

WRITTEN FOR THE MANKAI CHARITY ZINE

– Made August of 2024 , 2368 words

The sun shines brightly through the windows of the boutique just across the high-end street, the majority of the people there showing off their riches. Well, it wasn't like the owner minded it anyways.. It's just that- he wishes that they'd keep their mouths shut when visiting his store so that he could focus on sewing without having to hear their voices ringing through his ears.

But soon enough, he dismisses the thought away. After all, today was just another mundane day for a busy boutique owner like him. He wastes no time getting to work, tying up the bangs of his green bobbed hair with a small ponytail just high enough to help him keep the strands away from his face.

He hears the faint ringing of the bell outside his room as he gathers the needed fabric and supplies for his current project, a small huff escaping his lips when he begins to work on fixing the suit on the dress form itself, the carefully picked red-hued cashmere fabric gracefully falling down the figure.

Whilst observing the suit in front of him, he begins to write down a number of things he notices the outfit was lacking in and makes it his goal to work on them later on in the day. Well, only if he had the time to do so when he's suddenly called over by his fellow coworker to go to the front desk just because a certain *someone* decides to visit him at such a busy time.

Placing down the notebook and pen in his hands, he immediately makes his way over to the front desk to be met with not just one, but two familiar figures. With a long sigh, his irritated expression turns into a small frown when he crosses his arms and speaks up, grabbing the two other men's attention with his harsh tone

“What are you guys doing here at this hour? It's like you guys don't know that I'm busy. Especially you, Lua. You always waltz in here thinking that I have all the time in the world.”

Honestly, it's maddening. He's been so focused on getting the entire outfit finished in the next two weeks that he's been putting all of his other projects on hold and leaving all of the other tasks to his coworker who's thankfully been cooperative thus far and working non-stop day after day without rest. Before

he gets to say anything else, the blonde one named Lua speaks, a big grin on his face when he approaches the other and pulls him into a suffocating hug

“Altair! It’s been way too long man. Come on, loosen up a bit for me will you? The time is long and your work can wait. Besides, something special is coming up soon!”

Altair ignores most of what Lua has to say when he focuses on getting himself out of the tight grip the man has on him, his face turning red before the other one in the room comes to his aid and pries the blonde off of him to let him breathe, the fresh air immediately filling his lungs when he’s prevented from seeing the pearly white gates. The man scolds

“Lua! Watch it..! We don’t want Altair here dying on us before his special day because of you.”

Altair takes his time to catch his breath, a hand over his chest before he looks back to the two older men in front of him bickering, a sweat drop animatedly falling from his head when he sighs yet again, feeling overwhelmed from the sudden visit as he fixes his hairdo.

And oddly enough, despite the anger within him, he doesn’t mind their presence one bit when he continues to watch them silently, a small smile appearing on his face for a split second before he decides to interrupt them, preventing them from causing any more ruckus in his humble boutique

“Alright you two! No more fighting. You guys will give me a bad reputation if you keep on bickering like old men here in front of me.”

..It isn’t until the next day when he finally realizes something is amiss and his thoughts start to wander through his head like a leech. What was that special day they were talking about yesterday?

Unfortunately, it was starting to haunt him and give him a massive headache, and he can’t help but find himself wanting to get his preparations over with so that he could get to finishing the outfit that Sol, his other friend, entrusted him to finish.

With that as his sole motivation to make the thoughts pass his mind, he immediately goes straight to work, finding himself at the storage room first to look for that cashmere fabric he needs after having run out of it in his work room.

It was quite unfortunate that his coworker was currently out right now and was unable to assist him.. But since they've been working so hard, he guesses that maybe it was a good thing they weren't there since they were already so tired from dealing with such demanding customers..

But getting back to the point, when Altair opens the door to the room, he is immediately met with a peculiar sight in front of him. It takes him a few more moments and a pinch of his own cheek until he's finally convinced that it's real.

He could not believe it one bit. In the middle of the room was a mirror clad with a mesmerizing golden frame, the forged ornaments around it gleaming beautifully. When did he have such an expensive piece of furniture lying around in his store? Who gave it to him? Who even put it there?

The questions in his mind don't stop echoing as he walks closer towards it.

Upon further inspection, he would notice the dust that had accumulated on the mirror. It irks him to see when he extends his hand out to touch it, his fingers carefully grazing across the material and removing the dust to better appreciate it in its true form.

Though, it isn't long when he starts to feel dazed—His entire surroundings becoming hazy and the strength in his legs failing him when he stumbles towards the mirror, expecting a pang of pain to course through his body. Yet, it never really does hit him when he feels like he's falling through the air and descending into an entirely new world.

However, he finds that the thought is, in fact, entirely real when his body urges him to jolt awake and the sight in front of him catches him off guard. Somehow, he finds himself right in the middle of a human-sized chess board, the breath-taking view of this new world eliciting a gasp out of him.

He takes a while longer to observe the unfamiliar scene before looking over to what- or *who* was in front of him.

His head starts spinning in confusion when he notices that the man in front of him was Lua in a white suit with a crown adorning his head, his beauty more accentuated when his blonde hair is elegantly slicked back. Though, the stern expression on his face doesn't go unnoticed when Altair realizes that he's looking at who's behind him.

It shocks him even more when he looks back, the sight before him making him feel slightly nauseous. There, on the other side, was Sol wearing the outfit he was currently making, and everything suddenly hit him like a truck. Everything was so.. *realistically unreal*, if that made sense.

When he decides to speak, he finds that he can't. Even when he wants to move, it's hard. The world he's in shackles him down and it irritates him.

"He deserves better than this! Shouldn't you, of all people, understand the position he's in right now..!?" The White King says, his loud voice ringing in his ears when he feels as though it's ripping him apart.

"But why should I spare him? What he's going to go through is inevitable and can't be changed whether you like it or not."

No matter how much he wants to intervene, he can only listen to the conversation until that same feeling crept upon him, his eyelids feeling heavy when he falls into a deep slumber..

"Wake up.." A faint voice calls out to him. He's not sure if it's far away, beside him, or what, but whatever it was, it was prying him awake. He grumbles under his breath, tossing in his sleep when he hears the same voice calling out

"Wake up. You don't have any more time left..!"

Altair would twitch slightly at his words before he decides to completely wake up, hastily sitting up in his spot when he's met with a familiar sight before him, his eyes widening. He wouldn't be given the chance to speak when the White King intervenes, his grip on Altair's shoulder bruisingly tight

"Listen to me, Yuki. I know this is sudden, but you have to make a choice.. *One that will change your life forever.*"

The sudden statement takes him by surprise. What did he even mean by that and why was he suddenly addressed by *that* name? The White King continues, "I've seen the way you've worked so hard every single day, throwing away what was meant to be your childhood. I'm giving you this chance to think carefully. Don't waste it. Please."

Don't listen to him. Everything that has happened until this point was meant for you.

The thoughts running through his mind ceases to stop. He is beyond confused and he can only stare blankly into the blonde's eyes.

"Are you really willing to let that voice lead you on? Do you want this life? I promise you, nothing good comes out of it."

Lies. Foolish lies. You have to embrace what's coming for you, whether you like it or not Altair. After all, this is the life that you lived.

It gets harder to breathe every time they try to pry his head open with their nonsensical words, the world around him crumbling bit by bit before he finally pushes the White King away with a guttural scream and runs straight into the ominous forest.

He runs, and he runs. The path is never-ending when he finds himself in a plain abyss. The darkness engulfs him with insecurities and negative emotions he has never felt before.

He runs even more. It's getting harder to run, but he suddenly finds himself falling into a rabbit hole, his hair flowing against the harsh current of wind. Fortunately, it isn't long when he lands unharmed, his clothes still in one piece when he gets up and notices a blinding light by the end of the tunnel.

Despite the throbbing pain in his head, he decides to walk towards it, being careful with each step so that he doesn't trip over himself.

"..Look! They're playing in the field, let's join!" A familiar voice calls out to him, nostalgia suddenly washing through him. The person continues to speak, but this time, the tone is deeper and more matured

“Come on! You’re always so busy with your work, do you not have time for anything else..?”

He feels like everything is coming back to him with each step he takes, his brows furrowing slightly when he feels as though the voice is overtaking the thoughts in his head.

The tunnel is long, his feet are starting to grow numb from the sensation, but the memories that flow against him give him an odd sense of comfort and longing that by the time he’s reached the end of the tunnel, a bright light shines upon him and he can’t help but desperately reach his hand out to it.

When it finally occurs to him that Lua— *no*, Kazunari and Tenma have told him important things that he promised he wouldn’t forget, his heart drops, and now he suddenly feels like it could jump out of his chest. At that moment, the tears roll down his face as the bright light blinds him..

He’s on the chessboard again when he opens his eyes. However, he finds himself one space away from the White King when he tries to process everything that just happened to him, the tears still falling from his face. Despite this, he listens to what the two men have to say, the White King speaking first

“Are you ready to face change, Yuki?”

“The kingdom—The life you will live is up to you. Though, I’m sure you understand that well.”

Yuki would stay silent as he pondered. He was just a mere pawn in this scary game—A child who was trapped in his shell by the name of *Altair*, led on by the fears of growing up, now finally going out into the real world to make choices that will no doubt shape the rest of his future. Now that it has come to get him, he would not be able to push away the future like he always did.

He looks over to the two men, after much consideration, his lips pursed when he finally nods in response. He can’t help but notice the defeat in the White King’s eyes when he hears The Red King cast his final move.

Just then, a strong gust of wind knocks him towards the blonde man, his body phasing through him and entering an unknown domain, giving him a sense of oddity when he finds himself falling for the third time.

The journey is painfully long, but before he realizes it, his back hits the ground.

The harsh impact makes Yuki wake up in a cold sweat, and he takes the time to observe his surroundings.. No weird furniture, the time on the clock is set right, and he's finally in a peaceful atmosphere.

With a relieved sigh, he grabs his phone from the bedside table and opens it, only to see that today was in fact, his 18th birthday. At the revelation of his dream, he runs a hand through his disheveled hair as he mutters to himself

“Should’ve just told me it was my birthday, you losers..”