along.

“Where the hell are you taking me?” he laughed, enjoying every second of Prompto’s carefree grin, especially after the sorry state he’d seen him in last night. Prompto led him over to the giant sculpture, and nodded toward the chalkboard display that sat on the ground beside it.

“Time to make a wish for your kingdom. You know how it works,” Prompto sang.

Noctis lowered his gaze to the sign with a soft sigh. He remembered how it worked. Underneath the chalkboard was a basket of paper birds. He was to take one, write a wish on it, and throw it towards the sculpture. If it landed in the sea goddess’ mouth, his wish would be granted.

Prompto stared at him with expectant eyes and an open-mouthed smile as he took backwards steps, and tugged Noct with him toward the basket.

“Huh? Huh? Come on, what do ya say?” he playfully pestered, and Noctis rolled his eyes, reaching down into the basket. When he stood back up, he had an extra of each item, and offered them to Prompto. Prompto raised his brows, but Noctis simply pushed them further in his direction.

“Don’t think you’re getting out of doing this,” he said, being rather matter-of-fact about it. Prompto simply shook his head and let out a chuckle, giving in and accepting one of the paper birds and a pen from Noctis.

It didn’t take long for Noctis to start writing, but Prompto hesitated, tapping the end of his pen against his lips as he thought. While wishing for a long life alongside Noctis would have been his first choice at wishes, he denied himself the chance of even trying for such a goal. The paper would probably go flying in the opposite direction. He pictured it heading straight for the Tidemother’s mouth, and performing a sharp swerve to avoid it as the universe realized such a wish just wasn’t possible.
Even if the bird landed in the statue’s mouth, Prompto wasn’t that firm a believer in miracles; miracles didn’t happen to people like him, people that didn’t have the Astrals or Oracles or powerful magics on their side. Miracles couldn’t reverse something that had been set in motion the day he was born—or rather, created.

In the end, he decided on a wish, and began scribbling. He could see Noctis watching him from over the top of his paper, but he hoped he wasn’t peeking at the words he’d written.

“You think this is a good idea? I mean, Leviathan and I don’t have a great history in Altissia,” Noctis said, holding the paper bird precariously in his hands, as if it might take flight and begin pecking at him as punishment for what he’d done to the city.

“Dude, that’s exactly why you should do this! Maybe it will help you put some things to rest, you know? And Leviathan did help you in the end, right?” Prompto reminded him. Noctis gave a half-hearted nod as he continued to stare at the paper in his hands.

Prompto released a breath of satisfaction as he finished writing down his wish, hoping that by leaving out the part about himself, it might have a chance of coming true. ‘I wish for Noctis Lucis Caelum to have a long, peaceful reign as king.’

“I really don’t know about this,” Noctis groaned, bringing Prompto’s attention abruptly back to him. He looked startled; Noctis wasn’t sure why.

Prompto quickly composed himself and shoved the paper behind his back as he marched toward Noctis, guiding his hand up into the air so that the bird was poised and ready to fly.

“All that guilt you have about Leviathan, and Luna, and everything? Just throw it away. Just like this bird, okay?” Prompto smiled, his eyes big and wide and blue as they stared up at Noctis. The man was bent over at the waist, his hand pushing Noctis’ up, his face pointed up at Noctis like a little kid.

Noctis loved the little things like this about Prompto, the way he could make something seem so simple. Maybe he just didn’t overthink the way most people did, but that childish innocence about him also relaxed the people around him. Noctis had missed that. He had missed so much about him.

“You make it sound so easy,” Noctis hummed, one corner of his mouth twitching into a half-smile.

“Because it is. It’s okay to let go of that stuff, you know? If Altissia still held a grudge, they would have gotten rid of this statue long ago. Most of the people here already forgive you. It’s been ten years. It’s time to forgive yourself,” Prompto said.

There he was, like always, knowing the worries that lay deep in Noctis’ heart without him ever having to say them. With those words hitting home, Noctis gave a nod, and lifted his hand higher. He pulled back, and launched the paper bird forward, watching it soar effortlessly into the mouth.

“Yes!” he cheered, pumping a fist in the air. His chest felt featherlight now, like the image of throwing his troubles away—just as Prompto had said—had helped him to actually let go a little.

Prompto smiled at his actions that were very much reflections of a younger Noctis. He was sure Lucis had never had a king quite like Noct, and it was unlikely they ever would again. He was just too special. Maybe he was a little off the mark as far as formalities went, but Prompto believed that his experiences growing up in such a modern city, and exploring every inch of the world would make him a strong and insightful ruler.
“Alright, your turn.” There was a hand on Prompto’s wrist a second later, bringing him out of his thoughts of a future he might never see; he was thankful for the distraction, though he blinked wildly at the alluring look Noctis was giving him as he pulled him a little closer to the sculpture.

“Right,” Prompto agreed, numbly.

Noctis let go of his arm, and Prompto brought the little paper bird out in front of him, pulling it back and focusing on his aim. It was different than shooting a gun, but he hoped his trained eye would still help his accuracy. After a few flicks of his wrist for practice, he tossed the bird up and forward, watching as it drifted toward the mouth. It looked like it might miss the opening, but a small gust of wind guided it to the right, just enough for it to go inside.

“Yeah!” Noctis cheered, giving his friend a hard pat on the back. Prompto chuckled in disbelief, wishing now that he had at least tried for his original wish if luck was going to be on his side.

“Thought you were going to tell me that was a cheap shot,” Prompto half-chuckled. On a normal day, he probably would have, but Noctis was still trying to earn points with him.

If there was a even a tiny risk of hurting Prompto, he wasn’t going to take it, for the poor guy had seemed out of sorts for a while now. Today was the happiest Noctis had seen him in a long time, and he wasn’t about to ruin it.

“Hey, anyone who can control the breeze like that can hardly be called a cheap shot,” he smirked, and Prompto managed a half-smile. “Listen, I don’t know if you’d be interested in this, but I was wondering if you might want to have a nice evening out. Maybe dinner and a show? I mean, it doesn’t have to be a date or anything. No pressure,” Noctis rambled, his hands shoved deep into his pockets, and his arms stiff against his sides.

Prompto tried to hold his expression still, not wanting to show his emotions one way or the other. He tried to think fast, not wanting to appear hesitant, but still giving himself time to weigh out his options as best as he could. If nothing else, dinner might give him an opportunity to tell Noctis everything that needed to be said.

“That sounds nice,” he agreed, with a shy smile, and a small shrug of his shoulders. “Too bad we’re sharing a room. I could have freshened up and looked all spiffy for ya.”

“You want to part ways? I’ll explore town for a bit, and pick you up at 4:30?” Noctis smirked, and at first, Prompto wasn’t sure whether or not he was joking. It wasn’t until the smirk faded into a nervous smile, and the confidence left Noctis’ eyes that Prompto realized he was trying to be a true romantic.

“Wait, you mean it?” he gaped. Noctis shrugged, timidly, hands still firmly stuffed in his pockets.

“If you want to.”

Prompto couldn’t help but smile. Watching that awkward-looking former prince trying to ask him out like they were sixteen years old again warmed his heart more than he could describe.

“You are a total dork, and yeah, I totally want to,” Prompto grinned. Noctis remained shocked for a moment before he nodded, uncertainly at first, then happily.

“Great. I’ll see you later then,” Noct smiled, giving Prompto a touch on his shoulder as he passed by. Both tried to hide the excitement in their eyes, but neither succeeded.

Prompto couldn’t stop grinning as he began his walk back to the Leville, part of him so looking
forward to a night out, in the most romantic city ever, with the love of his life. It would have been far too easy to pretend he didn’t have to tell Noctis the bad news, to ignore it altogether and give in to the old habits that he’d suspected they would fall into if left alone; it just felt so good to be together again, how could he not? But he’d promised himself he would not lead Noctis on any longer without warning him about what lay ahead. The future, as bright as it seemed from this vantage point, was already on a downhill slope.

Prompto blinked in surprise at the knock on the door, staring wide-eyed at himself in the bathroom mirror. He reached for his phone that was on the counter ahead, and smiled as he pressed the button to light it up. 4:30, right on the dot. Such a gentleman. He spit his toothpaste out into the sink and dried the corners of his mouth with a towel before looking himself over one last time.

He was grateful to have packed at least a second collared dress shirt, as he’d suspected he might need them, depending on what leaders he and Noct might have to meet. The one he wore now was royal blue in colour, and buttoned up in the front. Iris had told him once that it brought out his eyes, and he thought that would probably play in his favour tonight if this did turn into a date, which, well, maybe Prompto was hoping for—not that he was letting himself get attached or anything.

He switched off the bathroom light and hurried for the door, pulling it open with a smile, which only grew when he saw Noctis standing there with a bouquet of flowers. They’d passed several vendor carts selling all kinds of gorgeous bouquets earlier that day, and apparently, even left to his own devices, Noctis had picked a dandy.

“Hey,” Prompto greeted.

“Good evening. For you, sir,” Noct announced, his mouth quirked into something between a confident smile and a playful smirk as he offered the flowers. Prompto grinned and accepted the cellophane-wrapped arrangement, running a thumb over the blue, yellow, pink, and purple lily petals.

“These are beautiful. Thank you,” he said, with a playful smile in return. “Please, come in. Make yourself at home.”

Noct smirked fully now, and entered the hotel room, continuing along with their little dating game. He took a seat in one of the comfy chairs, waiting while Prompto filled up the bathroom cup with water and set his flowers inside.

“This is a nice place you’ve got here,” Noct called out, and he heard Prompto stifle a laugh.

“This is a nice place you’ve got here,” Noct called out, and he heard Prompto stifle a laugh.

“Thank you. It’s not much, but I like it.” He returned from the bathroom, and stood before him. Noctis suddenly had trouble finding his breath.

Prompto looked stunning, his shorter hair styled to perfection, his slim but muscular form fitting beautifully into his dress shirt, which revealed a bit of skin up near his collar, the first couple of buttons having been left open. His bright, almond-shaped eyes looked especially gorgeous, and Noctis was almost a little jealous of how much more nicely Prompto had grown into his looks than he himself had. He would have been jealous if he weren’t also the lucky man who was getting to take this handsome guy out for the night.

“Something wrong?” Prompto asked, with a worried frown. Noctis shook his head with a low chuckle.
“Not at all. You ready to join me?” he asked, standing up and offering his companion an elbow. He looked at Prompto questioningly, as if giving him the option to reject his arm—and presumably the opportunity to make this a date—but caught up in this precious moment, Prompto linked their arms.

“It would be an honour, my dear Noctis,” he smiled.

They found a nice, quiet spot to eat next to the water, just across from Mahago’s. They chose one of the three tables, and took a seat in the red chairs, the umbrella above giving them some shelter from the late afternoon sun. A waitress quickly came to bring menus and drinks, and took their order before returning to the building on the right. The men watched the glowing orange lights of Mahago’s, and admired their round reflections on the still, shimmering water.

“So, about earlier, thanks for listening to that stuff I said. I really have been struggling, and I appreciate your support,” Noctis spoke up, hands folded on the table in front of him. Prompto watched him worriedly, head low and eyes pointed up toward him. There was so much guilt that came with the realization that Noctis had been suffering in ways of his own, and Prompto had been too wrapped up in his own problems to notice.

“It’s totally okay, Noct. You don’t have to thank me,” he assured him, knowing he certainly hadn’t been there for Noct enough lately to deserve such gratitude. Still, Noct continued on.

“Seriously, Prom. As far as rebuilding Lucis goes, and trying to figure out everything as king, I feel like I don’t have a clue what I’m doing. I don’t know what I should be doing to make this world better, or how I can earn the support of those who are still against me. But knowing that you’re still on my side will make things easier, I think,” Noctis explained.

“Yeah?” Prompto asked.

“Well, I won’t be so distracted worrying about you, and the distance between us, and… Hey, you won’t mind if I ask you for advice every now and then, will you?” he asked, looking seriously unsure. Prompto hated seeing those eyes so sad and concerned; they were just too beautiful, especially with the orange lights sparkling within their grey-blue depths.

“Oh of course, not. Anytime you need me, Noct,” he said, and wished that that promise would be long-lasting, that he could always be there for Noctis when he needed him. It hurt knowing he’d been letting Noct down for the past eight months, and that the future didn’t look much better.

“And just so you know, even though I’ve been distant lately, I’ve always been on your side,” Prompto spoke up again, his hands knitting together anxiously in his lap. “I’ve just… got some things to tell you,” he shakily admitted. It was then that the waitress emerged from the restaurant again with plates in hand.

“Okay, we’ve got one lasagna and one Fettini di Cernia. Can I get you anything else before you dig in?” she asked, cheerfully. With a glance at each other, they silently agreed.

“I think we’re good. Thanks,” Noctis told her, with a charming smile.

“Alright, gentlemen. Enjoy,” she said, returning to the kitchen. Noctis stuck a fork into his steaming hot lasagna, spinning it so the noodles and cheese wove around it.

“Looks delicious.”

“Yeah, it does.” Prompto’s voice was weak and indifferent, his gaze unfocused as he stared at his
own plate. He held his fork upright in his fist, which was resting on the table. Noct took a mouthful of food, and stared at him in confusion.

“You okay?”

“Of course.”

The response was automatic, and Prompto pushed himself back into action, digging into his own food, but at the moment, he could barely taste it. He was so close, but he wasn’t sure how to force himself to speak again, especially when Noctis seemed to have forgotten what he’d been saying before the waitress had come over. Should he bring it up again? He needed to, even though he would have preferred to keep his mouth shut. If he told him now, at least they would have the show to look forward to afterwards; that would act as a distraction, as well as an opportunity to smooth things over.

“Noct? Here’s the thing. While you were gone—”

“No way,” came a stoic female voice from behind. Both turned to the approaching figure, her silvery hair falling around her shoulders, and her steely eyes showing a distant fondness.

“If it isn’t the lovebirds.”

“Aranea!” Prompto squeaked, and Noctis grinned.

“Aranea! How’ve you been? What are you doing here?” he asked, popping up from his seat, and feeling like he should offer her a chair. He pulled one out for her, and she sat down, scooting it in against the table before either gentleman could do it for her.

“I should be asking you two that question. Why would a king leave his newly inherited kingdom so soon? What is it? Romantic getaway?” she asked, resting an elbow casually on the back of her chair.

Prompto gave her an unimpressed look, his eyes viciously telling her to cut it out, and play it cool. She’d had her suspicions about his feelings for Noctis back when they had been in Gralea together in the freezing cold cave, but apparently she’d come to her own conclusions since then.

“Well, technically, we are here on royal business,” Noctis said, chuckling softly. “But we gotta eat while we’re here, right?”

“Yeah, don’t mind if I do,” Aranea said, waving an arm in the air and catching the eye of one of the waitresses through the restaurant window.

Noctis and Prompto exchanged a frantic glance, both in disbelief of how the mood of their evening had drastically shifted as a waitress hurried over with a menu for Aranea. Noctis mouthed a ‘sorry’ to Prompto from across the table while Aranea was busy perusing dinner options, and Prompto gave him an understanding smile.

Both boys had their turns zoning out as Aranea chatted to them about how she’d started a mercenary business with Biggs and Wedge—just like she’d discussed with Noctis years ago. It was funny how the normally stoic Commodore could be so chatty when she felt like it. If Prompto didn’t know better, he would have thought this dinner interruption was payback for what a self-pitying doofus he’d been back in Gralea, when Aranea had been telling him to go back to his friends, and he’d been insisting that they didn’t want him.

He had never forgotten her words that day, how she’d said Noctis was so worried about him, he
could barely speak; he’d still doubted that was true until the day Noctis rescued him from Zegnautus. If he had cared enough to go through that dreadful place, he cared for him deeply, even if Noct did feel bad for not doing or saying more at the time.

“So, how’s that kingdom coming along, Highness?” Aranea asked, gruffly, once her food had arrived. Noctis used his fork to stab one of the giant meatballs on his plate, and hesitated.

“Not sure. It’s coming along okay, I guess,” he replied, thinking of all the buildings that still needed work or complete reconstruction—even the sections of the Citadel that still needed repair. “Listen, during your travels, have you heard anything bad about me?”

“Not really. Maybe a nit-picky comment here or there, but nothing major. Why?”

“I got a threat letter that was delivered right to the Citadel this week. Someone on my council looked into it and found a few resistance groups popping up around Eos. I… didn’t take it too seriously until Prompto and I were attacked in Galahd,” Noctis explained, his eyes wandering to the spot on Prompto’s arm where the bullet mark had now completely faded. Prompto caught sight of his lingering, guilt-ridden gaze and he lowered his head, feeling so very loved—a feeling he’d missed horribly during his hunting days, but had fought not to let himself think about.

“That sucks,” Aranea sympathized, draping an arm around the back of her chair again while she picked at her meal. “Galahd’s been kind of rough around the edges ever since the invasion.”

“Prompto said a lot of people came together during those years of darkness, but I… I guess I was naive to think that bringing back the sunlight would make everyone come together,” Noctis lamented. His sorrowful face made Prompto want to reach for his hand under the table, but he refrained. Aranea merely snorted.

“There’s always gonna be someone who disagrees with what you’re doing, or still holds a grudge. You just have to continue doing your thing, and keep yourself safe,” she said.

“Will you keep an eye out? You have our backs, right?” Prompto asked, with a wink and a grin that would have made Noctis jealous had they not kissed in the hotel the night before.

“As much as I hate to admit it, yeah, I do,” Aranea rolled her eyes, and Noctis chuckled softly. “Preciate it,” he said.

“So, you’re the talk of the town in Altissia lately,” Aranea said, swiftly changing the subject before things got too mushy.

“Oh yeah?” Noct asked, raising a brow.

“Apparently, there’s supposed to be some grand ball happening where ‘eligible maidens’ show up in hopes that you’ll marry them.” Noctis coughed hard on his food.

“What?! Who told you that?!”

“It’s just heresay. My guess is Accordo wants a monarch, and this is their way to get one—by getting their claws into you.”

“This is news to me,” Noctis grumbled, wide-eyed. Prompto looked suddenly pale.

“I guess… with Tenebrae gone, and no surviving members of the Nox Fleuret family… Accordo is yet another nation without a leader,” he said, solemnly. Noctis set his fork down, as any mentions
of Tenebrae or Nox Fleurets still seemed to tie his stomach in knots, thanks to old sentiments of dread and guilt.

“What, they want me to rule Accordo, too? I doubt everyone feels that way,” he scoffed. “At this point, I don’t think I have the trust of enough people to make that work.”

“Don’t sweat it. It’s only a rumour. And having a monarch is mostly a way of seeking feelings of safety right now,” Aranea said, waving him off. “You’ve been cleaning up the mess in Insomnia, so people are probably hoping you’ll do the same everywhere else.”

“So, those in Accordo think the only way to get me to take care of them is if I marry someone from Accordo?” Noct quizzed.

“More or less,” Aranea nodded.

“What about Niflheim?”

“They seem content to either govern themselves or become part of Lucis. They’re not looking to have your babies, if that’s what you’re getting at,” Aranea smirked, laughing inwardly to herself at the two disgusted faces before her.

“Well, if it’s true that that ball is really taking place, I have a feeling I’ll be hearing about it soon enough, if I’m not forced to attend,” Noctis sighed. Prompto was about as uneasy with that thought as Noctis was at the moment, and he changed the subject again for both their sakes.

“Anyone need a refill? I’m all out,” he said, holding up his empty water glass, and waving the waitress over. She refilled their glasses with a smile, and the three went back to their meal over more lighthearted conversation.

After a bit more chatter, Aranea paid for her supper and took off, then Noctis ordered some dessert for him and Prompto—to prolong the evening, if nothing else. The cheesecakes arrived within a few minutes.

“I’m sorry about Aranea. I didn’t realize she would sit down and stay like that,” Noct said, slicing a corner off of his cheesecake and running it through the strawberry sauce drizzled over his plate.

“It’s okay. I didn’t think she would, either,” Prompto half-smiled. “But it was kind of nice to see her. We don’t cross paths that often.”

“Yeah... But with all this talk of threats and ‘eligible maidens’, I’m feeling sort of sick to my stomach. It would be nice to just enjoy the rest of the trip with no more bad news, huh?” Noctis chuckled meekly, and Prompto didn’t quite now how to respond. It only got worse when he asked his next question.

“Now, what were you saying before Aranea got here? You said you had something to tell me?”

Prompto’s bite of cheesecake was swallowed down hard. He couldn’t believe Noctis had remembered that in the first place, but why did he have to bring it up right after making that comment about no more bad news? Prompto poked at his cheesecake, making several rows of fork holes in the creamy top layer. He could still tell Noctis now, could get this dreaded information out in the open, and be done with it, but they did still have the rest of the evening ahead of them. Did he really want to put a damper on the remainder of their ‘date’?

“I, uh...” Prompto started, then let out a chuckle that was soft, almost defeated-sounding. “I honestly don’t remember.” Noctis gave an amused smile, and they continued their dessert in
Promptowas relieved that the live theatre show had been a comedy. He was in desperate need of a laugh. Something he didn’t know he needed was Noctis’ hand brushing against his own in the darkness of the theatre, but it was comforting, and every now and then, those hands would intertwine.

Still, Promptofelt like a horrible person as his thoughts went through his predicament for at least the hundredth time. How could he keep leading Noctis on like this? How could he allow himself to get so close? Why couldn’t he get the words out and just tell him the damn truth? He knew why. Once he told Noctis, everything would change. This would be the beginning of the end, and maybe he was selfish, but being with Noctis this week had felt too good to let it die so soon.

“You cold?” Noctis asked, glancing over at Prompto whose face and body were both rather stiff as they took the long way back to the hotel. Promptogazed upon him in confusion, then he realized how he must have looked with his hands shoved tightly into his pockets like that.

“Oh, n-no,” he stuttered. “I’m fine.” The comment was accompanied by a weak, unconvincing smile, and Noctis scooted in to walk closer beside him, hoping the contact of their arms would bring some warmth or comfort—whichever of the two he needed more.

Noctis wondered more than ever what Promptohad been keeping from him all this time, ever since he’d cried that night in the ballroom, since the first day he’d come back to Insomnia, or even when they’d kissed that night in the caravan. If he’d been carrying the secret way back then, it could have meant he’d been carrying it even long before that, and Noctis just hadn’t been around to know about it—being stuck in the crystal, and all. He seemed to be winning Prompto over, but still, he seemed so closed-off and distant, not like the Prompto who used to tackle him to the ground for a tickle fight, or snuggle up with him just for the heck of it.

They rounded a corner which lead them to a cubby-like area, shaded by a bridge above and a wall of the stairs to their right. Up ahead, they could make up a few dark forms, two huddled in an abandoned, tarp-covered gondola, and one leaning on the wall across the way, leaving the boys only a small space to squeeze through. If they had been looking for the poor or worse-off citizens of Altissia, they had probably found them, judging by their tattered hoodies and dirtied pants. The way they muttered and snickered under the breath as they approached, however, didn’t make Noctis nor Promptofeel comfortable in offering their aid. In fact, the unsettling stares of the hooded men made the pair put a bit more distance between themselves as they walked, before they became victims of a hate crime.

One glance at the right wall beside him, and Noctis knew they were in danger. The Lucian king’s emblem was graffitied onto the stone, and the skeletal face—which used to scare Noctis as a child, and had grown only slightly less eerie over the years—had red paint splattered across its eyes and smeared across its mouth. The entire emblem was marred with red and black streaks, clearly a result of hate and anger, and Noctis almost turned and fled at the sight of it. Trying to remain calm, he subtly nudged Prompto with his elbow, which effectively got him to notice the graffiti. Promptoswallowed hard, hoping it would rid him of his fear.

“Is that him?” They heard one of the men whisper.

“Looks like him. Just the man we wanted to see,” said another, with a tone to his hushed voice that made Noctis uneasy. The two figures in the gondola stood up, and stepped onto the land beside them, and Noctis led the way towards the narrow opening—two men on one side of the street, and one on the other.
“Excuse us,” Noctis quietly uttered, head low as he tried to pass by. A hand on his chest stopped him from doing so, so fast that Prompto bumped into his back. Both stumbled backwards, stunned and uneasy.

“What’s the rush, Your Majesty? Rumours said you were here to visit our beautiful city of Altissia,” said the man who’d held Noctis back. He continued to stand in front of him, hands waving out to the sides as he spoke; it looked like a mere gesture to accompany his words, but it was also preventing Noctis from pushing past him.

Noctis knew he could break through if he really wanted to. He could warp past him so fast that the guy would be on the ground with his world spinning, but he wasn’t here to hurt anyone, or to cause a scene in the streets; if he did, everyone would hear about it, and he would only further anger those who were already against him. He could see the headlines now: Lucian King harms innocent Altissian civilian. Fighting these guys wasn’t worth the risk.

Can I help you gentlemen with something?” Noctis inquired, quietly, while trying to maintain his confidence. The man on the right side of the street shoved Noctis hard into the one across from him, who caught and held him firmly in place. The man who had been blocking their path moved in to repeatedly pound a hard fist against Noctis’ back.

“That’s for my wife, who was killed by Leviathan!” he shouted. “That’s for my buddy’s daughter who was killed in the fall of Insomnia! You think your friggin’ dad could have warned everyone else about the treaty signing? No, he was only worried about his pathetic son!”

Noctis closed his eyes, taking the beating in stride. Maybe all this anger was what he’d felt he deserved all this time; it was his punishment for everything he and his father had done wrong.

“You were supposed to give your life to bring back the sunlight—the ultimate sacrifice that might have earned you some redemption, but no. You couldn’t even get that right. You’re still here, and we all just have to wait until you screw up again! Don’t know why Claustra trusts you!”

Don’t fight back. It will only make things worse, Noctis thought to himself, but Prompto was not in sync with those thoughts. Noctis saw a flash of blue, and the man who had been beating him fell to the ground. The one restraining him immediately let him go, and Noctis stumbled back enough to see Prompto with his arms fully outstretched and a gun in each hand, pointed at the two men on their respective sides of the alley.

“You have three seconds to let us pass,” Prompto announced, his features pushed into the fiercest scowl Noctis had ever seen him give. The guy on the ground wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand and laughed menacingly, though from the strain of his voice, he was clearly still in pain.

“You can’t hurt us. Do you know how bad it would look for a king and his bodyguard to beat up civilians? Your whole life would be destroyed in an instant.”

The truth of those words hit Prompto, and uncertainty flickered in his eyes, his arms sagging slightly. The man had a point. He had to protect Noctis, of course, but maybe in this case, that didn’t mean with physical strength. Still, he brought his arms back to their former height, holding them stiffly.

“You shouldn’t show such disrespect to the man who brought back the sunlight. He’s the only reason you’re even able to live in Altissia again,” Prompto said, sternly, the fire returning to his eyes.
“He’s also the reason why the world fell apart. King Regis protected him before his people, but when daemons took over, precious little prince Noctis just disappeared off the face of the earth. Some leader,” the guy on the right spat, quite literally on the ground.

“Noctis didn’t make the world fall apart. The war did that,” Prompto corrected through gritted teeth.

Noctis wanted to shut down his mind so his attackers’ words couldn’t penetrate his soul, but they had already reached his heart, and that was enough to make him want to crawl back into the crystal and never come out. After that long journey that he, Prompto, Gladio, and Ignis had taken… After all those hunts they had done, all the broken cars they had fixed, and the good deeds they had done along the way… It felt like it didn’t even matter. The world would never know the extent of what they’d done. His father had been viewed as a traitor to his people, and now, he was, too.

“Part of being a leader is knowing and accepting that not everyone is going to agree with what you do. That doesn’t mean you just give up, and stop trying to do what good you can,” Noctis announced, and bravely stepped forward.

The man on the ground reached for Noctis’ leg, intending to yank him to the ground, but Noctis summoned his blade in a flash of blue. Before it could even fully corporealize, the man was scooting sideways out of the way, legs kicking helplessly. The men on either side of the street moved to tackle him, but Prompto aimed at their heads, and they backed off, allowing Prompto to cautiously ease past them. Noctis continued toward the stairs, and Prompto followed him, backing up with his guns at the ready until he could safely turn and ascend the stairs with his friend.

Noctis was practically trotting as they made it to the upper level, his face twisted into some horrified look that he didn’t want Prompto to see; it was filled with too much pain and guilt and hurt.

“Noct! Noct, slow down, will ya? They’re not going to follow us up here. It’s too crowded,” Prompto called out, but Noctis refused to slow his pace. Prompto had to run a few steps to catch up with him, and a hand on his shoulder finally brought the king to a halt.

“Noct, please,” Prompto begged, but as Noctis turned to him, he realized why he’d been beelining it out of there so quickly. His eyes were shimmering with tears that he was struggling hard to hold back. The tight grip Prompto had on his shoulder loosened, his fingers moving to caress him instead.

“D-did they hurt you?” he asked with gentle eyes, suddenly wondering how many bruises were covering Noctis’ back. He couldn’t help but picture them—blues and purples and yellows blotting the spaces between his muscular shoulders, or along the scar of his once injured spine.

“Can we just hurry back to the hotel?” Noctis asked, weakly, and Prompto gave a quick nod, his features twitching with worry.

“Of course, buddy. Let’s go,” he agreed, guiding Noctis back to the route they’d been on, his hand never leaving his back as they walked to their destination.

“Hey, they had some ice downstairs,” Prompto announced, softly, as he opened the door to their hotel room. He held the plastic bag of icecubes up for Noctis to see before he stepped inside and locked the door behind him, wanting to make sure they didn’t have any unwanted intruders tonight.
Noctis acknowledged him with a nod from where he sat cross-legged on the bed, but couldn’t manage a word, nor a smile. His head was hung low, and he rubbed an arm to distract himself from his emotions, but it was working rather poorly. Prompto strode confidently into the room and took a seat on the edge of the bed in front of Noctis.

“Here,” he offered, lifting the bag of ice off of his lap just slightly. Noctis reluctantly reached for the hem of his dark, grey t-shirt and pulled it over his head. He took the bag from Prompto, then sheepishly realized he could hardly reach his back on his own. Prompto chuckled softly as his friend retracted his hand from around his back, and looked to him for aid.

“I’ll get it,” Prompto smiled, tenderly.

He got up from the bed first, and went into the bathroom to find a facecloth to wrap the ice in, not wanting to hurt Noctis more with the harsh sting of the cold ice against his bare skin. He returned to the bed, taking a seat behind Noctis this time, and scooping a couple of cubes into the cloth. Gently, he pressed the ice to his back, which earned a sharp hiss from Noctis before a contented sigh followed.

“He got you pretty good, huh?” Prompto asked, studying the bruises that had not been too far off from what he’d imagined.

He had been terribly worried when he’d seen Noctis’ tears, afraid that the attack might have flared up some old wounds that Noctis had had since he and his caretaker had been attacked years ago. Prompto remembered his young friend coming to school in a wheelchair, and Noctis had told him years later that his spine had been injured, which also led to numbness down one leg. After that, Prompto had always kept an eye out whenever they had been navigating rough terrain, as it seemed that leg had never perfectly recovered.

“Well… that graffiti. That’s scary stuff, Noct. They don’t just hate you. They hate Lucis,” Prompto went on, voice higher in pitch than usual. He saw Noctis’ head drop.

“Stop, okay? I don’t want to talk about it.” His words came out in a breathy, tearful whisper, and Prompto immediately backed off.

“Oh…” he quietly replied. “I’m sorry.”

He felt Noctis suck in a few shaky breaths before he reached a hand back, and Prompto thought he was searching for his own until he guided the cloth to another bruised spot. He obeyed Noctis’ direction, and settled the ice in the new spot, hoping to lessen the ache.

Prompto wondered how they had ended up in a strikingly similar situation as they had the night before—only with their positions reversed, and a different cause for their distress. Here he was, sitting behind Noct and comforting him, just hoping that Noctis might lean back into his touch, and open up to him with whatever was plaguing his mind. He wanted so badly to feel Noct’s back against his chest, for his head to fall in against his neck, and for hands to find each other, but he could tell Noct wasn’t quite ready. After all the abuse that had been thrown at him tonight, he didn’t feel he could let his guard down without it being a sign of weakness.

“I guess, you can never really know how or when people are going to retaliate. Those men, at least,
didn’t hold back in telling me why,” Noctis eventually spoke up, the break in silence startling Prompto slightly. He nodded, and skimmed a thumb over Noct’s back where he held the cloth, hoping the small bit of contact would let him know that he was listening.

“I hate feeling like a failure, like I abandoned my people when I was stuck in the crystal. Even before that, I couldn’t help the citizens of Altissia, or Insomnia, or anyone.” His voice grew in intensity with each sentence, but there was a quaver there that made Prompto aware of how much he was suffering. He was still on the verge of tears, and it showed.

“You were just a kid, Noct. I know we felt like we knew what we were doing when we were twenty years old, but we didn’t. We were still trying to figure it out,” Prompto assured him. His free hand had slipped atop Noct’s thigh at some point while he’d been talking, and Noctis watched it intently as it brushed gently back and forth.

“You don’t get it, Prompto,” he whispered, meekly. “In so many ways, I still feel like I’m twenty years old.”

He turned his head slowly towards Prompto, who stared at him with shock in his eyes, his lips parted slightly in surprise, but he understood. The crystal had stolen those experiences he’d been meant to have between ages twenty and thirty, experiences that would have helped him grow up and better understand the world.

“In some ways, I feel like I did mature some in the crystal. I feel like I was bombarded with thoughts of past kings the whole time I was in there, and feel like I can see the bigger picture of the world, but… I didn’t get to actually grow up. It’s like some major parts of my life are missing, and I didn’t get to experience or learn from them,” Noctis explained. He shivered as he finished speaking, and on the off-chance that it was due to the ice on his back, Prompto set the cloth aside for the time being.

“I wish I knew how to help,” Prompto murmured after a few long seconds of silence.

Noctis said nothing, but as his shoulders began to shake with sobs that he was just barely suppressing, Prompto bravely leaned forward, his arms cautiously weaving around Noctis’ bare waist. Noctis’ hands immediately fell atop Prompto’s, holding them there and letting him know that this was okay. Prompto smiled ever so gently, and tilted his head so that he could press a few kisses to the tip of the scar on Noct’s back before resting his head on his shoulder.

In that moment, Prompto had forgotten himself. He had forgotten about his condition, about keeping his distance until he spilled his secrets, about what his future held and how it might ruin everything. In that moment, the only thing that mattered was that Noctis needed him, and that he did everything he could to be there for him.

“And I know that I used to badmouth my dad all the time. But I never, ever hated him the way these people did,” Noctis went on, voice trembling, as did his body, even in the comfort of Prompto’s arms. To hear those men say such horrible things about King Regis devastated Noctis. He had had his own doubts about whether his father had been right to protect him above all else, but to hear other people scorn him for it...

He had his own doubts about whether his father had been right to protect him above all else, but to hear other people scorn him for it... It killed him.

“Is it even possible for someone to be a good king? I don’t know how,” he cried, and Prompto could feel himself tearing up at the sound of Noct’s shaking voice. He held Noctis a little tighter, nestling his face closer in against his neck so that his lips could press against the skin there as he spoke.

“I don’t know, Noct,” he breathed. “I don’t know. But I think we have to hold on to the belief that
there are more people on your side than not, and that the world is filled with more good than bad. Don’t forget, you’ve welcomed a lot of people into Lucis who were in need of a home. A lot of people love you and are thankful for your leadership.”

He pulled back to analyze whether there was any change in Noct’s expression. At his side-on angle, he couldn’t really tell. The only indication he had to tell him whether his comfort was working was the way Noctis’ fingers sunk down to interlock with his own. Prompto brushed his thumbs over the backs of Noctis’ hands in response.

“I know this trip has been sort of surreal, seeing the proof that the world still isn’t at peace, even though the war is over, but give it time, okay? You’ll win people over. Once you get Lucis back in a good state, you’ll be able to do more for other places, too. And you’re doing a great job of that now, but I know you’ll feel better when you’re in a position where you can splurge a little more,” Prompto said.

Noctis’ sobs died down sometime while Prompto was talking, and the man turned his head back. Prompto raised his head curiously, and Noctis closed his eyes and leaned in, brushing their noses together. He wasn’t brave enough to seek any more affection than this, because he wasn’t sure he could handle the rejection tonight, but right now, it was enough.

“I’m glad you’re here with me,” Noctis whispered, his eyes remaining closed. Prompto pressed a kiss to Noctis’ cheek, hoping that it might be enough to bring back the king’s smile, and it was, albeit only a small one.

“I’m glad, too,” Prompto promised, feeling so thankful that he had pushed himself to go on this voyage with Noctis, despite his anxieties about it.

“Am I a coward for wanting to go home now?”

“Of course not, Noct. You’re in definite danger out here. Like Ignis always said, there’s a time to fight, and a time to flee,” Prompto said, the man’s words staying with him to this day. Noctis tilted his head up a little higher to nestle his cheek against Prompto’s hair, and Prompto pressed another kiss to his neck.

“Thank you,” Noctis murmured.

A trickle of cold against Prompto’s thigh was enough to make him jump, and Noctis was startled as arms disappeared from around his waist. He turned around to see what was happening.

“Ahh, the ice bag is leaking,” Prompto squeaked, picking the thing up from its position beside him on the bed. It dripped mercilessly onto the sheets, and Prompto hopped up, cupping one hand beneath the bag to catch the droplets as he ran for the bathroom. Noctis stared after him and sighed. Why did they have to be interrupted? Why did something push them apart every time they got close?

Prompto returned a minute later, but Noctis was already up, bringing the ice-filled facecloth into the bathroom to avoid any further mishaps. They searched the drawers of the dresser and nightstands for a hair dryer, and Prompto dried the wet spot on the sheets while Noctis watched longingly from the doorway of the bathroom, arms folded. Part of him wished they could have just left the water there, so that the concept of them sharing a bed might have become a definite possibility.

“All dry! And now you’ve got a super warm, cozy bed to crawl into,” Prompto smiled, turning off the hair dryer and coiling up the cord before setting it back in the bathroom drawer. Noctis nodded,
forcing what could barely be called a smile.

“Guess I should get ready before it gets cold, then.”

He returned to the bathroom to brush his teeth, and Prompto came to join him at the double-sink. Noctis stared at them in the giant mirror and wondered how they had gotten so old. Facial hair, age lines—it was strange to see them looking like this instead of the youthful spirits they used to be. He still wasn’t used to it. Even so, in this domestic setting, Noctis could easily picture them as a married couple. They were old enough—even mature enough, he supposed—and imagining that this was their shared bathroom, that this was their life together, made Noctis’ heart throb with desire.

Prompto caught him staring, and he gave a small, somewhat shy smile in return before spitting out his toothpaste and rinsing out the sink. He returned to the bedroom, and changed his clothes with his back to Noctis, while Noctis stole some more glances at his back and strong shoulders. He didn’t finish slowly brushing his teeth until Prompto was in bed, and his opportunity to stare was gone. It was clear he was still in love with Prompto—hopelessly so.

He finally headed for his own bed, and Prompto gave him a smile before he switched off the lamp. He curled into the spot that the hair dryer had left still slightly warm, and pulled the covers up to his neck, hands clutching the sheets.

“Prompto?” he asked through the darkness of the room.

“Yeah?”

Noctis hesitated, not quite sure what he should say. He wanted to ask if Prompto missed them, missed being a couple. He wanted to ask if he was the only one who felt like he was falling for his friend all over again, even though he’d never stopped loving him in the first place. He wanted to know if they could throw all of Prompto’s worries aside and just be together despite them.

“Thanks again for all you did tonight,” Noctis said, instead.

“It was no problem, buddy. Really,” Prompto assured him, never knowing how many other thoughts were swirling in Noctis’ head.

Deciding that being out on this voyage in a time of unrest really wasn’t the safest thing for the King of Lucis, they boarded their vessel early the next morning and headed for home. Once they had gotten back on solid land, Prompto offered to take the wheel, as Noctis hadn’t gotten a very restful sleep the night before.

He stole glances as Noctis dozed on and off in the passenger’s seat, feeling a bundle of emotions as they neared the end of their roadtrip. There was guilt, because he hadn’t yet told Noctis what he’d set out to say from the beginning, and fear because what Noctis had said at the restaurant in Altissia made him think he shouldn’t say anything at all. There were also feelings of longing, of missing Noctis even though they had been closer this past week than they had been in an entire decade, but he wanted more. He’d felt warmth and comfort in every touch, smile, and kiss, and part of him wanted so badly to give into temptation, and be whatever Noctis wanted him to be.

“You mind if we stop at Galdin on the way back? I just… want to see it again for myself,” Noctis said, at some point between naps. Prompto had agreed, knowing that Noctis probably still felt some connection to the place, after awakening from his crystal slumber in Angelgard, just off the coast of the Quay. It was quite the detour, but he didn’t mind taking it when it was something Noct
felt he needed.

Umbra continued to sleep in the back seat of the car as they pulled up to the hill overlooking Galdin. They got out of the car and descended the slope, as the debris of the old resort and other structures left no room for parking down below. They passed the old refueling station—which had long since been destroyed—and headed along the seemingly endless stretch of sand, past where the old fishing shack used to be, further along the shore.

The beach was quiet, save for a few crickets and calm waves rolling in and out. Noctis remained near to Prompto as they stood on the sand, which overlooked the black sea. Beyond the damaged resort, they could still make out the silhouette of the Isle of Angelgard, shrouded in fog in the distance.

“It’s eerie,” Noctis said, voice low, and Prompto hummed in agreement. Noctis had thought he might feel his father’s guidance in a place like this, but he was disappointed to find there was nothing drawing him to that island—only something drawing him to the man beside him.

Prompto reached for his camera, drawing it up to his eye and snapping a few shots of the horizon. The dark grey sky was patterned with clouds, looking almost identical to how it had when Noctis had escaped the island. If he didn’t know any better, standing here now, and seeing these foreboding skies, he would have thought the sunlight had never come.

“It’s still beautiful, though,” Prompto quietly commented, taking in the sight of the waves and mountains through the lens of his camera.

Noctis turned his head to look at him, thinking to himself that the island wasn’t the only thing that had maintained its beauty. In the moonlight, Noct couldn’t so much see his tired features, but rather it brought out his more radiant ones—his blond hair which shimmered with various white golds, his eyes that contained so many hues of blues and violets.

Once Prompto was satisfied with a good amount of shots, he let go of his camera, allowing it to hang from the strap around his neck. Slowly, he turned his head toward Noctis, who was staring at him with admiration in his eyes, but rather than wearing a smile on his face, his brows were creased in… what was it? Concern? Sorrow?

“What’s wrong, Noct?”

“I’m sorry for being so forward, but… I wish that just for tonight, we could be together. Like we were that night at the caravan,” he said, and Prompto swallowed hard, the memories of that night bringing instant heat to his cheeks. “Prompto, this trip has been killing me. Being so close to you, but not being able to bring you any closer,” Noctis admitted, sounding desperate.

It took Prompto by slight surprise, as it was true Noctis was usually anything but forward—at least, he used to be a man of few words—but Prompto could see where that desperation was coming from; he himself had felt it, too, all along.

Visiting all the places that they had once been years ago—places they had previously eaten together, snapped pictures, or cuddled up in the warmth of a hotel bed. They all brought back memories, and Prompto was constantly reminded of how much he was missing Noctis. He may have tried to shut off his feelings after Noct had been lost to the crystal, he may have been trying to keep them turned off now, but never had he once stopped missing Noctis. His voice, his jokes, his touch… they were all pieces of him, and therefore also pieces of Prompto that had yet to be reattached.
“I know,” Prompto said, but his voice came out as barely more than a whimper. Courageously, he
turned toward Noctis who did the same. Now that they were facing each other, they could both see
the burning emotion in each other’s eyes. It wasn’t anger; maybe it was despair.

“I’m so sorry for putting you through this, Noct.” Prompto suddenly realized how quickly he was
breathing, like he was on the verge of tears or sheer panic. He didn’t want either scenario; he only
wanted to let Noctis escape this misery—and perhaps let himself do the same.

He thought of Noctis healing his arm in Galahd, of wishing on paper birds, and eating out in
Altissia. He thought of nights in the hotel room, holding each other, soothing each other, kissing
each other. They had been crossing lines all week; would one more line really matter? Had keeping
himself from Noctis been foolish from the start? What if those worries had been all in his head?
What if Noctis’ love for him was bigger than all their problems? Did that make it okay to give in?

“I-it doesn’t have to mean anything. No strings attached, I just… Er, no, forget I said anything,”
Noctis said, stuffing his hands in his pockets when he realized how uncomfortable he’d made
Prompto look.

“Noct?” Prompto started—slowly, hesitantly. He could feel Noctis’ full attention on him now,
gazing at him sidelong. Despite how nerve wracking it was, he knew he needed to get this question
out in the open.

“Would there ever be a reason why you wouldn’t want to be with me?”

The lines between Noctis’ brows were indicative of his confusion and concern. He felt like he was
close to something, like if Prompto was asking this question, then he was considering giving in to
whatever had been holding him back all this time.

“Of course, not,” Noctis replied, emphasizing each word.

“What if there was some noble out there somewhere that would be better suited for you?”

“I wouldn’t care.”

“And if I wasn’t as carefree as I used to be?”

“I would do whatever I could to make your worries go away,” Noctis vowed.

“What if I was sick?” Prompto had asked this question just as quickly and casually as the others,
and he didn’t think Noctis caught on to how much he wanted to hear this answer, because his
response was just as on cue as the first two.

“I would take you in sickness or in health. Prompto, what is going on?” Noctis asked, coming to
stand in front of him, and interrupting his view of the ocean. From here, Prompto could see every
worry line on his ally’s face. Noct took his hands in his own, thumbs grazing over them tenderly.

“Please, just talk to me,” Noctis pleaded. Prompto breathed in deeply, finding the best way to
phrase his final question.

“What if there was a time where I had to step aside, and you had to rule on your own, or find
someone else to rule at your side?”

Noctis paused at this, taking the time to analyze each piece of the question and come up with an
answer.
“I would understand if you needed a break from the pressures. I would never stop you from leaving to pursue your own dreams. And I would rather rule for a short time with you by my side than spend a lifetime of peaceful reign with someone else.”

“Do you mean that? I mean, h-how can you say that so easily?” Prompto asked, his brows creased in utmost worry. The next thing he knew, there was a hand under his chin, and Noctis’ thumb guided his head up the slightest bit so that his nervous eyes met his confident ones.

“Because you’ve always been the one. I want you, even if it’s not forever,” Noctis promised him, with a serious, but heartfelt expression; worry was carved into his own features as well, as he feared Prompto would not believe him. The man lowered his head tearfully, and Noct wasn’t sure what kind of tears were on the way—happy or sad.

“I mean, I want it to be forever, but if forever is too much to ask from you, then… I’ll take whatever you can give. Whatever you want to give,” Noctis said, softly, his thumb brushing over Prompto’s matured jaw, and he watched as a weak smile formed just an inch away. Those words… that was all Prompto needed to know.

“Then, I… I want to give you tonight,” Prompto whispered, his hands reaching for Noctis. One clutched the front of his shirt while the other curled into the back of his hair, and he moved his body in close enough to press against Noctis’, filling them both with a sudden need. Noctis glanced down at the way their jeans brushed together, then his eyes flickered back up to meet Prompto’s.

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to.”

“I want to,” Prompto assured him, with a squeeze at the back of his neck. One more glance for confirmation, and lips were meeting amidst a flurry of hazy thoughts.

They undressed as quickly as possible, leaving their clothes on the shore, and wading into the water. It was warm, as the days of sunlight truly had returned and heated the ocean. Once they were out past their waists, they moved to entangle themselves in one another, Prompto resting himself on Noct’s lap with his legs around his waist, arms wrapping around each other’s backs. Lips met hastily, greedily, tongues meeting fiercely as fingers danced along skin. Prompto raised himself up and slid back down, causing friction between them that made Noctis release a hoarse cry. The sound died inside Prompto’s mouth, and both began to move against each other, hands tracing over necks and spines and anything that felt good. The sounds of the waves barely masked the soft moans that escaped their mouths. It wasn’t long before pleasure overtook them, and Prompto tossed his head back with a final, desperate noise that had Noctis following after him, burying his head in the space Prompto had left for him between his jaw and collarbone.

Their movements slowed as they tried to catch their breath, then they fell deep into one another’s embrace, bodies melting as close together as they possibly could. Noctis lifted his head enough to press some lazy kisses to the side of Prompto’s neck, and Prompto sighed contentedly.

A reunion such as this should have been much more slow and patient, rediscovering each other’s bodies, taking in all the ways in which they had changed, and making sure to take into account all the things that used to make each other feel good. It probably should have happened in a more comfortable location—in the safety of Prompto’s bed, or the privacy of the king’s ensuite. It should have been driven by loving desire instead of urgent need, but it was enough—enough to still feel close, and to push away the loneliness, even if only for a little while.

“I missed you,” Noctis whispered, trailing a hand over Prompto’s face. He might as well have said ‘I love you.’
Prompto knew it would come to this, that nothing between them could ever *not* lead to romantic feelings, because they had always been there, and they weren’t going anywhere now. It was ingrained in them that they belonged together, and they did. Astrals knew they did because they had brought Noctis back to Prompto, even after he was supposed to have died.

“I missed you, too,” Prompto murmured back, his voice high-pitched and almost tearful, as he leaned in to capture Noctis’ lips.

*His Noctis* was really here with him—the Noctis he had been forced to live without for the past ten years—and he couldn’t help but feel relieved, happy, overjoyed. There had been times during their ten years apart that Prompto had feared he wouldn’t even make it until Noctis awoke from his slumber—*if* he ever even awoke. There had even been times when Prompto had feared Noctis might awaken with no recollection of him or his friends, so to be here in this moment, drinking him in, drowning in him… It was more precious than he could even begin to describe.

Their kisses were slow now, so patient and tender. Prompto’s fingers tousled the hair at the back of Noctis’ neck, and Noctis revelled in his touch.

“But, this doesn’t necessarily mean…. I—I can’t promise that when we get back I won’t—” Prompto started, not wanting to leave Noctis with any false hopes, but Noctis gently shushed him with a soft finger on his lips.

“Let’s just have tonight,” he whispered, with a faint sadness in his eyes. He hoped the words would allow Prompto to let go and enjoy this for whatever it was.

His finger continued to trace patterns on Prompto’s top and bottom lips until they parted with a soft, warm breath, and Prompto leaned in, searching for Noctis’ lips. Noctis allowed the kiss to happen, his arms entangling Prompto’s back and waist like he might never let go, and in that moment, Prompto absolutely didn’t want him to.
They didn’t wander out of the waters until night had fully fallen, the darkness concealing them as they found their clothes and dressed themselves. The drive home was full of silence, as both thought about how good it had felt to be together, but also wondering what this meant for them now. Both wondered, but neither asked, figuring it was probably for the best to let the trip end on a high note, and bounce back to reality later.

Noctis parked the car in front of the Citadel, and a glaive immediately emerged to drive the car around back for them once they had gathered their belongings from the trunk. Umbra hopped out of the backseat as the glaive opened the door for him, and the dog trotted up the steps alongside Noctis and Prompto. The lobby was empty as they entered, and Noct turned to Prompto as they headed for the elevator.

“Feeling okay about being back?” Noctis asked, noticing that Prompto had grown paler since they had been in the car together.

“I guess so,” Prompto mumbled, as they reached the elevator, and Noctis hit the button to go up. He glanced at Prompto again, who was staring straight ahead at the closed doors. The elevator dinged, and they walked inside as it opened.

“Are you okay? With what we did?” Noctis asked, cautiously. Prompto slowly turned his head toward Noct, his heart fluttering anxiously.

“Yeah. I mean, we’ve done worse than that before,” Prompto chuckled nervously, but the sound of that laughter didn’t put Noct at ease. He watched Prompto carefully as he stared ahead again, his knuckles completely white as he clutched his bag, which Noct knew from experience wasn’t heavy enough to cause that kind of strain on his hands.

“Not since I’ve been back. Not since I became king,” Noctis softly reminded him, his own gaze shying away from Prompto’s and heading for the floor instead. Prompto lowered his own head as he sighed.

“I guess it is a little different now, but... don’t think I didn’t enjoy myself,” Prompto said, before following it up with a mere whisper. “It was nice. Being with you like that.”

Those words were exactly what Noctis wanted to hear. While he also would have enjoyed three small words of devotion, these at least let him know that Prompto didn’t have regrets.

The elevator dinged for Prompto’s floor, and he gave Noctis a nod and small smile before hurrying out the doors.

“Let me walk you to your room,” Noctis offered, and before Prompto could protest, the doors were closing behind them.

The hallway seemed unbelievably long to Prompto, and when they finally reached his door, his hands were shaking as he scrambled for his keys. He managed to unlock the door with minimal fumbling as Noctis watched him with worry. Prompto let out a breath of relief as he pushed his way inside the room and set his bag down.
“Phew, home in one piece,” he uttered, and Noctis lingered uncomfortably in the doorway.

“Well, I guess this is it,” he shrugged, feeling Umbra wagging his tail impatiently at his side, like he was expecting something of his master. “Thanks for going with me.”

He took a step inside the room, just far enough so that he could reach out for Prompto’s shoulders.

“O-oh,” the younger stuttered as he was pulled in against his friend.

Just like at the Quay, Noctis’ touch seemed to make the rest of the world fall away, as if the magics at his fingertips had the ability to take away Prompto’s fears and fill him with a warm sense of belonging. Prompto pushed any remaining worries aside and settled into that warmth, his arms finding their way around Noctis’ back to return the embrace. Noctis bravely gave Prompto a peck on the cheek as he pulled away, and eyes met. Prompto lowered his head, but his gaze remained pointed up at Noctis.

“Thank you. For bringing me along,” he said, eyes displaying hints of an invitation, as if he were hoping for something for which he was afraid to ask.

‘Would there ever be a reason why you wouldn’t want to be with me?’

‘Of course, not.’

‘What if I was sick?’

‘I would take you in sickness or in health.’

Prompto replayed their conversation in his head, and waited, hoping that Noctis would confirm for him once again that he’d meant every word of his promise, and that he wasn’t scared to pursue this road that might not be forever.

Noctis stared into Prompto’s eyes uncertainly at first, taking in their emotions and then surveying the space between his parted lips. Once he felt sure that this was what Prompto wanted, he leaned in, and met those lips in a final, parting kiss. Hands met between their waists, fingers interlacing briefly before their owners stepped away, creating a distance too far to continue holding each other.

“I should head upstairs. Do you… mind if I text you later?” Noctis inquired, and despite the serious mood, Prompto couldn’t help but release a small laugh.

“You make it sound like you just took me out on our first date.”

“Well,” Noctis shrugged, timidly. “It does feel like we’re starting over.”

Prompto supposed that was true. These past few months had been like the beginning of high school all over again—taking them right back to where they had started, when they were both desperately lonely, and not sure how to make a connection with one another.

“So… is it okay?” Noct asked, nervously, when Prompto seemed lost in thought.

“Of course,” Prompto nodded, sincerely. Noctis gave him a smile, and grabbed his bag from where he’d left it in the doorway, giving his thigh a loud pat to coax Umbra along.

“Goodnight, Prompto,” he said, softly, giving him one last genuine smile from the hallway, before he turned and headed for the elevator.
Prompto held onto the doorframe, watching as he departed. His heart felt like it might break in two from being torn so hard in opposite directions. He was seriously at a loss when it came to what to do next, but he knew one thing for certain; spending even a second away from Noctis was going to hurt more than ever.

“Goodnight, Noct,” he whispered.

“So, how did it go?” Gladio asked the next morning. Ignis was perched on the very edge of the training room bench, and Gladio leisurely rested a foot atop it, draping an elbow casually over his knee.

Noctis was in the centre of the room, swinging his sword at a training dummy. He had headed down here of his own volition this morning, needing to get rid of some of the pent up energy that had come from his adventures with Prompto that week.

“You mean the political part? Well, we got attacked twice,” Noct said, between swings, sounding far too matter-of-fact about it. Ignis scooted even further forward on the bench, his back straightening.

“I beg your pardon?”

“We got attacked. Why do you think we’re back so soon?” Noctis said, and when Ignis and Gladio’s eyes seemed to bulge out of their heads, he quickly continued to talk.

“Don’t worry, it’s fine. Prompto made sure I didn’t get hurt,” he assured them, nonchalantly. Gladio turned towards Ignis, who blindly looked back at him after hearing Gladio’s movements. The Shield shook his head after a minute, and let out a heavy sigh.

“I’m afraid we’re gonna need to know a little more than that. Who the hell attacked you?” he asked, sounding surprisingly patient. Noctis shrugged.

“Dunno. Some random gunman in Galahd, and a trio of anti-Lucian thugs in Altissia. Prompto got a picture of the gunman so we can try to identify him. But like I said, we’re fine.”

“This doesn’t bode well. If you ran into such individuals on such a short voyage, then I fear we might have a greater resistance on our hands than we’d imagined,” Ignis lamented, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, though it didn’t help to hide the worry lines between his brows.

“Or we just had some unlucky odds. Relax. Everything’ll be fine,” Noctis said, airily, turning to his friends to give them a brief smile before returning his attention to the training dummy.

“Why aren’t you the least bit worried?” Gladio asked, folding his arms with a frown.

“I mean, I was at first, but we’ll handle it. I’ll get things under control here in Lucis, and start reaching out to others as soon as I can. No big deal. I doubt anyone has plans, nor the means, to attack the Citadel like Niflheim did all those years ago,” Noctis said.

Gladio and Ignis both stiffened at the way he had said those words so casually. It was unlike him to talk about the fall of Insomnia like there was no lingering pain attached. He was too carefree and relaxed in this moment, even for their lazy old Noct.

“So, Ignis?” Noct started, leaving the straw-filled dummy swaying back and forth with a never-faltering smile on its face as he headed for the bench. He grabbed a towel and dabbed his forehead
with it before holding it in his hands, elbows resting on his knees as he sat. “You remember years ago when I asked you what the rules were regarding royal weddings?”

Ignis tried to steady his expression, to not let it show anything but utter stoicism until he knew exactly what Noct was getting at. He adjusted his glasses again as a distraction before answering.

“Yes, I remember.”

“You had told me that I was expected to marry a princess and produce an heir, and that if I were to marry someone of the same sex, it would only work in Niflheim’s favour because the line of Lucis would effectively end,” Noctis said, still not sounding perturbed about any of this information. Gladio watched Ignis intently as he nodded in response.

“That is correct.”

“But now that Niflheim is out of the picture, and now that I’m king, am I… Am I free to choose a mate?” This was the first time during the conversation that he faltered, fearing the answer would be something he wouldn’t like. In hindsight, he probably should have asked far before he’d left for Galahd with Prompto, so that he wouldn’t have sought out something he might not be permitted to have.

“Well, you are king, but the rules of the Lucian royal family date back centuries. I would have to look into specific details about adjusting these rules to your liking. And there would be issues, such as producing an heir, that could become… problematic,” Ignis said, honestly, though he continued to mull it over.

“Well... could you look into it for me?” Noct queried.

Gladio took his foot off the bench and stalked over to Noctis, who looked up at him with a slightly nervous gaze, that giant shadow enough to make anyone a little anxious. Gladio’s golden eyes stared down at him with suspicion, but his lips were twisted into a tiny smirk.

“What’s going on, Noct?” he quizzed, making the king lower his head. Noctis curled his fingers into the towel he was holding, and twisted it around gently as he pondered the best way to convey his thoughts.

“Things are… kind of happening again with Prompto,” he announced, with an almost melodic tone to his voice. Even with his head low, Gladio could see his shy smile.

“You had sex with him, didn’t you?” Gladio asked, his smirk growing, and Noctis fidgeted. He had always hated how much amusement his Shield got out of teasing him.

“Sort of,” he mumbled, face reddening.

“Is that why you won’t take your shirt off?” Gladio grinned, and Noctis glanced down at his sweat-soaked t-shirt.

It was normal for him not to take it off in the training room when Gladio was present—because he had muscle, you just couldn’t see it, and he didn’t need to be reminded of that every second in the training room, thank you very much. But honestly, today he wasn’t hiding love marks so much as he was hiding the bruises he’d gotten in Altissia.

“Gladio, no need to embarrass him. What the king does on his own time is no business of ours,” Ignis said, though Noctis could swear there was a twitch playing on the corners of his mouth; he hoped it was nothing worse than a sign of amusement.
“That’s new,” Noctis rolled his eyes. “Back when I was a prince, you certainly had lots to say about my business.”

“Alright, fine, Noct. What I mean is, congratulations,” Gladio said, giving up the joke and slapping a giant hand against the king’s back. Jovially, he sat down beside him. “You finally got Prompto to open up to you. Good job.”

“Hey, don’t praise me up too much. It’s not official yet, and I don’t want to jinx it,” Noctis said, the truth of that statement stinging a little. Even when Noct had walked him back to his room the night before, the way Prompto had looked at him had made him feel like they were walking on glass. “But I’m hoping it’s all going to work out.”

“All right, lover boy. On your feet. You’ve got all kinds of nervous energy going on now, and it’s time to get it out of your system,” Gladio announced, heading for the centre of the room and moving the training dummy aside. He took its place and summoned his greatsword from Noct’s magics as Noct headed for the ring again.

“Okay, okay. But I’ll warn ya. This nervous energy’s been working in my favour.”

Ignis continued to watch the two spar, his mind running through the consequences of this rapport between Noctis and Prompto becoming more than a casual affair. Sure, it was no business of theirs what the king did on his own time, but when common and royal mixed, when a king refused to marry a queen… that’s when problems were due to arise.

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Noctis Lucis Caelum: G’morning, handsome. Hope you slept well.

Prompto Argentum: I did, actually. Like a log. How ‘bout you?

Noctis Lucis Caelum: Pretty well. Think I was still on a high after the trip. Want to meet up later for coffee?

Prompto Argentum: A guy like you has time for coffee?

Noctis Lucis Caelum: For you, I do. Meet me in my quarters?

Prompto Argentum: ...As long as you don’t try to seduce me ;)

Noctis Lucis Caelum: Strictly business. Promise.

Prompto Argentum: ‘Kay. See you soon.

Prompto scrolled back through the messages as he made his way to Noctis’ room, a mix of nervous and excited anxiety making his heart feel like it might float out of his chest. His brain wanted to demand what he was getting himself into, but he couldn’t pretend that he didn’t want to be with Noctis. He couldn’t pretend that he didn’t still feel drawn to the man who had given him so much, who had blessed him with his love and trust and friendship.

The butterflies in his stomach only confirmed those feelings as he peeked past the open door of Noct’s room to see him looking as stunning as ever as he gussied himself up in the stand-up mirror, which stood just alongside his bed. A soft chuckle from Prompto made Noct aware of his visitor, and he shot Prompto an embarrassed glance, letting his hand fall from where he’d been fixing his long bangs.
“Ready to go?”

“Yeah, but before we do…” Prompto started, giving Noct a sly smirk as he waltzed into the room with his hands behind his back. Noctis quirked a brow, amused curiosity perking up the corners of his mouth.

“Ta-da! A present for you, Your Majesty,” Prompto sang, presenting his friend with a large, flat something-or-other wrapped in white tissue paper.

“‘The hell is this?’ Noct smirked back, accepting the gift and tilting his head as he looked it over suspiciously. The mystery object had some weight to it, and Noctis was careful to keep a good grasp on it as he tore off the paper. Prompto watched his eyes light up and his smile grow as he unveiled the present, letting the tissue fall to the floor without a second thought.

“No way! A fish plate? This is awesome!” he laughed, scanning the fish-shaped ceramic platter, its white form glistening as the light caught it. Its lack of scuffs and scratches indicated that the thing was brand new, and that Prompto had taken good care of it since he’d bought it.

“I’m glad you like it,” he smiled, sincerely, the joy on his friend’s face bringing warmth to his heart. It was a familiar expression, like when Prompto used to surprise him with the most thoughtful birthday gifts, or show up at his work just to give him a kiss and brighten his day.

“Hell, yeah, I do! Where did you get this?” Noctis laughed, still taking in the sight of the enormous plate, and loving that it would make any angler extremely jealous.

“I spotted it in the Lestallum market when I was there with the glaives. I meant to give it to you when I got back, but it slipped my mind.”

Noctis wanted to correct him, wanted to ask if it had really slipped his mind so much as Prompto had just been too scared to get involved with him, but what was the point of stirring up any tension now? He was getting what he wanted. His best friend was currently back in his life, buying him gifts, and making him feel special, and he couldn’t complain about any of that.

“This is amazing. Thank you,” he assured Prompto, with another gentle smile before he crossed the room and set it carefully down on his desk. “I’m going to make sure I’m served every meal on that plate,” he smirked.

“You’re the boss,” Prompto shrugged, chuckling.

Noctis tugged on his ballcap, grabbed his wallet from his nightstand and tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans, making it so easy for Prompto to forget that this was a king he was very-quite-possibly dating. Everything seemed so normal, like it was before they’d ever left on the roadtrip. In so many ways, Prompto wished they could travel back to that time—before they’d lost their home or he’d been tortured by Ardyn, before he’d lost Noct to the crystal or known how short his time was.

He blinked in surprise as Noctis reached out to squeeze his hand.

“Ready to go?” he smiled, and Prompto pushed those thoughts deep down inside, reminding himself that if now was all he had, he’d better make the most of it.

“Yeah,” he agreed, closing his fingers around Noct’s hand. “Let’s go.”

The coffee shop was one that used to reside in the same location years ago, tucked in among a
dozen or so different shops along the strip mall. It was a place that the boys hadn’t frequented as teenagers, as coffee had seemed at that time to be more of an adult drink—or a stuffy ol’ Ignis drink. Noctis had only been in a couple of times to pick up a bagel on his way to school. Now that the place had been restored to its former glory, Noct thought it might be a good place to start over with Prompto. Reconnecting with Prompto made everything feel so new; a new place to eat might help them feel the excitement of first dates again.

Noctis held the door for Prompto as he entered, for which Prompto thanked him with a small smile. He was grateful that they both looked enough like commoners that they wouldn’t draw attention, nor risk Noctis’ reputation that seemed to be on thin ice.

They found a small, round table at the corner of the cafe, the nearby window painted with the cafe’s logo, providing a bit of privacy while still getting to enjoy the sunlight—sunlight that was all thanks to Noct. It was perfect, Prompto thought.

A waitress came to greet them almost immediately, and handed them some menus with a smile.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Will you be joining us for breakfast?”

“Yeah, that sounds great,” Noctis agreed, with a nod, and Prompto couldn’t help but smirk at how cute he was as he looked up at her, disguising himself in his old ball cap. If they were lucky, they would get through this morning without her—or anyone else—identifying him as the king of Lucis.

“The special this morning is two pieces of toast made with porridge bread, and a side of fruit with yogurt,” the girl informed them, and Prompto put a hand to his rumbling stomach, already catching the scent of toast and bagels wafting from the kitchen.

“I’ll go with that, actually. Sounds delicious,” Prompto spoke up, and Noctis gave him a glance, hoping his quick decision was based on food preference, and had nothing to do with making this date go faster.

“What about you?” he asked with a patient smile, and Noct smiled in return, relaxing.

“I’ll have the same,” he announced, handing the menus back to her.

“And to drink?”

“Coffee, please,” came Prompto’s reply. Another of Noctis’s curious glances was directed at him before he smiled and turned back to the girl.

“Same.”

“Great. Shouldn’t be long,” she promised, returning to the kitchen. Noct waited until the kitchen door swung shut before he leaned in, chuckling softly.

“Guess I probably should have asked you if you liked coffee before I invited you to a coffee shop,” he said, almost apologetically.

“I do like it,” Prompto assured him, with a gentle laugh. It was an acquired taste, but after so many early mornings of hunting, he’d come to thoroughly enjoy it.

“Do you?” he asked, as the Noctis he remembered hadn’t even tried Ignis’ favourite flavour of Ebony.

“No idea,” Noctis shrugged, innocently, before they both burst into laughter.
“Well, I see you’re as adorable as ever,” Prompto grinned, and it warmed Noctis’ heart to finally hear such endearing words. The way his eyes softened, squinting slightly into a tender look, did not go unnoticed by Prompto. The younger eventually looked away from the king’s gaze out of embarrassment, feeling a little abashed for having brought out such emotion in him.

“Listen, Noct, I’ve been wondering... did you mean what you said in Galdin Quay? All that stuff about... wanting me by your side no matter how much things have changed?” Prompto slowly sputtered out. He slouched back in his chair, arms folded tightly and protectively across his chest, and Noctis leaned in again, hoping to quell any fears he had.

“Of course, I did. I meant every word.”

“Do you think it’s a bad idea to get involved right now? And be honest.”

“Tch, you think I’d lie?” Noct tested.

There was a teasing air about his voice, but it was meant to disguise the worry underneath. Was this why Prompto had grown so pale the night before when they’d returned to the Citadel? Because they had re-entered the reality where their actions could have consequences? Prompto rubbed his arm awkwardly.

“I just want to make sure you’re really thinking it through. I mean, there’s a lot of pressure on you right now, and I can’t guarantee that I will always be able to rule by your side.”

Noctis frowned, trying to figure out when the promise of ‘ever at your side’ had faded, but perhaps it was merely through growing up. Prompto understood this world they were currently living in a lot better than Noct did, having spent the last ten years in it while Noctis hadn’t.

Perhaps it was his doubts about being a Niff. Maybe he believed that when word reached public ears, they wouldn’t be safe as a couple anymore. Maybe he thought people would reject a Lucian king who would choose to marry someone of Niflheim, though Noctis thought a lot of those old stigmas had been put to rest. Or maybe it had to do with whatever Gladio and Ignis had been talking about when they’d said Prompto had been through a lot, whatever secret Prompto had admitted he was hiding the night he’d found him in tears in the ballroom. Noct supposed it was reasonable to have doubts; Prompto had always had them, and adults always tended to have even more.

Noctis reached out for Prompto’s hand, wanting to put any worries to rest. Prompto allowed his hand to be pulled out of the crook of his elbow and into Noct’s gentle grasp.

“I meant every word I said, but if you’re not ready, then we don’t have to commit to anything yet. I’m just happy to be on a date with Prompto Argentum, famous daemon hunter.”

“Please,” Prompto scoffed, playfully brushing a hand through the front of his hair. “You flatter me, Noct.”

“So, I was wondering, do you still take a lot of pictures? I know you snapped a few that night in Altissia, but...”

“Well, not as many as I used to, but I do have a decent amount from my hunting days,” Prompto said, knowing that was probably the part Noct was interested in, considering his past fascinations with that time in his life. “Just so happens, I’ve got my camera right here,” he went on, leaning over to dig in his messenger bag, which sat on the floor beside him, and sadly freeing his hand from Noct’s.
“Why did you stop taking so many?” Noct dared to inquire, not sure if he wanted to know the answer. He hadn’t forgotten that night in Altissia when Prompto had actually had to search his bag to see if he’d even brought his camera along.

“Well, you know, it wasn’t the same after... after you were gone,” Prompto solemnly admitted, retrieving his camera and sitting straight in his seat, though his head remained low, gaze timid as he stared at the table.

“Probably because ninety percent of your shots featured yours truly,” Noct smirked, and Prompto glanced up in surprise, a smile crossing his face at the relief that Noctis was trying to keep the mood light.

“And those memory cards are all tucked away, safe and sound. No one is allowed to touch those,” Prompto smirked.

“Good,” Noctis smiled coyly back. “Some were for your eyes only.”

“Right. ‘Cause those shots of you in your heart-covered underwear were so risqué,” Prompto laughed.

“Well, excuse me for being camera shy,” Noct rolled his eyes. Prompto let out another chuckle and stared longingly out the window.

“Good times. And I mean all the times we spent together,” Prompto reminisced.

“They were. I don’t think we realized how good we had it. Even after Insomnia fell, we still managed to have a lot of good times on that roadtrip,” Noctis added, even his own voice losing its teasing air now, as he fell into the melancholia of the moment.

“We did.”

“I’m glad you were with me. Through everything,” the king smiled softly, which pulled Prompto’s gaze back to him like magic.

“Me too, Noct,” he promised, granting him a sincere, albeit slightly sad, smile.

The waitress’ face appeared in one of the round windows of the kitchen doors before she came barreling through them with a tray in hand.

“Your coffee, sirs,” she offered, taking the two mugs off of her tray and placing them in front of the boys. She grabbed the coffee pot next and poured some of the dark, steaming liquid into each of their cups. Lastly, she set down a bowl full of tiny milks and creamers, before stepping back and offering them a smile.

“Do you need anything else with your coffee?”

“No, I think we’re good,” Prompto told her with a nod, and she gave one in return before heading back to the kitchen. Prompto reached for a couple of creamers, and pulled the top off the first one, dumping it quickly into his cup.

“Alright, what the hell do I do here?” Noct asked, dumbly, suspecting it would get a chuckle out of Prompto, which it did. Prompto reached into the little bowl in the middle of the table and grabbed a couple of creamers for Noctis, too.

“You’ll probably want these in it,” he said, handing them to Noctis who was already holding out
“Okay,” he said, watching as Prompto poured his second creamer into his mug. Noctis followed his lead, pouring the small tubs of cream into his drink.

“You can try it and see if you like it like that, but if I know you at all, I’m gonna bet you’ll want to add some sugar,” Prompto grinned, grabbing his spoon and stirring his own drink as he spoke. He watched intently as Noctis brought the cup to his lips, frowning as the strong smell hit his nose. Bravely he took a sip, and Prompto laughed as his face scrunched up in distaste.

“Ugh, that is so bitter,” Noct coughed, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth as he set his mug down. “How do you drink this?” he asked, unable to believe the sight of Prompto drinking his sugarless coffee so casually.

“I thought you’d want sugar. It takes time to get used to the taste,” Prompto grinned, reaching for the sugar shaker on the table and pushing it toward his friend. “Just try adding a little at a time,” Prompto instructed, and Noctis obeyed, pouring a little sugar onto his spoon, dumping it in, and stirring before cautiously trying another sip. Prompto watched in amusement as he did this five or six times before finally setting the sugar aside.

“So, what’ve you got?” Noct asked, eyes travelling to the device abandoned on the table.

“Oh, right. The pictures.” Prompto reached for his camera, and flicked it on. He pressed the triangle on the back to get his old photos up on display, and clicked through until he found a good starting point.

“Here’s a group of us one night after a mission,” Prompto said, leaning forward and tilting the camera so he and Noctis could both see it.

Noctis gazed at the photo, smiling at the familiar sight of Prompto in the forefront of the frame, holding the camera up to take the shot. A circle of hunters sat around the fire with their beer bottles held up in the air, faces beaming. Noctis recognized some familiar faces of people who were now his own glaives.

“That’s a pretty typical night. Oh, here’re a few action shots,” Prompto went on, clicking through a few images of his comrades, cutting through enemies and summoning their shields through their king’s magic.

He came to one of himself that someone else had taken from the sidelines, and Noctis cleared his throat as he took in the sight of Prompto looking so stunning; his strong arms were outstretched and gun pointed at a voretooth ahead of him, the faint glow of a glaive’s shield around him, as if just fading out.

“It’s weird to see you like this... using my magics, just like my dad’s glaives,” he hoarsely breathed out. Prompto sucked in a breath that was equally strained.

“Yeah. I remember the first time I healed myself with those magics. I felt like... I could sense you there. I know it sounds stupid, but that’s how I knew you weren’t dead, that you were still with me, helping me every step of the way, just like you always have,” Prompto confessed, and as eyes met, Noctis desperately wanted to lean in further and capture those pale lips that he hoped had only ever been meant for him. Prompto averted his gaze before he could do any such thing, and flicked to another photo.

“Oh, I love this one. Look who was in Lestallum when I went to visit,” Prompto beamed, showing
the picture to Noct with an extra little tilt of his camera.

“Talcott!” Noctis smiled warmly, eyeing the image of the boy, whose age was somewhere between when Noct had last seen him as a child, and the adult he was now.

Talcott was standing behind a crouched-down Prompto, with his arms slung playfully around his neck. In this photo, Prompto did look like he could be a parent, and it stunned Noct for the second time that his lean and nerdy little Prompto had matured so much in their time apart.

“Wh-what’s wrong? Is this too much for you?” Prompto asked, catching the glimpse of sadness in Noct’s eyes.

“No, it’s okay. I just... really missed being near you,” Noct admitted, pushing forth a small smile. “In the crystal, I... I used to dream of you. I used to cry out for you, and to see you here in front of me is still a little... overwhelming, I guess?”

“I...” Prompto stuttered, letting that first part sink in before he spoke on. “I know how you feel.”

“I guess it’s just hard knowing I missed a huge part of your life.”

“Yeah, I know,” Prompto sighed softly, and his eyes widened in slight surprise as Noct reached for his face. A thumb brushed tenderly over his cheek, and—quickly deciding to forget the world around them—he settled into the touch, expression softening.

“You’ve grown so much,” Noctis murmured, giving a smile that still contained longing and sadness.

Prompto tilted his head to nestle further into his palm, and he raised a hand to cup around Noct’s. He wanted to say he was sorry, but figured it would be stupid to apologize for such an inevitable thing; he couldn’t stop himself from growing up, just like he couldn’t stop his body from aging.

The sound of the door swinging open again brought the boys out of their daze, and they pulled apart. Prompto stuffed his camera into his bag as the waitress approached with their food.

“Your breakfast, gentlemen,” she announced with a smile, setting a plate down in front of each of them.

Prompto avoided her gaze now, for he feared his face would heat up knowing she’d probably just caught them in their more-than-friendly position. If anyone did recognize Noctis, would he be in trouble?

He almost laughed to himself at the familiarity of that feeling; he’d always been scared of doing something wrong, of being seen too close to Noctis and being deemed unworthy. But everything was different now, wasn’t it? Noctis was no longer a mere prince, but a king. Was he free to choose his own path now? His own partner?

Prompto suddenly found himself wondering what that would be like, to announce their love to the world, to not have to hide their affections while in the public eye. He thought about the media coverage, about interviews regarding Lucis’ restoration, and Noctis talking right into the camera with his arm proudly around his waist.

“Prompto? You okay?” Noctis asked, and Prompto blinked, realizing the waitress had already walked away, and Noct had his bagel in hand, caught halfway between his mouth and his plate. Prompto shook his head with a smile.
“Sorry. Just in a daze.” He reached for his fruit dish and spoon, and scooped up a bit of yogurt with his cantaloupe and berries. He popped the spoonful into his mouth, and gave Noct another grin when he seemed to be wearing that same look of concern.

“I’m fine, Noct,” he promised, as the fantasy fell away. He wasn’t ready. He couldn’t be ready when he still hadn’t told Noctis the truth, could he?

“Is this about... whatever has been bothering you lately?”


“Sorry, I just... I mean, I get it. Some things are hard to talk about,” Noctis said, and as worry lines appeared between his brows, Prompto had a fleeting worry that Noctis was keeping secrets as well. Of course, it certainly wasn’t fair to pry when he wasn’t giving Noctis answers either.

“No, it’s not about that. I was just wondering... are you okay since we encountered those guys in Altissia? I know you were pretty shaken up,” Prompto said, softly, hoping Noct would believe that was what was on his mind the entire time. Noctis’ next bite of food was swallowed down hard, and it took him a while to meet Prompto’s eyes.

“Well, I think you were right about what you said. I have to just keep doing what I’ve been doing. Focusing on Lucis, rebuilding what needs fixing here, and then donating to other places when I can. I can’t dish out money right, left, and centre without losing the faith of Lucian citizens, so I make them the priority. I shouldn’t even be expected to support everyone else right away, right? In time, maybe, but not yet,” the king explained, and Prompto smiled, gently and proudly.

“What?” Noctis quirked a suspicious brow.

“You’re doing that thing again. Where you sound like a king,” Prompto murmured, his eyes full of admiration, and Noctis rubbed the back of his head.

“Don’t get used to it,” he mumbled, stuffing in a piece of bagel that was far too big for his mouth, and making Prompto laugh at the extreme change in his personality.

They shared a grin, and the look in their eyes was enough to know that they were both happy in this moment. They may have changed, but they were still the same people at the core, and that would forever remain the case.

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“Hey,” came a gentle knock on Prompto’s door, which was already standing ajar. Just like in the college dormitories, Prompto often liked to keep it open so he could be a part of the comings and goings, even if it was just watching people go by. Nowadays, he had friends that he didn’t mind stopping in when they wanted, either.

“Hey, kiddo. What’s up?” Prompto asked, looking up from his camera as a pink-haired girl strolled in and plopped down beside him on the edge of his bed.

“Rumours said the king and his escort were back. How did it go?” she asked, hands on her knees as she glanced at the back of his camera, catching glimpses of a bright and beautiful city she’d never seen. She assumed it must be Altissia, with its bridges and gondolas and lights.

“It was... intense, I guess you could say.”

“With the political side of things, or with King Noctis?” The inquiry came out slowly and cautiously, and Fae lowered her head a little as she quizzed Prompto, her mouth stiff and eyes...
worried as she hoped to meet the man’s gaze. Reluctantly, he pulled his eyes away from his camera, and gave a sigh. His face looked weary, his features seeming to sag, his lips pouting slightly as he thought.

“Both, actually.”

“So, are you two... going to get back together, or—?” She stopped talking abruptly as Prompto shot her a wide-eyed glance. After a second or two, his surprise twisted into embarrassed amusement.

“Man, you’re nosy,” he teased, chuckling softly, as he set his camera aside and folded his hands in his lap.

“I’m sorry,” Fae eventually uttered, when it seemed Prompto didn’t know what to say next. “It would just be nice to see you truly happy. The way your friends tell it, the old Prompto was really something to see. They say you were the best at keeping everyone’s spirits up.”

“They said that?” Prompto laughed, but his voice quickly grew weaker, more solemn. “And here I thought all I did was annoy them.”

“Ugh, you did that, too,” came Gladio’s gruff sigh from down the hall, making Fae and Prompto perk up as he and Ignis appeared in the doorway.

“Thanks, big guy. Really, thanks a lot,” Prompto rolled his eyes. Gladio guided Iggy into one of the twin armchairs before flopping down in one himself, his muscular arms draped over the back of it.

“So, everything okay? Did you get to talk to Noct about...” Gladio started, then paused with a glance at Fae.

“It’s okay. She knows about everything anyway. I don’t mind talking about it with all of you here,” Prompto said, giving Fae a welcoming smile, as she’d begun to appear uncomfortable. Gladio and Ignis had figured as much, but it was better to be sure before they dove into the conversation.

“How did Noct respond to the news of your condition?” Ignis asked, and Prompto’s hands squirmed uncomfortably in his lap. Of course, someone had to come right out and ask.

Could he lie? He hated lying, but sadly, he’d had lots of practice over the years—lying about his origins, making up stories in front of his classmates about what wonderful parents he had, and denying his feelings for Noct to anyone who pestered him about the rumours.

Did he really want to mess up this thing with Noctis when he wasn’t sure it was going to bloom any further anyway? Should he wait, and maybe the fire would burn out on its own? If it did burn out, wouldn't that lessen the blow for Noctis when the truth did come out? Maybe lying was the best way to buy him time for now, at least until he figured out what would even become of them.

“He was upset,” Prompto started. “But he said he didn’t want to speak of it ever again, so... it’s probably best not to bring it up,” he fibbed. That was the best he could do.

“Hmm,” Ignis pondered, reaching for the bridge of his nose, worriedly. “That’s not like Noct.”

“He probably doesn’t know how to deal with this yet, just like the rest of us had to struggle through it,” Gladio said, his gaze on the floor and his expression soft.

“Yes, I suppose, and it would be even harder for Noct, given your history,” Ignis agreed. He lowered his hand from his nose and sat forward in his chair. Prompto knew that if Ignis had been
capable of making eye contact, he would have in that moment.

“And how are you, Prompto?”

“I’m fine. Honest,” he smiled, hoping the man could hear it in his voice.

“No changes?”

“Nope. I’m just the same old me. So far, so good,” he promised, and he didn’t miss Fae nor Gladio’s sad expression as he addressed the room.

Gladio pressed a hand to his forehead, looking like he was struggling to think of some way to get Prompto out of this tragic situation. Fae kept her head low, her eyes darting away when Prompto tried to meet them.

“Come on, you guys! Don’t be like this! There’s only room for one moody guy in the Citadel, and Noct’s got it covered,” Prompto grinned, and Gladio and Ignis managed a smirk.

“I’mma tell him you said that,” the Shield grunted, getting up from his seat. “You comin’, Iggy?”

“Actually, I wonder if I might have a word with Prompto alone?” Ignis requested, and Fae immediately got up from her seat while Gladio heaved a sigh.

“Alright, but don’t go too hard on him, whatever you do, Iggy.”

“I’m not going to scold him,” Ignis practically scoffed.

“Your track record with Noct would say otherwise,” Gladio smirked, with a wink at Fae, who let out a small laugh as they exited. Gladio closed the door behind them, and Ignis raised his head, listening hard to make sure they were alone.

“It’s just us,” Prompto confirmed for him, and Ignis nodded, folding one leg across the other, and grasping his cane tightly where it leaned against the chair beside him.

“Then may I ask what exactly happened on your voyage with Noct? He mentioned attacks, but it was difficult to get him to say much more than that. He seemed very nonchalant about it.”

“Well, there was a guy in Galahd who shot at us while we were coming back from gathering food for the townspeople. I managed to knock him out before he did either of us any real harm, and we left Galahd right after that. I got some pictures of him in case the council wants to take a look,” Prompto explained, watching the concerned frown deepen on Ignis’ face.

“Yes, that would be most helpful. Go on.”

“And then, one night when we were in Altissia, a group of men stopped us in an alley. They started beating Noct, and said some pretty awful things about him and King Regis, about how they’d both failed everyone.”

“How did you escape?” Ignis queried.

“Well, Noct wasn’t fighting back, and I was scared they were going to really hurt him, and I… pulled my guns on them,” Prompto admitted. He was embarrassed to say it, but knew he had to. Ignis pursed his lips, looking so stern, so concerned and disapproving.

“Then I fear that you and Noctis may be in danger. Not only by those who would harm you, but if
the media gets word of this, then it will severely hurt the public’s image of Noctis and the Crown.”

“I was only trying to protect Noct! I know, I did a stupid thing, but the first rule of Crownguard training was to protect him at all cost,” Prompto defended himself, but felt so much like a child in that moment. Ignis quirked a brow at him.

“I’m… I’m sorry. What I mean to say is, I take full responsibility for my actions. I understand what kind of danger this could have brought to the king,” Prompto apologized, placing a hand over his heart, and bowing. He knew Ignis couldn’t see the action, but it made him at least feel better about himself.

“Perhaps it would be best not to make any attachments to Noctis too well-known, particularly outside these walls.” Prompto perked up at the way Ignis had emphasized that word.

“Attachments?”

“Prompto, forgive me if this is rather forward of me, but it’s come to my attention that you and Noctis may have had... relations while you were away.”

Prompto sputtered out a gobsmacked noise, leaning back a little on the edge of the bed.

“Wh-what? Where did you hear that??”

“Gladio suspected. Noct confirmed,” Ignis said, pushing his glasses up slightly. It was always so hard to read Ignis—even harder now that he couldn’t give any subtle cues with his eyes. His indifferent, matter-of-fact tone certainly didn’t give Prompto any clues as to what he was thinking. Steeling himself, he sat forward again, and rested his hands on his knees.

“Is that a problem?” he asked, knowing full well that ten years ago, he never would have had the courage to pose such a question, but he was a grown man now, and maybe it was none of Ignis’ business what Noctis chose to do with him—king or not. Ignis tightened his grasp on his cane and sat forward.

“It’s not good to keep your partner in the dark, particularly in such dire circumstances as yours.” Prompto flinched at the words that carried the weight of accusation. So, Ignis hadn’t bought his lie.

“Are you talking about my condition?” Prompto inquired softly.

“Of course.”

“I told him everything, Iggy. Promise! But he said he didn’t want to talk about it until things get worse. Said we’d cross that bridge when we came to it, and he told me to tell you guys not to bring it up ’cause it would only upset him. I think for now, we just have to respect that.”

Ignis was silent for the longest time, and Prompto could have sworn he was trying to learn how to see again so he could pick up every little facial twitch that would have told him that he was still lying.

“But surely, we will have to discuss how this will affect Noct’s future. If you two are going to be wed someday, then we must be prepared for what will follow. Is Noctis really prepared to rule alone, or to find another suitor?” The tiny, pained noise that escaped Prompto’s tight throat was enough to bring Ignis’ rambling to a halt, and he sat back, the sternness leaving his face.

Despite the consequences, Prompto’s mind wanted to stick to that word: wed. Had Noctis mentioned something to Ignis? Did Noct actually think about stuff like that?
“My apologies, Prompto. I don’t wish to cause you any further heartache, but nor would I wish heartache upon Noctis.”

“It’s okay, but you don’t have to worry so much. Marriage isn’t even something we ever discussed as teenagers, you know?” Ignis looked surprised by that announcement, but chose not to comment.

“But... does that mean that Noct is free to choose? I mean, hypothetically, he could choose to marry anyone he wants?”

“It’s unclear at this point. Even if it was permitted, however, the council wouldn’t necessarily agree with his decision. It’s my job as advisor to make Noctis aware of the pros and cons.”

“And if he were talking about marrying me...? What would you tell him?” came Prompto’s weak voice. He wasn’t sure why he was asking when he probably didn’t want to know the answer, and when he was letting himself think about a future that he would probably never have—and should probably never have, for Noct’s sake.

Ignis let out a long sigh, and let go of his cane, resting it carefully against the chair and reaching a hand forward. Prompto outstretched his own, allowing Ignis to hold it within his own two.

“Please understand, Prompto, that as your friend, I wish only for your happiness. I wish you and Noct could live a wonderful life together if that’s what you both desire, but as an advisor to the Crown, I must also consider the dangers.”

“What dangers?” Prompto swallowed hard, the barcode on his wrist seeming to burn at the words.

“What will happen to Noct’s leadership when you’re no longer at his side. Whether he will be able to focus on what must be done to keep the world at peace. Prompto, I only bring up these issues out of concern for you and for the Crown. If you were to become Noctis’ consort, it would mean you would be required to take charge if Noct was ever ill or absent. I wouldn’t want this to put any extra strain on your health, if you are even well enough to rule at that point,” Ignis explained, and Prompto lowered his head.

“Y-yeah. Makes sense,” he sighed, shakily, not wanting to hear it, but knowing Ignis was right to worry.

“And I hate to say it, but I worry that word of your origins may not work in our favour,” Ignis explained, and Prompto slowly pulled his hand free of Ignis’. He’d been afraid of that one.

He stared at his friend, whose mouth was firmly set in a line, and he wished he could see more apology in those bleached, dead eyes. But perhaps being an advisor meant there was very little room for sympathy.

“Because I was born in Niflheim? Or because I was created to be an MT?”

“Both, though I would hope the latter would never be public knowledge.” While Prompto wanted to agree with that statement, on some level, it still hurt. A lot.

Was he something that Noctis should be ashamed of? Something evil and tainted? Something that could cause their homelands to be at war again?

“For the most part, I would hope a union between Lucis and Niflheim such as your marriage would be viewed as a symbol of peace, just as Noct’s engagement to Lady Lunafreya was meant to be. However, in light of the recent threats against the king, I would not be particularly eager to spread word of your courting at this time.”
“Ignis, hey, you’re getting way ahead of yourself,” Prompto shook his hands wildly, knowing Ignis couldn’t see the action, but needing an outlet for all that nervous energy in his fingertips.

“We’re hardly even ‘courting’, okay? We’re just getting to know each other again after everything that’s happened,” he scrambled to explain, because he couldn’t bear to hear any more reasons confirming what had always been his worst fear—that he wasn’t good enough for Noctis, and that the perfect ending he’d always imagined for his life story was just a silly fantasy. People like him didn’t deserve people like Noct.

“Really? Things have been moving a little fast if what you say is true, don’t you think?” Ignis tested, and Prompto could tell from the odd gleam in his eyes that he was referring to the incident in Galdin again. He wondered how much Noct had told him.

“O-oh, that? It wasn’t planned. It just sort of happened, and... maybe it was a good thing. Because it’s the first time I’ve really felt close to him since he came back,” Prompto explained, voice desperate, like he wanted validation for his feelings.

He wanted to hear that everything was okay, that the tears pooling in his eyes were completely unnecessary, but he knew from the unchanging expression on Ignis’ face that he was still questioning whether or not them being together was the right move.

“Prompto, I hope you will not take my words to heart,” Ignis said, to fill the uncomfortable silence, if nothing else.

“No, w-why would I take them to heart?” Prompto tried to play it cool as he got to his feet, strolling casually around the room as a distraction from his emotions, but they were coming on strong.

“I am sorry,” Ignis said, reaching for his cane again and getting to his feet with a hand on the armrest to support himself. He could tell by the sound of Prompto’s pacing that he should probably take his leave and give the young man some time to think.

“But please, consider what is best for Noctis before you get in too deep with him. There is a ball coming up in a few months, in Accordo. Noctis will be expected to mingle and seek potential mates there. Perhaps that would be a good opportunity to set him free.”

Prompto watched through blurred vision as Ignis strode toward the door. He fumbled for the door handle before he pulled it open and made his exit.

Prompto held his head in his hands, fingers tangling into his blond hair. He waited until Ignis was probably out of earshot before he rushed over and slammed the door closed. He let out a noise somewhere between a scream, a cry, and a desperate growl, before he crumpled to the ground, his knees taking the brunt of the fall. Head hung low, he allowed himself to release a few quiet sobs as tears travelled over his red cheeks. He wiped at them viciously with the back of his hand.

His phone dinged a second later, and he reluctantly dug it out of his pocket. He sniffled as he unlocked it and read the text.

Noctis Lucis Caelum: I have a lot of paperwork to do after dinner tonight. Really boring stuff, but you’re welcome to come hang out while I work.

Prompto whimpered as he finished reading, wanting so badly to run to Noctis’ room and fall apart in his arms. That’s the way it had always been. That’s what they’d done whenever one of them was going through a hard time.
He would always remember the day Noctis had shown up at his apartment after learning the news of his betrothal to Lady Lunafreya. He’d been such a mess, he hadn’t even been able to tell Prompto what was wrong. He’d simply knocked on the door, his face red and drenched, and Prompto had pulled him inside, holding him tightly against him. He’d somehow managed to get the door closed and manoeuvre them over to the couch, where they stayed for a good ten minutes or more before Noctis was able to stutter out the words that shattered Prompto’s world as well. Prompto had managed to stay strong, and just hold Noctis while he cried.

But maybe those days were over. Maybe he couldn’t ask for Noctis to be his pillar of support anymore, because history showed that they couldn’t help but entangle themselves deeper into the other’s life when they were together, and if Ignis thought it was a bad idea... Who was Prompto to argue with a royal advisor, especially when Ignis’ life goal was to make sure everything that happened was in Noct’s best interest?

Prompto’s fingers hovered over his phone, waiting to type a response, but he couldn’t think of anything to say. Eventually, he shut off the power and stuffed it in his pocket again as he forced himself to his feet. With a final sob, he wandered over to lock his door, prepared to lay low for the rest of the day.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! If you're enjoying the story, feel free to let me know! Feedback is always appreciated :) Hugs to all who have shown their support thus far <3 Thank you, all!!
A Step Back

Chapter Notes

*Trigger warning - There is a very brief mention of depression and self harm in the first scene of this chapter, so please skim over it if you need to. Thanks!

Message received at 10:03am
Noctis Lucis Caelum: Hey, I missed you last night.

Message received at 2:24pm
Noctis Lucis Caelum: Everything okay?

Message received at 4:36pm
Noctis Lucis Caelum: Hello?

Message received at 6:00 pm
Noctis Lucis Caelum: Prompto?

“Prompto?” The knock on the door brought Prompto spiralling out of dreamworld, eyes flying open, heart pounding from the start he’d been given.

“Prom, please open up,” sounded Noctis’ gentle voice from the other side of the door.

Prompto sat up and rubbed at his eyes, taking in the sight of his bed. He’d been having a restless sleep by the look of things, the sheets and bed-covers seeming to stretch in every direction, hanging off the sides of the bed-frame in some places and laying crumpled up in others. He’d given up on the idea of a productive day when he had woken up sometime after eleven and seen Noctis’ text; productivity was out of the question after such a depressing evening the night before.

He had thought a lot about what Ignis had said, and a lot about what the weight of his secret might do to Noctis. Ignis was right, he figured—as he usually was—and that meant... Prompto’s stomach did a hard flip. He hated that he had let Noctis down, hated that he had to wedge them apart again, hated that he had to break both of their hearts in one blow.

Prompto ran a hand through the back of his hair, and immediately knew from the tiny tufts that were sticking up that he probably looked as bad as he felt. Still, he dragged himself out of bed, and crossed the room, his sweaty palm reaching for the door handle and pulling it open to reveal his king standing in front of him, wearing a seriously worried look.

“What happened? You look like hell,” Noctis stated, eyes wide, and hands twitching at his sides as he fought off the urge to pull him into his arms, pat down his hair, and comfort him until he was ready to talk. Prompto managed a tiny chuckle, his gaze travelling toward the floor—partly out of guilt, and partly because his eyelids felt so heavy, even the skin beneath them felt saggy at the moment.
“Thanks.”

“I mean it. What happened?” Noctis asked again, pushing his way into the room and closing the door behind him. He ducked his head, hands gently gripping Prompto’s shoulders as he tried to meet his gaze, but Prompto looked away, suddenly appearing ashamed of himself—maybe even afraid.

“Prompto, come on. You’re scaring me,” Noct said, eyes still wide as he stared at his friend’s turned head, at the way he looked like he either wanted to cry or bolt. He watched the way Prompto’s chest rose and fell, its speed increasing with each shaky breath, and he told himself that one of them had to stay calm here; under the circumstances, it had to be him.

“I can’t do this anymore, Noct,” Prompto whimpered out.

“Can’t do what?”

Noctis’ voice was so gentle, Prompto was afraid it was only going to make it that much easier to break. He drew in another quavering breath, and found the courage to meet Noctis’ eyes. Doing so was the only way to make Noctis listen to him; he knew that.

“You know that ball in Accordo that Aranea talked about? I think you should go. Because, this thing with you? I can’t.”

There was so much finality in his tone, but so much pain in his eyes, Noctis wasn’t sure what to believe. He hesitated, simply staring Prompto down for a few very long seconds while he tried to reason out what was happening. Prompto was shrinking under his gaze, and although Noctis didn’t want to make him feel any smaller, he needed a second longer to wet his throat in order to get even a word out.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked, and Prompto felt so utterly guilty when he saw the injured look in Noctis’ eyes—the upward slant of his brows, the sad, downward twitch of his lips. Prompto shook his head.

“No.”

“Did I say something stupid? I know I suck at communicating sometimes, and if I said something stupid, just tell me.”

“You didn’t.”

Prompto’s answers were so short and abruptly spoken, like he was on autopilot, spitting out conveniently small and simple answers. But Noctis needed more, needed to understand. He would have felt like he was talking to a mere machine if it weren’t for the pained expression on Prompto’s face. He was hurting, and if that were so, then why was he doing this? Why was he making them both hurt more?

“Is there someone else?” Noctis asked, for what felt like the millionth time.

“No, Noct.”

“Then I don’t understand. You seemed genuinely happy when we were together. In Altissia, at breakfast yesterday... Is someone telling you to stay away from me? Is it Ignis, or—?”

“No, Noct. It’s just... it’s just me. And I’m sorry, but I can’t do this. Us being together would ruin everything.”
Prompto couldn’t blame Ignis for this, for all the things he’d said were things that had crossed his own mind at some point over the years. It may have hurt to hear them being uttered back to him, to know that all those worries held some validity, but they were indeed concerns that Prompto had already had.

“What do you mean, ruin everything?” Noctis inquired.

His heart stung as he raised a hand to Prompto’s face, and the young man stepped back—not out of his reach, but enough of a flinch that Noctis certainly couldn’t ignore it. Noctis held his ground, and brushed his thumb over Prompto’s cheek, hoping the soothing gesture and his gentle eyes would lure him back to him; it seemed to work, even if only slightly.

Prompto’s eyes were turning to slits now, his breathing irregular as he tried his hardest not to break down. It was stupid to break down, wasn’t it? He was a grown man, and he’d believed for a long time that Noctis wouldn’t be coming back. He had been ready to live out the rest of his short life alone, so why was it killing him to say this now? The answer was simple. Noctis was his world, and he was about to give him up. It was so much harder to live knowing Noctis was right there, and that he couldn’t have him, than to live knowing he was gone and that they might soon meet again in death.

“Is it because of Lucis? I know I have a lot more responsibility now, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t... It doesn’t mean that I don’t need you, or even that I shouldn’t have you,” Noctis murmured.

Prompto dwelled on how good his fingers felt on the side of his face, like each gentle stroke pulled his soul a little closer to Noct’s. He wanted to believe his words, wanted to believe that Noct’s reasoning was sound, but according to Ignis, it wasn’t. Noctis shouldn’t have him—a commoner, a Niff, a failed MT who was running out of time.

Prompto closed his eyes and focused on his breathing, making himself slow it enough so that he could at least try to manage his thoughts. He didn’t need much—just one good reason for Noctis to give up the fight and leave him for good. It had to be believable, and it probably had to hurt.

“Too much has changed, Noct. Ten years is too long for everything to just fall back into place. I tried, but I don’t feel—”

“Bullshit,” Noctis growled, and Prompto pulled away from his hand as if it had burned him. His sad expression transformed into one of fierce anger, and slight disbelief. He wiped his forearm over the spot where Noct’s hand had been, as if washing himself clean.

“Don’t tell me how I do or don’t feel,” Prompto warned him.

He looked like he was in a battle stance now, his legs apart and knees bent, at the ready for whatever would be thrown at him next, and Noctis raised his hands in surrender. He didn’t want to fight with Prompto; he’d been there, and it was the worst feeling in the world. He took in a deep breath of his own to calm himself.

“Maybe I could let this go if I really thought this was what you wanted. If I thought you were happy. But I don’t. Prompto, you seem miserable, and I’m worried about you,” Noctis said, his voice returning to that tender one from before he’d called Prompto’s bluff. Prompto continued to stand there, eyes shifting from side to side like he wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself.

“Are you depressed?” Noctis asked, and Prompto repeated the question to himself. Probably.

“Are you... thinking of hurting yourself?” came the next careful question. Definitely not. Quite the
opposite. He wanted to give himself more time, not less.

“No, Noct, of course not,” Prompto finally replied, his voice coming out in a tired-sounding murmur. His defences were down again, and he shifted his weight back to where it should be, legs coming to stand straight under him.

“Okay, then, will you just... humour me, and tell me the answer one more time? Are you still in love with me?” Noctis asked, weakly, needing to hear it once more if he was going to believe it. Prompto said nothing.

“Do you still want to be with me?”

“Yes,” Prompto whispered, meeting Noctis’ eyes for a brief second before his gaze fluttered toward the floor. “To both of those questions.”

“Then why aren’t you? I’m right here, ready and waiting,” Noctis said, holding his arms out to his sides, displaying himself for the world to see.

Prompto bit his bottom lip, trying to keep his emotions at bay. Why was Noct so good at reeling him back in? In this moment, his desperate tries to keep him near were so painful, it was frustrating. Make him let go, Prompto. You know you have to, Prompto urged himself, and his body shook as he forced himself to use that frustration to his advantage.

“Because I’m not the same person you knew back then. I’ve got a lot more baggage than you’d even know how to deal with, and this...” Prompto paused, his hand flicking back and forth between himself and his friend, his voice gaining irritation as he spoke. “Just isn’t a good fit.”

That was it—the end of his patience, and the last of his strength to hold back his emotions. He turned and hurried for the door, but Noctis’ sharp call of his name halted him before he could make his exit.

Prompto turned his head, but refused to turn his body as Noctis approached. The king debated putting a hand on his friend’s shoulder, but Prompto was looking just a little too hostile at the moment, so he decided words were the only thing he should use in this game of persuasion.

“I love you, Prompto,” he started, emphasizing that with his low, stern voice. “But I can’t do this back and forth thing with you. I can’t have you string me along for a while, and then pull away, because it hurts too damn much. So, think about what you’re doing before you walk away,” he warned.

Prompto’s eyes flickered around for a moment, before stopping determinedly on the door. Pressing his lips firmly together, he stormed out of the room. Where, he didn’t know; maybe the showers where he could fix up his bed-mussed hair and tousled appearance. More importantly, it was the best place to hide any possible tears.

Meanwhile, Noctis continued to stand in the bedroom with clenched fists, his heart pounding with so much disbelief, hurt, and anger that he thought it might break apart. He glanced around Prompto’s empty room, feeling so out of place in here all of a sudden—in the place that used to be his haven when he was lonely for his friend’s company.

He wanted to break something. He wanted to smash those bottles of the Galahdian ginger drink that lined the cabinet—bottles that Prompto must have stocked up on while in Galahd, and hadn’t said a word about. Noctis wanted them to stain the gold carpet. He wanted the shards of glass to be a memory of everything Prompto had broken between them.
Instead, it wasn’t the bottles that received his anger, but rather the picture frame that sat on Prompto’s desk—a picture of the four of them in front of the Regalia at the commencement of their roadtrip. He grabbed it and threw it against the opposite wall, his chest heaving and his vision blurring as the thing cracked loudly and fell to the floor.

After everything he’d been through, how could Prompto leave him like this? After all those cold, lonely, horrible days in the crystal, all those days wishing that Prompto could scoop him out of there and hold him close against his warmth, did he somehow deserve to be met with only more cold? After Noctis had helped Prompto overcome so many obstacles and fears, was he really so selfish to disregard Noctis’ problems? Or was Noctis just failing like he always had? Never knowing how to tell him what he was feeling?

Next he yanked open the desk drawer, the old wood squeaking in protest. There sat Prompto’s camera, and in the midst of his fury Noctis found himself reaching for it. He raised it above his head, ready to let it join the picture frame in a pile of broken glass, knowing a blow to something as important as this might just hurt Prompto as much as he had hurt him. But this wasn’t the camera he’d been using at breakfast yesterday, Noctis noticed. It had scratches all over the back display screen, and a nasty diagonal crack that ran from the top right corner to the bottom left. LOKTON LX-30. Noctis could remember Prompto saving up for it when they were in college. This was the camera that had gone through Zegnautus Keep with him, which probably explained its damages.

Noctis quickly realized he didn’t want to hurt Prompto. Not at all. Not ever. Prompto had been through more than any person should.

With a stifled sob, he pulled the camera in against his chest, holding it close as if it were Prompto in his arms, bruised and broken after being in Ardyn’s possession. It occurred to Noctis that maybe Prompto’s inability to reciprocate his affections now were rooted in that time. After what he’d said in Altissia—that he might never be ready to talk about what happened in Zegnautus—it was possible that whatever had happened was making it hard to open up now. Noctis could only imagine the things Ardyn might have said to him, especially with his knowledge that Prompto was in fact the prince’s heart’s desire. What would he have said? What would he have done? Noctis shuddered to think. He wouldn’t put anything past Ardyn.

Noctis managed to blink away his tears, and with a final sniffle he looked down at the camera in his hands, pressed tightly to his chest, thumbs grazing delicately over it. Swallowing down any feelings of fear, he forced himself to press the power button. The screen flickered abnormally, grey bars cycling downward before the LOKTON logo appeared and the menu loaded. Noctis’ thumb hovered above the button to display previously taken photos, hoping there might be a memory card still in the device, along with some possible evidence of what had happened in the Keep. His stomach clenched as his mind conjured up possibilities of what he might see. Maybe Ardyn had used the camera to capture images of Prompto, beaten and restrained. Then again, maybe Prompto would have deleted them by now.

Summoning the last bit of courage he needed, he clicked the button and the last picture taken appeared on the screen. To his surprise, it was nothing horrendous nor gruesome—merely a shot of the two of them in one of the Keep’s dingy beds. They lay atop the beige covers, Noctis fast asleep on his side facing Prompto with an arm protectively around his waist, and Prompto on his back, so close his shoulder was pressed up against Noct’s chest. He held his other arm up above him to take the picture. He wasn’t smiling, but there was still a look of relief on his face as he stared up at the camera; that look spoke volumes. He was safe and sound. Finally.

Noctis wanted to remain on that image forever, realizing that what had come after that moment had been too painful for Prompto to capture, and whatever was before it was potentially even worse.
Still, he clicked back, preparing himself for the worst, but it didn’t come. The previous shot on the camera was a selfie of Prompto, clad in his winter attire with a smile on his face and Aranea in the background. He clicked again to find shots of the two of them, taking down monsters in the snow. Prior to that were a few scenery shots that he had taken on the train ride to Gralea. So that was it. There was nothing from while he was captured, which gave Noct no clues as to whether or not Ardyn had anything to do with Prompto’s currently cold demeanor.

But what did it matter? What reason did he really have not to believe that Prompto had fallen out of love with him? It was completely possible that he had. Sure, after ten years apart and being on their own, it was easy to fall back into old habits, and just enjoy the familiarity and safety of their relationship, of being close to one another. But maybe for Prompto, those feelings of desire weren’t based on love—merely nostalgia. And since that was far from the case for Noct, he knew he had to let Prompto go. Prompto had made his choice, had walked away. Now Noctis had to work on figuring out who he was without him, just as Prompto had done all those years ago.

“Parry.” Gladio instructed, getting more irritated by the minute at how severely Noctis was failing to listen. He continued to whack at Gladio’s giant blade, both colliding repeatedly, but with Noctis never taking the advantage to use Gladio’s weight against him and deflect the attack.

“Come on! You gonna fight me or not? I said parry!” Gladio hollered, before taking his own advice and shoving the younger man backwards, making him lose his balance. Noctis landed on his rear with an exaggerated groan, glaring up at his Shield before scrambling to his feet, rubbing his backside.

“The hell is wrong with you?” Gladio grumbled, watching as the pouting king meandered over to the weapons room.

“Don’t want to talk about it,” came Noct’s simple reply.

He set his training blade back on the shelf, wanting to blame its shape and size—which were far less familiar than the blades he was used to—but he’d used them enough growing up to know that they were perfectly balanced for any beginner. His inability to fight properly was purely due to his current mood, and a mind full of thoughts that he would prefer to forget if he could.

“You hear there was another threat against you? Someone graffitied something nasty about you on a wall in Lestallum,” Gladio went on. Noctis didn’t even blink at the news. He’d overheard Iris and Ignis discussing something of the sort in the hallway earlier that morning, but being as out of sorts as he was lately, he figured Ignis was simply trying to spare him the bad news.

“Don’t want to talk about it,” Noct repeated, turning to see Gladio leaning against the training room door, arms folded.

“Prompto missed his guard duties a few times this week. He didn’t report to his post. You know anything about that?”

Noctis flinched at the mention of his friend, but his face was quickly taken over with a frown.

“Why would I?” he asked, darkly.

“Because you’re grumpy as hell, and he’s M.I.A. Makes me wonder if the two are related.”

“Hmph. You can expect very few things involving me and Prompto to be related anymore. He says... Nevermind,” Noctis sighed, pushing past Gladio with a dismissive wave of his hand. Two giant steps ahead of him—as Gladio was always trained to be—he jutted out a muscular, tattooed
arm, stopping Noct in his tracks.

“He says what? Spill.”

“I don’t want to talk about this with you,” Noctis scowled, reaching for Gladio’s arm, but his attempt to push it out of the way was futile. Gladio merely pushed back.

“Then who are you gonna talk to? You just gonna bottle things up as usual? Come on, Noct. I thought you grew up,” Gladio grumbled, targeting one of Noct’s weak spots instantly, and watching as his frown twitched and fell away.

Noct’s mind flashed back to that night in Altissia, when he’d told Prompto about his fears of not having grown up enough during his time in the crystal; as hard as it was to believe, even after four days of mulling over their last conversation, he supposed those days of confiding in him were over.

His head drooped, his eyes focusing on the ground rather than his Shield. He maintained a loose grip on Gladio’s arm, for moral support if nothing else. He pulled his lips inside his mouth, wetting them enough to speak—or at least stalling long enough to think of how he was going to address the matter.

“Prompto says the feelings aren’t there anymore. For him, at least,” Noctis divulged, despite the painful lump in his throat.

Gladio was relieved Noctis wasn’t looking up to meet his eyes because he didn’t think he could hide the look of pure shock on his face. The night he had gone out for drinks with Prompto and the guys, Prompto had seemed devastated by the possibility that he was ruining his relationship with Noct. Had that really changed? He doubted it. Knowing Prompto, he had pulled away after telling Noctis of his condition. Or maybe Noct had been an ass about it, had said something insensitive. Gladio didn’t think Noctis would have been anything but supportive, but who was he to say for sure? They’d all had their own ways of dealing with the difficult news.

“I have to say, I really don’t think that’s true, Noct. You know he’s been through hell. You’ve been supportive through this whole thing, right?” Gladio asked.

Noctis paused, recalling all the moments he’d been there for Prompto when he’d needed him—from healing his injuries to kissing away his tears, and whispering to him that everything would be alright. What more could he do, without opening himself up for a world of hurt and rejection?

“I’ve certainly been trying,” Noct sighed, and he let his hand fall from Gladio’s arm.

With a stretch above his head, he headed for the bench to gather up his sweatshirt and phone. Gladio followed, watching as Noct clicked the button on his device to see if there were any missed messages, and shut it off with a look of longing when there were none. He pulled his hoodie on, and was about to head for the exit when Gladio spoke up.

“He loves you, Noct,” he stated, voice and eyes serious, as if he were trying to convey something much more dire. Noctis would bet Gladio would have done well as a politician if it weren’t for that temper of his, for those eyes and that tone could have convinced even the most stubborn men of anything.

“How do you know?” Noct dared to ask, tilting his head to the side in curiosity, but there was a wariness about him too; he wasn’t positive he wanted to know. Even if he did love him, it wouldn’t change Prompto’s resolve, would it?

“You know all those pictures he took of you on our journey? He put them all into a slideshow,
added music and effects and everything, and played it at the graveyard on your birthday last year. The tenth year after you were gone. He’d told me and Iggy he’d done something extra special this time in your honour. It wasn’t until we’d gotten there that we found out what it was. It was beautiful, Noct. He put so much care and detail into it,” Gladio said, his expression almost pained now, as if the memories of it were still strong enough to induce emotion.

Noctis pressed his lips hard together as he pondered what that slideshow might have been like. He wondered which memories Prompto had chosen as his favourites, which tune he had chosen to represent them and their time together.

“Does he... still have it?” he carefully queried, not wanting to sound as desperate to see the thing as he felt.

“I have a copy. I asked him to send it to me. I can text it to you later. My phone’s upstairs,” Gladio said, meeting Noctis’ hesitant eyes.

“Do you think he’d mind me seeing it?”

“Well,” Gladio hummed, folding his arms again and shifting his weight to rest mainly on one leg. “I don’t think he imagined you ever would in person, but I think part of him believed that if you had somehow passed away in the crystal, you would be watching over him as he played it for you. So, I guess in a sense, he did want you to see it. He did make it for you.”

Noctis nodded numbly. It was sickening to imagine what grief Prompto must have endured after he’d been taken by the crystal. He hated to think what he himself would have done if their positions had been reversed. If Prompto had disappeared and he’d been unable to save him, he was pretty sure he’d still be suffering. He would still feel guilty, powerless, unworthy. He wondered if Prompto felt the same.

“Yeah. Text it to me when you can.” Noctis’ phone dinged a second later, and he whipped it out of his pocket, hoping to see a certain blond glaive’s name lighting up the screen, but instead, it was his advisor’s.

“Gotta go. Ignis says he’s got something important to tell me,” Noct said, trying not to huff. The last thing he wanted to do was discuss Citadel matters. His heart just wasn’t in it, and neither was his mind.

“Probably about the graffiti?”

“Probably. Thought he was going to spare me the details, but I guess not.”

“Well, good luck,” Gladio grunted, crossing the room to collect his sword and train some more, while Noct pushed open the heavy double-doors and exited the training room.

Ignis was waiting for him when he reached the basement of the Citadel. As he stepped off the elevator, the dim lighting and dank smell reminded him of his fear for this place as a child. It was so much colder than the levels above, and although it was designed similarly to the rest of the building, it hadn’t been cleaned and cared for the same way. There were cracks in the walls from the weight of the Citadel’s tall structure, and the tile floor was barely recognizable as the same flooring above, thanks to its good layer of dust and dirt.

“What’s up?” Noctis asked, passing the large wooden shelves—which ran from floor to ceiling on either side of the hallway. They were at least ten feet wide, and held several types of preservatives and alcoholic beverages. At the end of the shelves, on the left wall, was a giant metal door with a
turning crank, similar to those Noctis and his friends had encountered deep within Eos’ dungeons. This was the vault. This was where all his father’s money, treasures, and riches lay.

“Oh! Talcott!” Noctis beamed, noticing the young man who had been standing behind Ignis as he’d approached.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Your Majesty,” Talcott smiled, moving to bow, but Noctis pulled him into a hug before he could. Talcott grinned proudly as the king stepped away.

“How have you been? How has life in Lestallum been treating you?”

“Very well, thank you, Your Majesty. We have successfully restored power to all of Eos. Holly is still working out the last few bugs and glitches in the system, but things are very much under control.”

“Glad to hear it. Just remember, you’re always welcome here at the Citadel, if you ever wish to return. After everything you’ve done for us, I promise, I would find you a position you and your grandfather would be proud of,” Noctis smiled, softly.

“That means a lot, Your Majesty. Thank you,” Talcott bowed, hand over his heart.

“Now, to business,” Ignis interjected.

“Yeah,” Noctis sighed, placing his hands on his hips and staring up at the giant safe.

“You bringing me down here is making me worry. What’s going on?”

“We’re having an issue accessing the late King Regis’ funds,” Ignis announced.

“What do you mean?” Noctis asked, throat suddenly dry.

“After your request for me to retrieve money from your father’s vault for the relief efforts in Galahd and Altissia, the Marshall and I were unable to crack the code on this lock,” Ignis said, waving a hand toward the enormous circular lock, its numbers looking suddenly daunting as they ran around its circumference.

“That’s easy. The code was always his birthday. 09-28-06,” Noctis announced.

“We’ve tried it.”

“Maybe he changed it. Try… my birthday? 08-30-35,” Noctis said, as if Ignis didn’t already know the date.

“We’ve tried that as well, along with several other possible combinations,” Ignis lamented, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose, and holding them there even as he lowered his head.

“Which is why I’m here, Your Majesty. Sir Ignis asked me to bring along my grandfather’s journal in hopes that there might be some other ideas we could try,” Talcott explained.

“Well, I guess any clues could help, huh? Thanks, Talcott. So, what does this mean, if we can’t access my dad’s funds? Is there anything I can do for those places right now?” Noctis asked. Ignis sensed Noct was looking at him again, and he raised his head to address him, his brows twitching in distaste as he prepared to deliver the news.

“How do I put this? Your own funds have… dried up. With the repairs to the city and the donations to other parts of Eos, I’m afraid there’s nothing to spare, unless you want your glaives and staff
going hungry,” Ignis said, the words nearly knocking the air out of Noctis’ lungs. He stood stunned for a long moment, just staring at Ignis as if he might eventually say he was kidding. The joke never came.

“Are you serious? Things are that tight?!” Noct asked, trying not to panic, but it was difficult.

“I’m afraid we didn’t monitor your financial situation carefully enough, especially when we were banking on being able to use some of your father’s wealth to get Lucis through this tough time,” his advisor went on, sounding apologetic, but Noctis was trying hard not to lose his cool. How could he and the council be so careless? ‘Sorry’ didn’t fix this.

“So, what do I do now? Did any provisions make it to Galahd?"

“Yes, the first bundle of provisions, which included food and water, was delivered not long after you were in Galahd with Prompto. The lumber you requested to repair some of the structures there, however, requires additional funds, which we had hoped could come from your father’s treasury, but... Well, that’s where we stand now,” Ignis sighed, waving blindly towards the locked door.

Noctis eyed it with disdain and irritation.

Libertus had told him he couldn’t win the people over with a few gifts, and yet that was all he was able to do. If he didn’t send enough, would the people lose even more faith in him? His stomach turned as he thought about the way he and Prompto had taken off after the attack. The townspeople probably weren’t pleased either about the way their ‘glaive help’ had suddenly disappeared without warning. His relief efforts were lacking—even he couldn’t deny that, despite how much he wished things were different—and he hated that his actions, or lack thereof, would reflect poorly on him. But like Prompto had assured him, he hadn’t had a choice; it was more important that they got out of there safe and alive.

“So, how do we keep afloat until we crack the code?” Noct grumbled, arms folded.

“I would prefer to discuss this properly with the council at a later time, but…”

“No. I don’t want rumours going around that I can’t even support my own staff. We’re discussing this now,” Noctis declared, and Ignis gave a sigh, even his perpetually stiff posture sagging slightly.

“The quickest and most logical way to start earning is to raise the taxes on the land,” Ignis announced.

“You think the people can afford that right now?! The world is recovering from a crisis! If I raise the taxes, it’s only going to provoke more hate for the crown, and more people saying that I can’t do my job!” Noctis practically hollered, his voice hoarse and breaking. He saw Talcott lower his head and take a step back, and hated that this outburst had to happen in front of him.

“I understand, Noct, but we’ve got limited options.”

“What about hunts?” Noct asked, quickly. “The daemons may be gone, but what about the violent or rabid wildlife? Could we send glaives to do hunts, and bring back the rewards?”

“Hunts were never a huge source of gil, Noct,” Ignis reminded him, coarsely. “And I don’t know that this will do much for your image. If your glaives go and claim the rewards for hunts, won’t it look like you are taking money directly from the towns that advertised them?”

“It’s not like average citizens can take on the hunts themselves,” Noctis argued.
“With all due respect, Your Majesty, I must agree with Ignis. I’m afraid the citizens of Eos will see you in a negative light if you do this. It will look like you’re taking money directly from these poorer cities for your own benefit, and as far as anyone else knows, your wealth is plentiful,” Talcott spoke up, though he still appeared wary to do so. Noctis kept his expression firm and unchanging.

“Not if the glaives remain undercover. If they dress like ordinary citizens, then maybe…”

“Don’t forget, a lot of people might recognize your glaives, as many people came together during those dark days,” Ignis said.

“But it’s the best plan we’ve got for now. Besides, it’ll only be temporary,” Noctis announced, before giving a knock on the metal door that echoed at a deafening volume.

“Hey, Talcott. Keep trying to crack this code, will you?” he said, with a nod at the young man before heading back to the elevator.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Talcott whispered.

Prompto woke with a start at the sound of his door creaking open. He bolted up, sitting in his bed and staring across the room at his intruder. Gladio stood there looking unimpressed, and he rolled his eyes as he turned to the girl behind him.

“No worries. He is just ignoring everybody,” he huffed.

Prompto rubbed his eyes to get a clearer picture of Fae in the background, looking rather tired and concerned, though she kept her gaze on the ground, rather than anywhere near Prompto. She hadn’t wanted to invade his privacy, but after knocking several times over the past four days and never getting an answer, she was beginning to assume the worst.

“It’s not nice to ignore your friends,” Gladio scolded, and Prompto let out a heavy sigh, not caring if Gladio heard it. He pushed the covers off of himself, and swung his legs over the side of the bed, not fully trusting that they would carry him where he wanted to go. Still, he pushed his weight onto them, and wandered around to the front of the bed, taking a seat on it.

He was still half dressed from the night before—his leather glaive pants, which surely weren’t meant to be sleepwear, and a white tank. His hair was a mess, his face bearing a good few days’ scruff. The two in the doorway hadn’t even thought it possible for Prompto to grow that much facial hair.

“You’re welcome to come in. Not you, Gladio. Pretty sure you just broke the lock on the door,” Prompto grimaced, hands resting on his knees as he remained perched on the end of the bed.

“Can’t anyway. Iggy called and said he had a situation with Noct. Gotta go calm him down before he ends up whooping his royal ass, but—” Gladio said, looking behind him to find Fae again. “She might want to visit, make sure you’re really alright.”

Fae’s eyes flickered up to nervously meet Prompto’s, and he gave her a nod of approval. Gladio walked off as she entered the room, her feet guiding her warily to the chair at Prompto’s desk. His room smelled musky, like he’d been spending a lot of time in here and hygiene hadn’t been his top priority.

Fae’s gaze wandered to the photo atop the desk—of Noctis, Gladio, Ignis, and Prompto—which lay next to a black picture frame without any glass in it. Stuck to the frame was a note that she
assumed was written in Noctis’ handwriting. As far as she knew, he would be the only one in here when Prompto wasn’t.

‘I’m sorry about the frame. I’ll replace it.’

“What’s up?” Prompto asked, when her gaze had lingered on the frame a little too long. He didn’t want to start answering questions about it; the last thing he wanted to talk about was how he’d disappointed Noct to the point of making him destroy his things. He knew the frame had been broken out of anger, and perhaps rightly so.

Fae’s attention flew back to Prompto and she swallowed hard.

“Okay, you can’t scare me like that. I thought you were dead in here,” she said, failing to hide the panic in her voice.

“Why would you think that?” Prompto chuckled, but Fae gave him a disbelieving look. She couldn’t believe he’d just gone there.

“You know why. The whole MT thing?” she went on, and Prompto raised a finger to his lips, shushing her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, as Prompto hurried to the door and closed it. “Don’t all your friends know now?”

Prompto resumed his position on the edge of the bed, his fingers weaving tightly together, and pulling at each other awkwardly.

“I... I didn’t tell Noct.”

“What? But you told Ignis and Gladio—“

“I know. And I don’t know why, but I just... couldn’t do it. And then Iggy said these things that made me think... it’s probably for the best if he doesn’t know.”

“How many times do we have to go over this?” Fae shook her head in disbelief, looking utterly displeased with this figure she’d looked up to so much. He looked defeated now, his shoulders curled in on himself, his tired, scruffy face making him look about ten years older than he was.

“No more, I promise. There’s a ball that’s happening in Accordo, where they’re looking to match Noct up with some potential mates. I told him he should go.”

“I don’t know why,” Fae said, her worried eyes boring into Prompto’s. He merely smiled, and reached out to ruffle her hair.

“And I don’t know why I’m bogging a kid down with such heavy stuff like this. I shouldn’t be,” he said, apologetically, but the girl pushed his hand away immediately.

“I’m not a kid,” she frowned. “And I’m only doing this because...” She trailed off, wanting to say she cared about him, and wanted the best for him, but her poor heart wouldn’t let herself become that vulnerable. She decided to share the best wisdom she had, the memories that had caused her deepest regrets.

“You never know when you’re going to have your last moment with someone. If I’d known how little time I would get with my sister... I never would have fought with her so much,” she admitted, voice weakening, gaze wandering toward the window. The window’s light illuminated her sad
features, but Prompto knew how unlikely it was that she would let her guard down enough to cry.

“You’re the closest thing I’ve had to a guardian since my parents died. I always had to fend for myself, and I was okay with that until you showed me that I didn’t have to shut myself off from everyone else. I know you’re suffering, and I know that I’m going to lose you too one day, but that just makes me want to do everything I can to make sure you don’t have regrets when that day comes,” she explained, and when she looked back at Prompto, she was startled by the soft look of surprise in his eyes. They stared at her in admiration, in wonder, and she pushed herself to continue.

“King Noctis makes you happy. Don’t shut yourself off from him,” she finished, giving him a small smile that she suspected he needed. Prompto smiled warmly at her and closed his eyes, soaking up her kind words.

“Thanks, Fae. That means a lot.”

Another knock at the door broke the serenity of the moment, and Prompto ran a hand shamefully over his scraggly beard as he headed over to let their next guest in, hoping it wasn’t someone who was going to judge him for his current appearance.

“Talcott! No way! Long time, no see, buddy!” Prompto grinned, pulling the kid into a one-armed embrace that Talcott awkwardly laughed at while trying to somehow reciprocate it. He smiled softly as Prompto let him go and took a step back. Fae turned in her seat to see the young man in the dark hunter’s vest and Hammerhead ballcap.

“Hello, your Highness. Glad to see you again.”

“Uh… Highness? Me?” Prompto asked, with a curious tilt of his head.

“O-oh, I—I thought you and his Majesty were… Nevermind. My apologies,” Talcott stammered, reddening slightly. Prompto gave him an encouraging smile. It was likely that a lot of people would assume he and Noctis were a couple now, given their history.

“No apology necessary,” Prompto assured him, waving his hands. “So, what’s going on?”

“His Majesty has ordered a meeting for all glaives to attend. Something to do with a mission for hunts,” Talcott said, never letting on that he knew more details than he was dishing out.

“Hunts? Okay,” Prompto said, with a quizzical brow, not quite understanding. He looked back at Fae, giving her a coaxing nod to come and join them at the door, as glaive business included her as well. She came to stand beside Prompto, watching Talcott carefully as he spoke again.

“You are to meet with the Marshall and Sir Gladio in the training room in twenty minutes. They will brief you on the situation,” Talcott explained.

“Great. Thanks, Talcott,” Prompto said, with a thumbs-up.

“You’re welcome, Sir Prompto.”

“Seriously, just Prompto is fine,” he grinned.

Talcott nodded to dismiss himself, but wasn’t about to address Prompto any less formally. He was one of the highest ranking Kingsglaive, and even if not currently the apple of the king’s eye, he still deserved the utmost respect.

As he headed back down the hall, Prompto strolled past Fae to retrieve his Kingsglaive jacket from
his closet. She smirked as he reappeared at the door, and she held an arm out, barring the way.

“Do yourself a favour. Shower and shave before you go.”

“Right,” Prompto grinned, waving a finger at her in agreement as he waltzed toward the bathroom.

The meeting was confusing, and left Prompto wondering why Noctis would order such a large number of glaives to complete hunts. It seemed like there were just enough glaives to cover all posts and shifts, and Prompto couldn’t help but feel security around the Citadel should have been Noct's first priority after the attacks they’d endured during their short voyage away. It was these concerns that forced him to track down Ignis, despite how much his words from the other night still stung his heart.

He eventually found him in a hallway with Cor—probably being filled in on the events of the meeting. Prompto approached with caution, not wanting to intrude, but Cor waved him forward.

“Hey, I just thought I should bring you the photos I took of that guy who shot at Noct and I in Galadh,” he announced, phone clutched tightly in his hands. He felt a little guilty for not bringing them sooner, but he hadn’t exactly been in a good state of mind.

“Oh, yes. Thank you, Prompto. Perhaps you and Monica could take a look at them, Marshall?” Ignis asked.

“Of course. If you forward them to me, Prompto, I can take a look right away. Perhaps you would join us, and give us your insight?”

“Yes, sir,” Prompto nodded, with a small smile.

“Perfect. I will find Monica and meet you in the Conference Room.”

“Sounds good.”

Prompto’s smile faded as he was left alone with Ignis. The tension in the air between them left a sour taste in his mouth. When Ignis said nothing, Prompto decided there was no pressure on him to say anything either, so he turned to leave, but was stopped by a murmur of his name.

“You don’t need to worry about Noct and I anymore,” Prompto announced, keeping his back to the advisor.

“Prompto, what you and I talked about—”

“I broke things off.” The words hung in the air, the silence seeming so foreign in the normally loud and echoing hallway. “It’s like you said, right? It’s better for his sake.”

Never even bothering to look back, Prompto strode off down the hall.

He made it to the Conference Room in record time, the adrenaline from his pain and frustration making his legs move faster than he would have thought possible. He was glad he raced Cor and Monica, as it gave him time to breathe and decompress before they entered. He messaged the photos to Cor, and when he and Monica arrived, they brought large prints of the photos to properly analyze them. They all sat close together, and got to work.

Each of them took their time looking over the photos, scanning them for important details. As Prompto analyzed one of the photos, he noticed a black, cloth bandana wrapped around the
shooter’s wrist. Prompto remembered seeing similar souvenirs in Lucian gift shops way back before Insomnia’s fall, each decorated with the symbol of the Lucian royal family.

Thinking quickly, he grabbed his phone out of his pocket and brought up the same photo.

He moved his fingers across the screen, zooming in on the bandana until he could see small red lines of paint smeared across the skull’s empty eyes and mouth.

“H-hey, look at this,” he said, trying not to shiver at the sight. Cor and Monica leaned in to peer over his phone, taking note of the part of the image that Prompto had enlarged. “Noct and I saw this same symbol graffitied near a bridge in Altissia. Do you think... these attacks could be related?”

“Hmm, if they are indeed the same symbol, then perhaps they are. What are your thoughts, Marshall?” Monica asked, looking up from Prompto’s phone, and peering past him to look at Cor.

“The resistance could be using this as a universal symbol to identify themselves. It’s possible that the majority of resistance members could belong to one large group, rather than smaller ones from different regions,” Cor elaborated.

“Butchering the royal family’s symbol definitely makes it seem like they’re targeting the Lucian line, though, right?” Prompto asked, swallowing hard as he felt himself fearing yet again for his king’s safety.

“It seems that way. Despite the king’s success in bringing back the light, he has yet to regain the trust he lost both before and during his years in the crystal,” Cor went on.

“Prompto, I will pass these photos along to Miss Amicitia, and see if she can find any other information on this symbol,” Monica assured Prompto, having noticed the look of worry on his face.

“Y-yeah. Hopefully Iris will find something,” he agreed, blinking as he brought his thoughts back to the current moment. He pushed forth a smile, and got to his feet as Cor and Monica did. Cor put a gentle hand on Prompto’s shoulder, making the younger man look up at him curiously.

“We will find out who is behind these acts, Prompto. We will all see to it that the king does not come to harm,” he vowed.

Prompto nodded, somehow maintaining his shaky smile. It was reassuring to know that there would always be people to care for Noct, even long after he was gone. And right now, he could still play his part in protecting him, too. That was incentive enough to keep on keepin’ on.

Noctis was on his way back from his supper in the dining hall when he spotted Prompto waiting for the elevator in the lobby. He wasn’t sure whether or not he should approach him after their previous encounter, but once Prompto looked up and caught his eye, too, he figured avoiding him would only make the tension worse. Timidly, Noctis proceeded down the hall and stood beside him, waiting patiently for the elevator to arrive.

“I’m really sorry about the picture frame. Did you get my note?” Noctis asked, though both of them continued to stare up at the number display on top of the elevator, never daring to make eye contact.

“I got it. Thanks. It was a cheap frame anyway,” Prompto assured him, earning a glance from Noctis.
“H-hey, you lost the goatee,” Noct stuttered out, not sure himself whether he was more surprised or disappointed.

Prompto put a hand to his chin, feeling the bare skin there. With all the scruff he’d had to get rid of in the process of shaving, it had been useless to try and salvage it. Might as well start from scratch.

“Oh, y-yeah. I was starting to look pretty rough around the edges,” he chuckled, softly, breathing a sigh of relief when their floor number finally lit up and the doors opened.

“Well, I was really starting to like the scruff, but you look good. Like the old you.”

Both stepped inside, still maintaining a good foot of distance between them once Noctis generously pressed the buttons for both his and Prompto’s floors.

Noctis stood with his arms in front of him, one hand clasped around his opposite wrist in what looked like a regal stance; he was just glad Prompto couldn’t see how white and tense his knuckles were under his long cuffs. Prompto leaned awkwardly against the wall behind him, hands continuously readjusting themselves against his waist, like he wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself.

“So, I’m leaving tomorrow to take on some of those hunts you wanted done,” Prompto announced, unintentionally pulling Noctis’ gaze straight to him like a fish on a line.

“You are? I mean, that request wasn’t meant for you. I should have specified, but it wasn’t for the higher-level glaives like you, Gladio, and Ignis,” Noctis explained, his brows slanted in what was quite possibly disappointment.

Prompto tried not to think about the twinge he felt in his heart at the thought that Noctis was already missing him, and he hadn’t even left yet. But that was why it was good not to get attached, right? If he got in too deep with Noctis, whenever tragedy decided to strike, Noctis would miss him even more, wouldn’t he? Prompto shuddered at the thought of Noctis longing for him, crying for him, mourning for him.

“Oh, really? Well, it’s okay. I want to help you—er, Lucis out as much as I can,” he said, just as the elevator dinged at his floor.

He gave Noctis a tiny, somewhat guilty smile and a shrug as he ducked out of the opening doors, but to his surprise, he felt the man at his side, following him. Even Noctis couldn’t say why exactly he had chosen to follow; it was just an instinct. Wherever one of them went, the other followed. It had been that way since high school ‘til the day they were separated by Ardyn.

They walked in silence until they reached Prompto’s room, both waiting for the other to say something, and realizing that neither one of them knew which words would fix this gap between them. As Prompto reached for the key to his room and unlocked the door handle, he wondered if Noctis was hoping he would change his mind about what he’d said. Was he hoping to be invited inside? Was he hoping they were going to make up?

“Noct, those things I said… I’m sorry that I hurt you,” Prompto said, allowing his eyes to flicker to the side and meet his friend’s sad ones. They bore the same pain that Prompto’s did.

“I’m just sorry that things changed, but if this is what you want, then I’m going to learn to be okay with it,” Noctis vowed, but Prompto remained stuck on those words. He had to learn to be okay with it, which meant he absolutely wasn’t okay with it right now, and that made Prompto ache inside.
“Thank you,” Prompto nodded, giving Noct a small, but sincere smile, despite the crease that was still between his brows. He looked so much older in that moment, his smile full of so many mixed emotions that only an adult could convey. The smiles of the young Prompto he’d once known would never have contained that pain, that silent understanding, that look of apology and gratitude instead of pure happiness.

Prompto pushed the door open, and gave a nod to his friend, silently thanking him for accompanying him to his room. It was meant to be goodbye, but Noctis reached a hand out for his shoulder, letting it rest there cautiously, like he was half-scared the gesture might be shrugged off. To his satisfaction, Prompto remained still, his head turning back to look at him in quiet curiosity.

“For what it’s worth, no one would ever compare to you, Prom. That’s why, if I have any say in the matter, I’m not going to Accordo, or anywhere else to become someone’s suitor,” Noctis said, softly, and he watched Prompto’s brows twitch upward with emotion. There was a long pause before Prompto managed to say anything.

“Why?” he eventually choked out.

“I’m not going to settle for just anyone to rule at my side. My father ruled alone. If I can’t have you, I will do the same,” the king went on, giving Prompto a smile that was filled with as much sadness as it was pride and determination.

Prompto searched his friend’s gentle eyes, and tried to figure out where the angry Noctis from the other day had gone. In his place was only this calm, soft-spoken Noctis, this strong king with an iron resolve, and he seemed content—content with where and who he was, confident in his decision.

“That’s… setting you up for an awfully lonely life, don’t you think?” Prompto asked weakly, allowing himself to turn back toward Noctis. Although part of him still wanted to run from this conversation, the other part of him really wanted to know Noctis’ answer to this question, because it was a vital part of why he had been keeping himself from Noct in the first place.

“Life is short. This whole thing with the crystal made me realize that… you never know when you’re going to be whisked away. I would rather live with my dearest friends close by me than to rule alongside someone that I may never truly love. Not in the way I loved you, at least,” Noctis said, and Prompto felt another pang of guilt in his heart.

“I just want to enjoy my time here, my reign, and if this is the best way to do that, so be it. I just want us both to be happy.”

Prompto remained stunned for a long while, his expression remaining sad and pensive, unable to tear his eyes away from his king. He was still not used to how much wisdom Noct had gained in the crystal. He was so much more willing to speak his mind, so much more confident to give Prompto these long-winded speeches, and maybe it was because on the inside, he felt like he needed to. Maybe he was actually scared—so scared of losing Prompto that he used everything and every word at his disposal to try and keep him there. That’s what he’d been doing on their trip, and that’s what he was doing now, except for one thing. He wasn’t trying to win Prompto back anymore; he was letting him go.

That realization sparked a sickening sensation in Prompto’s stomach, and he wasn’t quite sure how to feel about it all. Making Noctis move on from him was supposed to have been a victory, but instead it felt so very much like a loss. If Noct stopped trying to make advances, then this fairytale really was over. There would be no more unexpected kisses or brushing of hands, no more heartfelt confessions or spur-of-the-moment dates. It was all over.
Prompto thought back to Galdin, the way it had felt to be so intimately close to Noctis, holding each other and kissing until the mist-covered sky faded to black. He thought about how safe he’d felt with him, despite all of their time apart, despite not knowing for sure how he would react to the news of his condition. He remembered soft lips on his shoulders, on his neck, on his own lips. He remembered gentle hands that he knew would never harm him.

He thought back to Zegnahtus on their final night together before the crystal had taken Noctis. He could never forget that feeling of hope that had taken over him when he heard the sound of footsteps, and looked up to see his friends. He would certainly never forget that feeling of relief when he realized this wasn’t an illusion—when he saw Noctis’ frantic, worried face, and hands reaching to free him from the device that had trapped him for days. He would never forget the way Noctis held him that night as they slept, his arm draped protectively around his waist, and Prompto feeling like he had to capture this moment with his camera, just to prove that this was real, that he was safe, that Noctis loved him, that he was back where he belonged.

Noctis gently squeezed Prompto’s shoulder, which finally brought Prompto out of his trance. He gave a half-smile, and Prompto couldn’t decide whether joy or sadness was the dominating emotion in his eyes.

“Take care of yourself on those hunts,” he said, not in the loving murmur Prompto was used to, but rather in a tone that was meant for a king and his glaive.

And with that, he was gone, giving Prompto one last glance at the doorway before he strode down the hall. Prompto didn’t follow, didn’t call out, didn’t do anything. He merely continued to stand there, paralyzed by the fear that he had just made a terrible mistake.
Noctis had forgotten how beautiful the city of Insomnia could be, all lit up at night. Dots of purple, yellow, orange, red, and blue burned brightly in the distance, lighting up the silhouettes of buildings and homes that the king himself had helped rebuild with money from his own pocket. He was thankful for the money his father had put aside for him, for the job he’d had as a teenager that helped build his wealth, for the hunts he and his friends had taken on during their journey to earn that little bit of extra cash. It all added up. It all helped.

Noctis brushed the curtain a little further aside with the back of his hand, holding it there and tilting his head to rest against the window. He couldn’t ignore that unsettled feeling in the pit of his stomach that had come during his earlier meeting with Ignis and Talcott, and had never since left. What would he do now that he had run out of his own funds, and couldn’t access his father’s? There were still homes, and buildings, and bridges that needed to be rebuilt. There were still parts of the Citadel itself that were under construction. Would he even be able to finish paying the workers?

He hated the thought of having to raise the taxes on the land. The people of Insomnia had lost everything all those years ago, and all Noctis wanted to do was make their city safe and comfortable for them. How could he make them feel welcome when their homes basically came with giant price tags? The hunts he was about to send his glaives on wouldn’t come near covering what he needed to finish rebuilding Lucis, nor the other parts of Eos that were still recovering from the past ten years of damage. And yet, at this time, what else could he do?

The hunts. The glaives. Prompto. This predicament was making Prompto leave again. His heart wanted to dwell on this painful fact, but he wouldn’t let his mind linger there. He was sick of thinking about the falling out with Prompto, was sick of the aching hole in his chest and those nagging feelings of hurt and disappointment. He had to put it all to rest. Yes, maybe rest was the best thing he could do for himself right now. He couldn’t solve anything when he was overtired and nauseated from the constant worry.

With a sigh, he let his hand fall, and the curtain drifted back into place, covering up the sparkling city. He wandered over to his bed, switched off the lamp on his nightstand, and lifted up the covers. He sat down with one leg bent up campfire-style, and the other stretched out straight, maintaining the position as he lay down against the headboard, hands resting on the back of his head as he stared up at the ceiling. He breathed in deeply and let it out, remembering all the things his father had taught him when he was having trouble keeping his cool. He repeated the process, making himself focus on taking in long, steady breaths.

He was interrupted by a rather frantic knock on his door. Noctis’ eyes widened slightly at the noise. Who would be rapping on his door so loudly at this late hour of the night? There weren’t that many people who had clearance to be on his floor. Of course, it was probably just Ignis.
coming to tell him more bad news about the money or the kingdom. Or Gladio coming to growl at him for doing or saying something stupid earlier that day.

“Who is it?” Noctis groaned, deciding that if it was either one of them, that he would send them away until morning.

“It’s Prompto,” came a weak voice.

Noctis shot up in the bed, sitting there stunned for a moment as he tried to replay what he’d just heard. Was his mind playing tricks on him? He couldn’t risk ignoring this if it wasn’t.

Hurriedly, he got up and crossed the room to open the door. He was startled as he pulled it open, only to be gripped by shaking hands that curled around the backs of his shoulders. Prompto scooted inside the door, and leaned back against it to close it, pulling Noctis helplessly along for the ride. Noctis’ brain struggled to keep up with what was happening as one of Prompto’s hands rose to the back of his neck, and tangled itself in his long hair as Prompto pulled their lips together—hastily, desperately.

Without needing to think, Noctis kissed him back, his hands falling instinctively upon Prompto’s waist, and despite his confusion, he allowed his thumbs to stroke his sides gently. If nothing else, he hoped the small action might slow the urgency of the moment long enough for him to figure out what was going on.

“I lied,” Prompto tearfully whimpered, between kisses. “I never wanted you to go to Accordo and find someone else. I never wanted us to be apart. I love you, Noct. I love you.”

Noctis shushed him gently with a soft voice and a finger brushing delicately against his lips. Despite the closed curtains and lack of lights, the city still managed to illuminate the room with a dim, blue glow, and it was enough to allow Noctis to search Prompto’s features for clues as to what was happening. He analyzed the shimmers of tears on Prompto’s lower lids, the downward twitches that took over the corners of his mouth, the sorrowful look of pain and regret in his entrancing eyes.

Prompto tried to remember how to breathe. Noctis’ response was taking forever, his stoic expression impossible to identify... until he really let himself focus on his eyes. Noctis’ eyes had always spoke volumes even when he struggled with words. He wanted this moment as much as Prompto did—he could see that look of longing, of love—but why was he hesitating? Because of all the stupid things Prompto had said to keep him away? Because he had to earn back his trust?

“Please...” Prompto whispered, brows slanting even more in fear and sorrow. “Tell me I’m not too late.”

To his surprise, Noctis smiled softly, and shook his head. The hand that was at Prompto’s lips travelled back to cup his jaw instead, and Noct ghosted a thumb over his cheek. Prompto released a sob at the mere motion.

“You’re not too late,” he promised, and leaned in to capture Prompto’s lips, earning a whimper that was full of both pleasure and relief, both joy and pain.

Prompto tilted his head back against the door, allowing Noctis to move in closer, lips moving together quickly in a mass of quick, meaningful kisses. Prompto’s hand curled a little tighter around the back of Noct’s neck, while the other found the curve of his back, fingers rubbing tenderly. Noctis dared to push Prompto’s kingsglaive-issued tank up the slightest bit so that his thumbs could graze over skin, rather than fabric.
He moved in a little closer and Prompto released a muffled sound against his lips as more sensitive regions brushed together. Noctis let out a heavy breath in response, and moved against him again with a little more pressure. Prompto panted and tilted his head to part from Noct’s lips.

“The bed,” he whispered, eyes fluttering open to meet Noctis’. “C-can we?”

Noctis gave him a nod, and lips met again, hands keeping their bodies in place as they traversed the room. Noctis sat down near the head of the bed, and Prompto followed him. Lips continued to meet as they undressed themselves and each other in a frenzy.

Once all of their clothing had reached the floor, Prompto shimmied forward on his knees, his legs on either side of Noctis’ thighs. He tangled both hands into the back of Noctis’ hair as he lowered himself down to brush their groins together again. The noises they released at the contact this time were much louder, much more hoarse and desperate. Noctis’ hands were on Prompto’s lower back now, but he allowed one to travel further down, and fingers circled his entrance teasingly. To his surprise, he felt Prompto lean back against them, his back arching as he tried to coax them inside.

“Prompto, wait. It will hurt like that,” Noctis murmured, pulling back from their kisses with worried eyes.

“I don’t care.”

“Just wait, okay? We’ve got time.”

Noctis removed his hands and reached for his nightstand, retrieving the bottle of lubricant and coating his fingers with the substance. Once he was ready, he quickly set it aside and resumed his previous position, holding Prompto steady with a hand on his back as fingers began to push inside him. Prompto released a noise that was somewhere between a whimper and a sound of relief.

Noctis made sure Prompto looked comfortable before he closed his eyes again and resumed their kisses. Prompto’s breaths came out heavy as Noctis moved his fingers inside him, adding another one whenever he felt he was ready.

“Y-you now, okay?” Prompto asked, weakly, between kisses.

“Okay,” Noctis whispered, moving his hand from Prompto’s back to his face, and grazing a thumb tenderly over his cheek. He carefully removed his other hand next, earning a soft moan from Prompto as his fingers retreated.

Prompto continued to straddle Noctis as he coated himself with the lubricant, his hands threading gently through the back of Noctis’ hair as the man did his work. Finally, they were ready, and Noctis pulled Prompto in against him, manoeuvring them both towards the head of the bed, and kissing Prompto down to the mattress below him. He reached back, tugging the covers over them as Prompto raised his legs, and ever so gently, he pushed himself inside.

Both of them released soft sounds as they eased into the connection, both staring into each other’s eyes to soothe them, and confirm that everything felt the way it should. After a minute of letting themselves get used to the sensation, Noctis pulled back slightly before pushing back in. Prompto let out a shaky breath, and a nod of approval before reaching for the back of Noctis’ neck again, and pulling him in to kiss him. Noctis eased a hand under Prompto’s back, and moved again, beginning a gentle rhythm.

It wasn’t long before Prompto ended the kisses, and instead settled his head in between Noct’s neck and shoulder as Noct continued to move. His nose brushed against Noct’s collar, his arms
weaving tightly around his neck, fists pressing into the backs of the king’s shoulders, clutching him like he was about to lose him. Noctis’ heart swelled at the familiarity of it.

He had always found it so adorable the way he did that, the way Prompto had always clung to him like a barnacle, never letting go until long after the height of the moment was over. He’d always recognized how vulnerable Prompto was in that state. He was letting his guard down completely, and trusted Noct enough to know he wouldn’t be rejected. And as the only soul who had ever loved and been loved by Prompto this way, Noctis felt blessed—blessed beyond belief.

Before long, Noctis could feel the heat in his stomach, and knew that his limit wasn’t far off. Prompto whimpered blissfully as Noctis reached for his length, stroking and pumping him along with his thrusts. The end came all too quickly for both of them, filling the room with a last bout of mews and moans, and they remained there in that position, Prompto clinging to him like he was the last man on earth as they slowly caught their breath. Finally, Noctis pulled out, and Prompto let his head fall back onto the pillow.

Noctis leaned in to press a few last kisses to Prompto’s swollen, wet lips, meeting them slowly and tenderly now; they were his final attempt to make sure Prompto knew how extraordinarily much he was loved. When he retreated for a breath, he caught sight of a stiflingly sad look on Prompto’s face. His chin trembled like tears weren’t far off, and Noctis wished with all his heart that those were tears of joy, but his expression seemed to indicate otherwise.

With worry in his eyes, and the utmost tenderness, he reached for the side of Prompto’s face, his thumb brushing tenderly over the freckles that had faded with time. Carefully, he searched for those eyes to guide him. He needed to know what Prompto was thinking, needed to know why there were tears clouding those beautiful shades of blue and violet.

“What’s wrong, my love?” Noctis whispered.

The words were quite foreign to Prompto, but he was touched by the man’s confidence to call him by such a name, and his ability to be so gentle with him, even after everything Prompto had put him through. Hearing that Noctis loved him in that moment was enough—enough for Prompto to push aside that nagging reminder of the story he owed Noctis, enough for him to believe they could make it through whatever was to come… even after the truth came out, even after Noctis knew their time together was short.

Maybe he was a liar, maybe he was keeping Noct in the dark, but maybe everything would turn out okay because Noctis loved him. He believed in Noct. He believed in them.

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong, Noct,” Prompto assured him, finding his smile; it was small, but it was there, burning bright like a flicker of the sun that had always been enough to put Noctis at ease. Prompto lifted his head to meet his partner’s lips again, promising him his feelings were sincere.

“Everything’s perfect.”

“Ah, I’ve missed this,” Noctis sighed peacefully. His hand was laced with Prompto’s in the small space between their bodies, atop the soft sheets. There they lay on their backs, side-by-side, so calm, and relaxed, and happy, and Prompto could only think about how he could get used to this again—waking up with Noct’s nose nestled into the back of his hair, bodies pressed flesh together, and Noct’s arms holding him like he would never let go. Prompto never would have left that position, either, if he hadn’t wanted to kiss Noctis good morning so badly, but the best way to fulfill that desire had been to roll over and face him.
“Me, too,” Prompto agreed softly, inching his head over until it could rest against the king’s shoulder. They both stared up at the ceiling, still in disbelief of what had happened the night before, but it was a blissful, wonderful feeling.

“Really didn’t think it’d take so long to get you back into bed with me, but, hey... Better late than never, right?” Noct teased, smirking as he turned to press a kiss to Prompto’s slightly mussed hair.

“Maybe I just wanted to drive you crazy first,” Prompto chuckled, revelling yet again in the feeling of Noct’s nose against his hair, enjoying the closeness of it all.

“Well, you certainly did a good job of that,” Noct said, failing to hide the lingering ounces of irritation that Prompto had caused him over the past several months.

There was a sudden tension in Prompto’s body, and Noctis realized that statement might have hit him a little more harshly than he’d intended. Wanting to immediately right the wrong, he rolled onto his side to face Prompto, and gave the man’s hand a squeeze.

“I did tell you that you were well worth the wait, didn’t I?”

“Mm, not sure if you mentioned that,” Prompto hummed, feigning an innocent smirk, meeting Noct’s eyes now as the king leaned over him, lips hovering just inches above his own. He was certainly fine with Noctis reconfirming his worth, as many times as he so desired.

“Well, you were. You are,” Noct smiled.

Eyes closed as lips finally met, both feeling a sense of relief as they connected. Prompto curled a hand into the back of Noctis’ hair, tugging him closer, and knowing as Noctis’ arms moved in against his waist that he was exactly where he was supposed to be—where he wanted to be. Noctis loved him, and they deserved this chance for happiness, despite how short it might be.

He would tell him the truth eventually. He knew he had to, for he couldn’t let Noctis get any unrealistic notions in his head as far as their future was concerned, but telling him could wait; this wasn’t the time, nor place. This morning was all about enjoying the fact that they were finally together.

Prompto blinked as Noct pulled away from the kiss, but the coy gleam in the man’s eyes made it clear that he was far from done with him. Noctis manoeuvred himself to hover over him, his legs situating themselves on either side of Prompto’s as he eagerly leaned in to kiss his neck and jaw. Prompto tilted his head back to allow him more room, his breath quickening and hitching whenever something felt particularly good.

Noct travelled downward, his fingers grazing Prompto’s sides as he slid the covers down, revealing more skin. His lips followed suit, and quickly discovered unfamiliar territory. He halted abruptly, head pulling back to gaze upon a sight that was extremely disheartening to him.

“You got hurt? When... did this happen?” Noct asked, gently, his dark brows curving upward in worry.

One of his hands wandered from Prompto’s waist up to the three thick, grey lines that ran diagonally across the man’s stomach, the backs of his fingers ghosting over the raised skin so lightly it made Prompto shiver beneath him. Prompto stared up into tender, grey-blue eyes and swallowed hard as Noctis’ hand continued to graze his sizable scars.

“Five? Maybe six years ago? A coeurl kinda got its claws into me.”
“I’ll say,” Noct scoffed, eyeing the marks with disdain. He felt sickened at the thought of any monster digging into Prompto’s slender body like that.

He wondered whether he could have prevented this, if he’d been able to fight at Prompto’s side. They had always been so in-sync, always ready with a dose of healing whenever the other looked ready to drop. The injuries before him now didn’t look like they’d been tended to in a timely manner, as they were thick like the one that adorned Gladio’s chest. It seemed all of Noctis’ Crownsguard managed to get into the worst scrapes when they were apart.

“How come you didn’t notice these before?” Prompto asked, a smirk inching its way onto his face. Noct’s expression twisted into some sort of embarrassed pout.

“I was distracted. By your lips... among other things,” he rolled his eyes, and Prompto gave a hearty chuckle.

“Riiight.”

“I’m sorry,” Noct said, almost startling Prompto with how quickly his tone switched back to a serious one. His worried eyes returned to those scars, his fingertips running over the raised lines, while Prompto intently took in every move he made.

“For what?” Prompto asked, meekly.

“For not being there for you.”

Prompto pushed himself up on his elbow and reached forward with his other hand, his fingers sliding in to cup Noctis’ jaw.

“Hey, you have nothing to apologize for. Especially after the eight months of torture I just put you through,” Prompto murmured. “I wasn’t there for you, either. Call it even?”

He stroked Noctis’ beard with his thumb, smiling softly. Noct reached for his hand and guided it towards his lips, pressing a kiss to his palm, his eyes closing as he did, emphasizing the passion behind his action.

“Maybe. Once I’m done making it up to you here,” the king smirked.

He lowered his head again, and Prompto’s hand slipped around to the back of his neck, gripping gently as Noctis began pressing kisses along the long lines of scar tissue. Prompto whimpered contentedly, his grasp on Noctis tightening a little. Noctis smiled against his skin as he felt Prompto’s stomach muscles contracting under the movements of his soft lips.

Noctis was determined to make every bit of pain these wounds had given Prompto worth it in the end. Prompto was beautiful. These marks were beautiful, and they were proof that Prompto had fought to stay alive, proof that he believed in the future, whether or not Noct would return from the crystal, and Noctis was unspeakably proud of him for that.

“Noct,” Prompto hummed, loving every second of this gift far too much.

“Tell me, did you miss me?” Noctis whispered, his breath tickling the sensitive skin of Prompto’s stomach, making the young man’s breath hitch again.

“Of course, I did,” he exhaled, heavily.

“What sorts of things did you miss? What nasty little fantasies did you come up with while I was
gone?" Noctis seductively purred, making it quite clear that he was willing to fulfill whatever desires Prompto had, but Prompto simply reached for the pillow under his head and tugged it out, pressing it over his own face in embarrassment.

“Dude, you’re making it weird,” came a muffled whine from under the pillow.

“You want me to leave you alone?”

“Yes, please,” he squeaked, sounding so much like his younger self, it warmed Noctis’ heart. Prompto felt Noctis pull away from him and resume his position at his side. Prompto removed the pillow to see Noct giving him a gentle smile now, and he leaned in to give Prompto a quick peck on the cheek.

“Whatever pleases you,” Noct said, continuing to give him that tender smile. He gave his arms a good stretch above his head after that, giving Prompto some time to recover from the heat that had settled between his thighs and pinkened his normally pale cheeks.

He glanced at the clock. While 10:00am was late for most of the early risers in the Citadel, Noctis was a little impressed with himself to be awake before noon of his own accord. The excitement of having Prompto here with him was more than enough incentive to give up his slumber.

“Are you hungry?” the king asked, turning back to his companion. “I could go downstairs and bring us back some breakfast.” Prompto turned his head from where he lay on his back, eyeing Noctis with a curious frown.

“Don’t you have servants for that?”

“Well, yeah, but I don’t know who’s on duty this morning, and I didn’t know if we should raise suspicion by asking them to bring enough food for two,” Noctis explained, and Prompto nodded in agreement. Palace rumours probably wouldn’t help when they were just beginning to mend their relationship.

“Then, yeah, if you don’t mind going yourself.”

“I don’t, except...” Noct trailed off. His grey eyes locked onto Prompto’s, his bottom lip curling inside his mouth as he pondered, and Prompto felt like he was suddenly under scrutiny.

“Except what?” Prompto dared to ask, voice monotonous.

“I’m scared to leave you. I feel like you’ll be gone when I come back.”

Noctis looked honestly worried now, and perhaps rightly so. It had taken so long to get Prompto back where he belonged, so long to get him to stop shying away, it was only natural to fear that their reunion might be short-lived, that Prompto would flee when given the chance and return to his old habits.

“I promise, I won’t leave. I’m so done hiding from you, Noct,” Prompto said, giving him a smile and reaching for his hand. He squeezed it affectionately, trying to further prove his vow, and eventually Noctis’ stoic expression softened back into a smile.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Surprise me,” Prompto grinned, and Noctis agreed by pressing one last kiss to his forehead. He pulled away very slowly, brushing his nose against Prompto’s in a loving little manner, his lips still curved gently upward and his eyelids drifting lazily open.
“I’ll see you in a few minutes,” Noctis murmured, before finally pulling himself away. He dressed himself quickly, finding yesterday’s discarded garments in various places of the room, then he exited the chamber, leaving Prompto still smiling to himself as he lay in the bed.

Prompto let out a peaceful sigh as he looked around the bedroom. It felt strange and a little awkward to be in this room that had once belonged to King Regis, but he hoped the former king would have been happy for them—for his beloved son, at least. He knew as well as anyone that King Regis had always wanted the best life for Noctis, and had wanted to see him happy even when it meant him leaving a life in the Citadel, and living as a ‘normal’ citizen of Insomnia in an apartment of his own.

The few times they had met, the King had been very kind and gracious towards Prompto, willingly accepting him into Noctis’ Crownguard, praising him for his loyalty to Noctis, and in private, thanking him for filling a hole in Noctis’ life that no one else had ever been able to fill. He had been a kind man, so yes, Prompto had to believe he would have been happy about his and Noctis’ reunion.

Prompto rolled out of bed and headed for the ensuite bathroom, finding a large, square shower with spotless glass doors, a giant soaker tub, toilet, and double-sink. He chuckled softly to himself, certainly not used to this sort of luxurious environment. Any old bathroom would have sufficed; he simply wanted to freshen up a bit, but he supposed he could let himself indulge in this just once. He’d paid his dues during his years as a hunter, not finding a decent shower for days, or having to bathe in questionable lakes.

He was about to strip down and take a quick shower when he caught a glimpse of himself in the long, rectangular mirror that hung above the sinks, spanning the entire length of the wall and countertop. Bright red was a stark contrast to Prompto’s pale skin, and he frowned in dismay as he watched it dribble from his nose. Quickly he scrambled toward the toilet paper dispenser, and tore some of the tissue off, clumping it into a ball and pressing it to his nose, trying to stop the bleeding. He hadn’t had a nosebleed in years, not since he was a kid, and while at first he thought little of it, the longer he held the tissues in place, the more his brain tried to come up with reasons of why this was happening. His stomach clenched painfully. What if this was a sign of his body beginning to break down? What if this was the beginning of the end?

Reaching a hand out to guide him, he found the edge of the tub and sat down, continuing to hold the tissue against his nose. There was so much regret that wanted to creep into his heart. He had kept himself from Noctis for almost a year now, by his own stupid choice, and all of that was time they could have spent together. What if the estimations were wrong, and the most they got now was a couple of months? Prompto scoffed, and scolded himself for thinking of such dreary possibilities.

He decided he should spend less time regretting the past, and focus on what was upon him now. Even after all the reasons Ignis had given him not to be with Noctis, hearing Noctis say all those things yesterday about letting go had still broken his heart. Coming to Noctis’ room the night before had been selfish, he supposed, but was he allowed to be selfish when he had limited time left? Was it still selfish to be with Noctis when Noct wanted to be with him, too? When Noct himself had voiced his concerns about how short life was?

In Galdin, Noctis had told him straight up that he didn’t care how much had changed, that he would take him in sickness or in health, and maybe he didn’t know just how important that vow had been in that moment, but Prompto still believed that whatever happened to him, Noct would stay by his side and help him through it. If he hadn’t abandoned him when he’d found out he was
meant to be an MT, then no way would he ever abandon him, especially in such a sorry state.

Maybe Ignis and the council wouldn’t like it, maybe the world wouldn’t like it, but it wasn’t up to them; it was ultimately up to the king. And if the king wanted to be a little selfish, then maybe Prompto was allowed to do the same. Besides, it was only temporary. It could only ever be temporary.

“Prompto?”

Prompto gasped at the call of his name. He hadn’t heard Noctis come back, nor had he any idea how long he’d been lost in thought. Quickly, he got up from the side of the tub and hurried to the mirror, lowering the tissue to check the amount of blood flow, and hoping to make a quick exit without Noctis ever needing to know about this turn of events. To his dismay, a thin red stream trickled from his nose, and he tossed the old tissue in exchange for a new one.

“You okay?” Noctis asked, appearing in the doorway. Prompto turned to give him a halfhearted expression.

“Nosebleed,” he sighed.

Noctis entered the bathroom with an air of both calm and grace, and stood beside him at the mirror, reaching for his back and rubbing gently. His brows slanted in concern. As he gazed at the two of them in the mirror—Prompto in naught but his boxers, and himself in a t-shirt and slacks—his attention wandered from their less than regal attire to Prompto’s face, half-covered in white tissue.

“You feeling okay otherwise?”

“Y-yeah, why?” Prompto asked, meeting Noctis’ worried eyes.

“You’re just a little pale, that’s all,” the king replied, continuing the gentle motions of his hand against Prompto’s back.

Prompto stared hard at his reflection, searching for any little sign that he was sick, and yet dreading finding any. He was lacking a little colour, he supposed, but it was probably due to his not-so-cheery train of thought.

“Probably just a coincidence. You remember, I used to get these dumb nosebleeds all the time in school. They’re annoying, but harmless,” Prompto said, with a meek chuckle, but Noctis couldn’t help but note how it was anything but cheerful.

“Yeah, I remember,” Noct sympathized, recalling the dozens of times Prompto had had to rush out of the classroom to tend to them, even going back as far as elementary school. Noctis stared in the mirror at the sorrowful look on Prompto’s face, and knew he was beating himself up over this unavoidable interruption. Wanting to lighten the mood, Noctis spoke up again.

“Huh? What’s this?” he asked, poking at Prompto’s side. “Have… Have you lost some muscle since we were last together? So much for gettin’ them gains, huh?”

“What?!” Prompto’s face jutted towards the mirror as he analyzed his shirtless figure. He couldn’t really be going downhill this fast, could he? His body couldn’t be failing him now—not now that he and Noctis were finally back together. Noctis waved his hands, stopping him before he went into a full-on fit.

“Geez, you nerd. I was just kidding,” Noctis smirked, stepping behind him and slipping his arms around Prompto’s waist. He pressed a kiss to his cheek, which was puffed out to emphasize his
pout. “If anything, you’re more toned than ever. And I’m finding you very, very attractive right now,” Noctis murmured into Prompto’s ear.

“Oh yeah. This bloody ol’ tissue is making me really attractive,” Prompto rolled his eyes. The mood was ruined yet again by his growling stomach, and Noct laughed softly.

“Alright, first things first. Let’s get some food into your system. That might put some colour back in your cheeks,” he added, pushing forth a small smile and pressing a much more chaste kiss on Prompto’s face this time before pulling himself away.

Prompto nodded, and dared to lower his tissue again. This time, the blood appeared to have stopped, and he tossed the second tissue into the wastebasket beneath the sink. He turned on the taps and washed his face and hands before turning back to Noct, who had not yet left his side.

“Okay, sorry about that. If you still have an appetite after seeing me like that, then we can dig in.”

“You really don’t have to apologize. It’s not like you can help it. Besides, it’s gonna take a lot more than that to turn me off from you,” Noct purred, taking him by the hands, and walking backwards as he led him into the bedroom.

They sat down on the bed together, sitting up against the headboard on their respective sides. Noctis reached for the tray that he had previously set down on his nightstand, and set it down atop their blanket-covered laps.

“I managed to snag us some pancakes. I got a dozen to split. Judging by how many I’ve been known to eat in a sitting, no one will ever suspect I grabbed enough for the two of us,” Noct smirked, proudly, holding a fork upright as he offered it to Prompto. Prompto took it, meeting his coy little stare.

“Perfect.” He pushed forth a smile that must have looked forced, for Noct continued to give him worried glances as he poured syrup over their breakfast.

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Mm-hmm. Of course,” Prompto nodded, so many times that he was starting to look like a bobble-head figure.

Noctis eyed him suspiciously, but the suspicion lessened as Prompto stuck a fork into one of the top pancakes and tore off a little piece, contentedly popping it into his mouth. He seemed happy enough. Maybe Noctis was just being paranoid.

Noct grabbed his own fork, and cut off a sliver of one of the pancakes. He chewed it slowly, his attention fixed far more on the man beside him than breakfast. As amazing as last night had been, today Prompto still seemed nervous, like he was holding something back. Was it the same thing that had kept him from Noctis all this time? Noctis didn’t know what else could steal him from the bliss of being back together.

He didn’t want to push too hard, but felt he needed to at least start prying a little if they were ever going to get to the root of the problem. Maybe Noctis never needed to know in full, but he didn’t want to be so clueless anymore. Carefully, he chose a place to start.

“So, can I ask?” he started, cautiously, earning a curious glance from Prompto. That innocent look threatened to turn into a fearful one at the sight of Noct’s small frown. Prompto had half a mind to hightail it out of there, but instead, he remained frozen.
“What brought you here last night? What made you change your mind about us?” the king queried. Prompto let out the breath he was holding. That answer was an easy one; he didn’t even have to lie. He cut off another small triangle of pancake and swirled it around in the excess syrup Noct had poured onto their shared plate.

“All those things you said yesterday... They made me think I had lost you for good, and that really scared me,” Prompto admitted. “I know I’ve been acting weird since you got back, but I swear, that’s never what I wanted.”

Noctis watched him continue to play with his food, and he took a bite of his own pancake in hopes that Prompto might relax and do the same. He pondered those words, feeling rather baffled by them. How could Prompto not want to lose him for good, and yet had constantly put up a barrier whenever Noct was around him?

“What did you want?” he asked, quietly. “And you don’t have to answer that if you’re not comfortable.”

Prompto’s eyes flickered sideways to meet Noctis’. Noct’s head was low, his eyes timid and gentle as he peered up at him. Prompto was suddenly so grateful for this kind soul that was Noctis, this tender-hearted prince that—for some reason—fate had handed him.

“I don’t know. For things to feel normal again?” Prompto shrugged. It was the best response he could come up with, and at least it held some truth. He did want to go back to when he didn’t have to worry about his time running out, when he and Noct were just two silly teenagers in love.

“I guess I can understand that,” Noctis nodded. “Being apart for so long, having to fight for your life, moving into the Citadel,... it’s all an adjustment. I know you’re worried about what kind of impact our relationship will have on the kingdom, but we don’t have to announce anything right now. If things get serious, then we should at least tell our friends, but I want to take things slow until I’m sure you’re okay.”

“Huh? Until I’m okay?” Prompto asked, with a quizzical brow. Noct lowered his head a little more, looking rather timid.

“When I’m sure that whatever has been bothering you isn’t an issue anymore,” he explained. There was a look of deep care in his eyes, like he was vowing to take away those troubles that were plaguing Prompto’s mind.

“Oh.” Despite knowing that Noctis couldn’t fix everything, he still couldn’t help but give him a soft and grateful smile. Noctis seemed pleased enough to see anything other than sadness on his partner’s face, and he continued to eat his breakfast with a smile, feeling Prompto relax at his side.

“These are delicious. Who made ‘em?” Prompto asked, eyeing the bite that was currently on his fork before devouring it.

“One of the new cooks. Sadly, Specs is bogged down with more important jobs than preparing meals these days,” Noct sighed, not wanting to get into the particulars of what those jobs were, because they would only depress him—particularly the one involving his father’s money.

“Too bad. His were the best. But these are amazing, too,” Prompto said, managing a grin now. Honestly, he was happy, and he wanted to be happy. He was here with Noctis, in his bed, sharing his food, both of them feeling so light and giddy and in love. Life couldn’t get much better.

“So, listen... This is kind of hard for me to say. A-actually, it’s probably even harder on you, but I
want you to know…” Noctis halted, his hand resting on the side of the tray, his fork at a standstill, hovering over one of the pancakes.

Prompto swallowed hard, not knowing what to expect. He felt like Noctis was trying to get closer to his secret, and he didn’t blame him, but he desperately wanted to enjoy this first morning of them being back together. Or maybe just the first week. Or maybe...

“I don’t know what Ardyn did to you, and just because you were okay this time and in Galdin doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll be okay every time we try to—” Noct trailed off, eyes flickering meaningfully toward the bed, bringing all of Prompto’s other thoughts to an abrupt end.

“Uh, what?” Prompto asked, confused.

“I mean,” Noctis struggled, his face twinging as if he were in pain. “If he... touched you, then we’ll work through it, okay?”

Nervousness was evident on his face, like he was afraid Prompto might flee at the sound of his words. Instead, after a second or two of looking surprised, Prompto smiled softly and leaned over to capture Noctis’ lips. Noctis made a startled noise, but quickly settled into the kiss, revelling in every second of pure Prompto—Prompto’s lips on his own, his hand grazing the side of his face, holding him gently in place as they kissed. He was sure he looked like a dazed idiot when Prompto pulled away.

“You’re the best, Noct,” Prompto murmured. “But honestly, he didn’t do anything like that. He just... beat me up. Told me some things that I really didn’t want to hear.”

His stomach clenched at the memories, but he was thankful that Ardyn hadn’t done anything worse. So, that was what Noct had thought was the cause of everything falling apart? He had worried that Ardyn had done things to him that only a lover should? Touched him in ways he’d only ever permitted Noctis to touch? Ardyn’s harsh words and mild torture didn’t seem so bad anymore; maybe he could actually consider himself lucky.

“Like what? Did he tell you we shouldn’t be together?” Noctis tried, not letting out his breath of relief quite yet. Prompto shook his head, and leaned in again, brushing his nose gently against Noct’s, his eyes half-lidded and dozy.

“Let’s not talk about this right now, okay?”

Noctis was disappointed to be shut down again, but he knew he shouldn’t push too far. He had time now. Prompto wasn’t going anywhere. Little by little, he would get closer to the truth, and maybe when he was close enough, Prompto might be ready to tell him on his own. Noctis leaned in, hands reaching for the back of Prompto’s neck and squeezing gently.

“Oh okay,” he said, with an exaggerated sigh. Lips met again in a few tender pecks, Noctis lingering in close when he whispered, “Can I ask you a favour?”

“Mm?” Prompto asked, wanting to hear the request before he committed himself to promises he couldn’t keep.

“Don’t go on the hunts with the glaives. Stay here, okay? I want to mend things with you, and I don’t think we can do that at a distance,” Noctis said, still so close that Prompto could feel his warm breath on his lips.

Prompto let himself relax. That was a favour to which he could agree; distance definitely wasn’t what they needed right now. All he wanted was to stay close to Noctis, for that was his safe place
“Yeah,” Prompto breathed, leaning in to meet Noctis’ lips again. “I can do that.” They exchanged a few more gentle kisses before they pulled away and resumed their breakfast.

“So, what are your plans for the day?” Prompto asked, finally finishing his first pancake, after all the interruptions. Noctis gave him a sly smile.

“Stay right here in this bed. With you. All day.” Playfully, he tapped his fork to the end of Prompto’s nose, his pancake leaving a small dot of syrup in its wake.

“Hey!” Prompto pretended to grimace, but couldn’t hide his grin as he wiped the syrup from the tip of his nose. Noctis leaned in to kiss it after that, his tongue darting out to taste the remains of the sugary substance, opening his eyes just long enough to see Prompto staring cross-eyed at him. He chuckled softly, meeting his lips in one more kiss before he pulled away.

“I forgot how cute you were,” Noctis hummed, with a tilt of his head that made Prompto feel he’d forgotten how adorable Noctis was, too. He swallowed any embarrassment he was feeling, and gave him a grin.

“And I forgot how much of a sap you were,” he teased.

“Well,” Noct yawned, stretching his arms above his head. “This sap feels like he might be ready for another round. What do you say?”

His eyes wandered to Prompto, not nearly so fearful of Prompto’s rejection anymore. Prompto raised his eyebrows, half in question, half in a seductive quirk. He lifted the tray off of their laps and set it down on the floor beside the bed, abandoning ten untouched pancakes that would probably be cold by the time they were of any interest to them again.

Prompto reached for Noctis’ waist, and pulled him in against him, guiding Noctis under him ever so gently. His hand effortlessly found the skin that was peeking out from between Noct’s shirt and waistband, and stroked his stomach tenderly, fingers tracing over taut muscles. Noctis reached for the back of his neck again, and pulled him down to meet his lips.

“Oh, but it’s my turn to make love to you, buddy,” Prompto grinned.

“You think I’m gonna complain?” Noct smirked back. Prompto met that statement with another smile, and a pair of roaming hands as lips pressed together once again.

There was something different about the way Prompto made love to Noctis this time—something subtle, but definitely there. He was still gentle, so genuinely loving, making sure to kiss and touch all the spots that used to make Noctis feel amazing, but he also exuded more confidence—his body stronger, thicker, and more toned than the young man he’d been in his twenties.

His hand remained securely under Noct’s back the entire time, holding him in what was practically an embrace, even as they neared their end. He angled himself just right, remembering exactly how to get Noctis to arch his back up against him as they reached their limit, and as Noct released soft noises, Prompto leaned in to kiss his lips oh so tenderly. Noctis’ body relaxed beneath him, and he stared up into those familiar eyes, knowing in his heart that this time, Prompto had loved him with everything he had. He had loved him like the world was ending.

Noctis reached up to brush a hand against his strong jaw, feeling a little confused to see that same kind of sadness in Prompto’s eyes that he had found there the night before, but it didn’t linger this time.
“I love you so much, Noct,” Prompto breathed, and Noctis smiled, the relief of hearing his familiar voice in a moment like this putting his worries to rest. Maybe that sadness only came from their time apart, filling this reunion with power and passion and emotion.

“I love you, too,” Noctis promised, lifting his head to meet Prompto’s lips again. If the world was ending, then at least this was the best way to go.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, giving kudos, commenting, and showing your support!! It means so much, and I love hearing from each and every one of you. <3

This chapter brings us to the end of Section 1 of this story. After this point, the parts I've written so far don't seem as solid to me as the first section, so it might take a little longer for me to update. I'm still going to try to stick to updating every two weeks, but it might be every three weeks, depending on how much editing needs to be done. I hope you'll all still stick around for what's to come, though, and I hope you're looking forward to Section 2 as much as I am! Thank you all again so much!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!