Love Has No Recipe
by sillypandalover91

Summary

All Ludwig wanted to do is do right by his family all while indulging in his favorite past time, baking! When he meets and befriends fellow doctor Feliciano, his life is cast into a state of chaos for there is no recipe to remedy. Who exactly is this flirtacious man and what does the Italian mob have to do with the Vargas clan?

Notes

Written about five years ago, this story and it's readers have been through a lot. This time, LHNK is here to stay.

See the end of the work for more notes.
It began with a letter and like most things, ended with one. An invitational letter to be exact, and, well, more like three hundred of them. The first was an invitation to the world renowned University of Genovia, which was conveniently located in his home city and not the capital of their country like most would probably assume. That's where they had all but rolled out the red velvet carpet for Ludwig Beilschmidt where he majored in chemistry and minored in business. A rather strange combination but it met the standards of the next level of education that he was pushed into: medical school. The second invitation was one he had to earn, whether he actually wanted to or not was irrelevant. He received it in the mail only a few days after his interview with the dean of admissions and to nobody's surprise, he was in. The third invitation was one sent to his proud family for graduation day. Today is that day.

The graduating class had been ushered into a cramped room and were given last minute reminders as to how they were to enter the convention hall. A handful of women were crying as they hugged each other tightly. Men were standing around awkwardly next to their best friends, trying to maintain their emotions. Some simply couldn't and were also hugging each other. In the far side of the room, a group of friends huddled in a prayer circle for what was to come. This was going to be their last hour as med students. It was as if time flew by and everything they had striven for, from the moment an adult asked them 'what do you want to be when you grow up' to sweat inducing stress and tear jerking moments of despair in their postgraduate career, was only beyond those doors.

Ludwig leaned against a wall with his arms crossed. He didn't care so much for all the emotions on display. It wasn't as if they were never going to see each other again; many of them had been taken under the same wing for their residential years. Though perhaps his lack of excitement lay in the fact that this wasn't his first rodeo. Unlike many here who were first amongst their families to be doctors, or even complete such a high level of education, he came from a long line of doctors. Literally.

His ancestor Christopher Beilschmidt had founded the first hospital in Genovia and the medical tradition had been passed along through the generations. As a matter of a fact, all his brothers were doctors and even his in-laws were in the field. Heck, even his younger siblings were headed towards the same career path. Regardless, he knew that they would be just as excited and moved by his accomplishments as any other parent.

"Graduating class of 2013 in ten," called the coordinator. This earned a cheer of excitement from the eager graduates. Ludwig sighed and unfolded his arms to straighten his cords and sash. He felt around his pocket and slipped on his ring. In all honesty, he hated wearing it with a passion. Not only was it uncomfortable but it also served as a reminder for the hell that was to come as soon as he left the safety of these walls. Perhaps that was another reason why he wasn't as enthusiastic about graduating, the fact that he would then only have a year of freedom before sharing his last name with one of the most disagreeable beings he's ever had the unfortunate pleasure of knowing. But it did serve its purpose: ward off anyone who had their eye on him.
"Where the hell is the guy giving the speech?" The coordinator ran back into the room and looked through the groups of students huddled with one another. She ran around in search for the orator, and with every student she dismissed the more frantic she became. "Graduation starts in three minutes! Where is he? Never mind, we don't have time. You," she pointed at the stoic German, "Beilschmidt! Yes, you. You're going to give the speech."

The students stopped talking. Ludwig felt himself flush pink when a hundred pairs of eyes locked in on him. It wasn't that he wasn't liked by his peers; it was more like they were intimidated by him and perhaps on some level, a bit resentful. His last name didn't help his case. Everyone knew who the Beilschmidts were—again his ancestor practically started the health care system in the country. Hell, there was a painting of Ludwig’s dad in the dean's office and, in their Gross Anatomy class, his professor had hung up pictures of his top students. Needless to say, all of his brothers were on that wall, including his sister in law. Speaking of which, he would have to find Dr. Bott so that he could pose for his picture.

Getting back to the task on hand, Ludwig gave a nod and raked his mind for a suitable speech. What should he talk about? Well, whatever, he was sure to come up with something nice when he was up there.

The coordinator had begun to bark orders and organized the students based on their academic standing: cum laude, magna cum laude, where he was, and finally summa cum laude, there was only one person in this category.

Ludwig heard the band start playing as they were ushered into the convention hall. Proud parents, friends, and loved ones erupted in cheers when they saw their little doctors enter. Ludwig sat in his assigned seat and waited patiently as the dean and other members of the board gave their speeches. 'What am I going to say to them,' he thought to himself. He raised his eyes up in the general direction his family told him they would be seated and immediately caught sight of his father and siblings.

Wolfgang Beilschmidt stood when the dean mentioned his name and offered a polite wave at the applause they gave him, making his son roll his eyes in half-hearted annoyance. Having been Chief Surgeon General of their nation had certainly made his father popular. Being Head of the hospital he owned made Ludwig, not. Well that's not true. It had made him popular with women and men alike but he would have none of it.

Not only was he not interested, but he knew what they wanted. After graduation, they would have to start their residency, well not him. He'd already done a year and would only have to finish one more before he could practice freely. His classmates however had not been so lucky and while he knew that the more proactive students had already secured a position in a teaching hospital, others were still struggling. And with a Beilschmidt in their class, well let's just say they tried to befriend him for what he assumed were the wrong reasons.

Shaking his head, Ludwig trailed his eyes to the left where his oldest brother, Gilbert, sat with his husband, Matthew. The shy Canadian-American was trying his best to control the rowdy albino as the latter was trying to wave a banner he no doubt made himself. Next to them was the second oldest brother, Roderich and his wife, Elizabeta. Roderich was, from what he could tell, pouting. His arms were crossed in a childish-like matter and he had crossed one leg over the other while Elizabeta was putting something away in her purse. This made Ludwig stifle a laugh; no doubt she took away his iPod so that he could pay attention.

Next to them was his younger brother and sister. Vash looked annoyed by the monotone speech that was being given while his sister busied herself in peering through binoculars in an effort to see
him. Ludwig offered a small wave in case she saw him but he assumed from the eager wave she returned that she had.

On his Father's right was by far one of his favorite brothers, not that he played favorites but if he did then Berwald would take the first slot. Based off body language alone, Ludwig would've assumed that his brother didn't want to be here but he knew better. Berwald wasn't too fond of unnecessary blabber that graduations normally had but for his siblings he would stomach it. Beside him, his fiancé, or wife as he was fond of calling him, bounced in his seat in excitement, camera in hand. Tino leaned over to whisper something into Berwald's ear to which he answered with a nod.

Ludwig felt himself grow anxious, what was he going to talk about? Curse the fool that was supposed to do this and didn't show up!

"And now," spoke the Dean, "the graduates of 2013 have selected one of their peers to stand up here and give you a parting speech." Ludwig was grabbed around his bicep and ushered to the stage, flushing in embarrassment when he heard Gilbert's loud cheer.

Looking out into the sea of black, green and gold, Ludwig licked his lips to moisten them. 'Quick say something,' he screamed internally. Collecting his thoughts he opened his mouth to speak, "Uh-

"Wait!" The coordinator hissed as quietly as she could before tossing a scrawny man to join him. The man stood up and skipped to the podium next to Ludwig. "Don't. Just stand there and don't say anything."

"Io?" The man pointed to himself in question.

"No, not you! Beilschmidt!"

"Ve," he said again, nodding in understanding. "Allora, a million apologies for being late. I couldn't find my pants," he said sheepishly causing a peel of laughter from his classmates and a few chuckles from the Dean and professors. Ludwig stared at the man next to him as he blabbered on and on about this and that. Of course, they would've chosen Feliciano as their representative. Why not? The man was a chatterbox and very likable.

So why did Ludwig want to reach over and strangle the poor guy? Ah, yes. Because now he was standing up here like an idiot while the other was making their classmates giggle. How the hell did he even get into medical school let alone complete? Didn't he just say he lost his pants? Who in their right mind would let someone as forgetful as him have his license to practice medicine?

"Now as my final words," Feliciano said seriously, his voice deepening slightly, "After today we are doctors, and as such we must vow to always do everything in our power to make our patients well again. But don't forget, good health isn't only about the body, it's also about the mind and spirit. A sound spirit is a sound mind. And a sound mind is a sound body. Sometimes a smile is all that it takes to give the spirit a will to fight. I know there will be times when we won't be able to smile because of what we will see in our job but never let the bad things extinguish your passion, but also do not let your passion get to your head to the point you get cocky and careless. In the words of my father, keep your mind cool like water but the flames of the sun in your heart. Thank you."

Smiling, Feli took Ludwig's hand in his, making him blush, and raised it over his head, "Now what class are we?!!"

"2013," cried their class in excitement.
"Who are we?!"

"The Serpentines!"

Feliciano grinned cheekily and looked over to the Dean who gave him a nod. Turning back to the class he pumped their joined hands in the air again. "Here we go my fellow Serpentines, it's time to graduate!" He tugged Ludwig back down the stage when everyone, including those in the stands, cheered. The blond looked down at their conjoined hands and pulled away with a blush. Feli looked back, "Oops, sorry." He offered Ludwig a smile before taking a seat.

"That's not your seat," said Ludwig with a stern look. "That's for those who are magna cum laude, you're in my seat."

"Oh! I'm sorry." Feli giggled and took the seat next to it.

"That's for-"

"And now it's my pleasure to give the first diploma to our sole summa cum laude graduate, Dr. Feliciano." No one in the stands cheered for him save for a lone blonde girl who waved a pink glitter poster board with his name on it. Did he not have family to support him? Feeling a bit guilty he brought his hands together for a polite applause but that was soon drowned out by the sudden burst of cheers from his classmates. Wait. Did the Dean say summa cum laude? Feliciano? Feliciano graduated with the highest honors?!

Ludwig's jaw dropped when the ditzy Italian gave a happy cheer for himself as he skipped up to get his diploma. How was that possible? He remembered having a few classes with that idiot and he would always spend his time flirting or staring into space while working a cats cradle out of colorful string. How he managed to pass was beyond him. Unless…then it hit him. Feliciano must be one of those lucky bastards who could sleep all during a lecture and still get straight A's. Fuming internally, he stood to accept his own diploma and sign his name on the Hippocratic Oath under Feliciano's fancy script. He raised an eyebrow when he saw that the man had scratched something out before adding M.D. after his last name's initial.

The rest of the graduates went up to get their diplomas and when the last one finished signing his name on the oath, the Dean looked out to his students. "It is with great pride that I conclude this ceremony. Doctors of 2013, you may now move your tassels to the left. Congratulations and may you serve your community with honor, grace, and humility." Ludwig felt as if his ear drums were going to give out when they were enveloped in a roar of cheers. Looking up to his family, he saw that they were on their feet applauding along with all of the other proud family members. A cap fell onto his lap. Picking it up, he noted the decoration on it.

"Ve, my friend did that for me," said Feliciano happily. "Isn't it pretty?"

"Uh, ja. I guess so." Ludwig placed it back on the auburn hair. A peculiar curl stood out from the rest. Drawn to it by curiosity, he reached to smooth it back into place but a slender hand reached out and took it.

"Er, please don't. It's always like that." Feli looked into baby blue eyes with rosy cheeks. "Congratulations. Maybe I'll see you around, si?"

Ludwig looked down at his hand, not entirely sure why the tanned fingers holding on to his was making his stomach feel like it had butterflies. Surely it had nothing to do with the beautiful Italian man holding his. He mentally froze as he realized he thought Feliciano beautiful and immediately tugged his hand out of the others grip. He gave a curt nod. "Ja, whatever. Congratulations. Now, if
you’ll excuse me, I need to get to my family. Goodbye Dr. Feliciano." He made his way out of the crowded sea of black and red and gold, leaving behind a disheartened Feli.

"Ve," he murmured. "Goodbye, Dr. Beilschmidt." He walked out into the hot summer evening when he felt a sudden weight on his back.

"Feli!"

"Feliks!" Feli grinned and hugged his best friend and roommate. "I'm so happy you were able to make it."

"Psh, as if I was going to, like, miss out on something as big as this." Feliks let go and looped his arm around his friend's. "Like, let’s go! I totally made us a reservation at Miaku's."

"Sushi?"

"Yup yup!"

Ludwig watched as Feliciano walked past him with a girl—no, wait, a guy—on his arm and rolled his eyes. As if Feli would ever look at him twice. Not that it mattered…he was already promised to another. Speaking of which, he slowly made his way to his black Audi, dreading what was to come.

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Three hundred invitations sent out. Three hundred guests and their plus one stood in the Beilschmidt estate’s sparkling garden, all sipping from their champagne glasses and making small talk. Others, like his father, were probably talking about business and politics. Meanwhile, Ludwig stood stiffly near the water fountain with his hand clenching almost painfully to his crystal glass, the light from the fountain making the white gold of his ring reflect in his eye mockingly. "I can't breathe," he muttered to his brothers when Gilbert and Roderich made their way to him.

Gilbert, instead of mocking him, gave him a look of sympathy. "I'm sorry, West. Truly I am."

"Can't you call it off," asked Roderich as he looked at their guests. "It's not like you love her."

"Love has nothing to do with this marriage," Ludwig muttered before drowning the rest of his champagne and plucking another from a passing waiter. "Vati wants this to happen so it's going to happen."

"But she's such a bitch," muttered Vash as he too made his way to Ludwig. The young man’s usual unruly hair was brushed back and out of his face save for a few wisps that fell over his eyes. "It's clear that you two aren't into each other."

"Yeah," agreed Gilbert bringing an arm around Roderich, who brushed it off in annoyance. "Have you two even banged yet?"

"Gilbert!" His brothers glared at their older brother for his brash question, even more so when Lilly came up to hug Ludwig.

"Congratulations, big bruder!" She said happily as she nuzzled into his chest, "I'm so happy for
you!

Ludwig let a soft smile adorn his features and he patted her hair gently, "Danke, Lilly." When she pulled away he took note of her dress and apparently so did Vash. "Er, Lil'?

"Hm?"

"Isn't that dress too, er," he blushed as he tried to come up with an appropriate word.

"Short," exclaimed Vash indignantly. "The word you're looking for is short. That dress is too damn short!"

"I'm not a little girl anymore," she said with a pout. "Besides, Elizabeta and Emma said Emil would love it. Speaking of, there he is! Bye, guys!" The four brothers watched in dismay as their little sister skipped her way to the young Nordic, every skip making her skirt bounce a little higher. Emil immediately perked up at seeing his girlfriend and reached out to hug her, his hands lowering to the small of her back when she returned the embrace.

"I'm going to kill him," growled Vash. Gilbert, Roderich, and Ludwig nodded in agreement.

"Let the girl have her fun. Emil is a sweet boy," chirped Emma when she came up to her cousins with her brother, Lars, in tow. "His brother however..."

"There's nothing wrong with Mathias, sis." Lars lit a cigarette only to have it taken from his mouth by Emma and tossed into the fountain. "He lets me smoke."

"Yeah and if he keeps encouraging your disgusting habit, he can kiss any chance he has with me goodbye. Oh, look, there's Lizzy! Later, Luddy. Congrats on your diploma!" The men watched in amazement when their cousin ran over to her best friend and pounced.

Lars sighed, "Congratulations, Ludwig. One more down two more to go, huh? How's school, Vash?"

Vash shrugged, "It's fine, though I was actually thinking of maybe going for pharmacy instead. You know, in case someone here didn't want to go through with you know what." He looked over to Ludwig, "You can still back out, Ludwig. Just say the word and I'll switch majors."

"Back out of what?" The too kind voice sent a chill down the backs of the Beilschmidt brothers and Lars. A man of tall stature with calculating violet eyes gazed at Ludwig with a pleasant smile. Beside him, a short platinum blonde haired woman with the same violet eyes glared at her fiancé with disdain. "Surely you don't mean what I am thinking you mean. Such a thing would upset my little sister. Wouldn't it Natalya."

Natalya brushed her long hair over her shoulder and looked up adoringly at her brother, "Perhaps we should break the engagement."

Ivan waggled his finger playfully and tapped her nose, "But if that happens, little sister, then many stand to lose their jobs because I wouldn't have a reason to expand the company here. Not when it wouldn't have a bright young woman serving as its head." He chuckled when she preened. "Now, Ludwig," Ivan turned to his future brother-in-law, "What was young Vash talking about?"

Ludwig swallowed nervously but was saved from answering by Berwald. "M' brother is consider'n not workin' at th' hospital." Everyone turned to look at the stoic man that rivaled Ivan's height. Berwald placed a hand on Ludwig's shoulder and continued, "But he'll finish his residency there an'way. Won't ya, Lud?"
"J-ja, burder." Ludwig thanked their mother in heaven for Berwald's quick thinking. Ever since they were little, Berwald would always come through for him and get him out of trouble whereas Roderich would usually sniff and tell him that his bad behavior was the reason he'd gotten in trouble, and Gilbert would usually be the one to get him in trouble. Not that he could complain now that they were older, as far as siblings go, his brothers were pretty awesome.

Ivan studied the five men carefully before breaking out into a grin. "Very good. You had me worried for a moment there. Come, Natalya. We must go great your future father-in-law."

"Da, big brother." Natalya sent Ludwig a cold glare before nuzzling her face into her brother's arm as the pair went in search of Wolfgang.

When they were out of earshot Berwald grumbled, "That girl in't right."

Roderich scoffed, "That entire family isn't right. I mean have you seen the way his sister looks at him?" Ludwig's older brothers shuddered.

"You, my brother, are screwed," muttered Gilbert after taking a gulp from his beer bottle.

The party continued well through the night. It was announced that Ludwig and Natalya were to wed in precisely a year to which everyone applauded politely. Elizabeta, Lilly, and Emma exchanged glances when they noticed the pained expression on Ludwig's face but neither had the heart to mention it. Natalya gave her fiancé a kiss on the cheek before departing for the airport with Ivan. As soon as she was out of sight, the young German had removed his ring and placed it in a jewelry box for safe keeping. He shuddered to think what the woman would do if he were to lose it.

Ludwig raised his hand to his face and felt his skin heat as he remembered Feliciano's warm hand in his. "Nein!" Ludwig shook his head to clear his mind of the feel of the other's hand in his and how drastically different it had made him feel in comparison to when he held Natalya's hand. Sighing, he went to take a quick shower before settling into his cold bed. Tomorrow he'd have the day free before he'd have to go start work at the hospital again. Perhaps he could go visit his bakery and bake for the day. Ludwig smiled at the thought of running his hands through the soft mounds of dough, kneading away until it was perfect. Whipping up smooth batters for cakes and then icing them with all the care in the world. Yes. That sounded perfect. With thoughts of cakes and cookies floating in his mind, Ludwig turned to his side and closed his eyes for sleep.

Feliciano and Feliks stumbled into their apartment in a fit of giggles, the latter wearing the Italian's robe. What a night they had! First, they'd gone to Miaku's where they ate to their hearts content. Then they'd gone dancing at Feli's cousin's club. Marcello had embraced his older cousin and led him to the V.I.P room where more of his cousins—Naya and Nico from his dad's side and Chiara who never failed to remind him of his twin brother—joined in on the celebration. And speaking of his brother, Lovino and his boyfriend Antonio had showed up later with gifts from the family. It'd taken both his car and Lovino's car to bring them home but that was ok. At least now he wouldn't have to buy new clothes for himself, and the money. Well, he'd save that for a rainy day.

The two friends collapsed onto the couch and stretched out. "That was, like, totally fun. You're
cousin's hot too, Feli."

"I guess so?"

Feliks sat up, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm just tired. Can't believe it's over."

"I know, right? Now you can go save people's lives, just like you've always wanted." Feliks reached down and pulled off his heals. "Welp, I'm going to, like, call it a night. See ya in the morning, Feli." He reached down for his two kisses on the cheek and went to his bedroom.

"Buonanotte, Fe." The Italian looked up towards the ceiling. There was a crack; he'd need to fix that tomorrow. Lifting his hand up he closed his left eye and the crack disappeared behind his hand. If only it were that easy to hide things. Staring at his hand, he felt the corners of his mouth lift upon remembering how flustered his German classmate had gotten from them holding hands. Stifling a yawn, he stood up and made his way to his own bedroom, absentmindedly petting his cat, Gino, when he collapsed onto his too firm bed. Tomorrow he'd have to go tell his jerk of a boss that he would be quitting. Smiling to himself he thought, 'It'll be so funny to see his face when I show him my diploma. Teach him not to underestimate his waiters.'
Good Morning Asclepius Hospital

Chapter Summary

Feliciano is forced to find a job before he and Feliks are forced to take more water bottle showers meanwhile Ludwig is forced to conduct interviews for a new physician because heaven forbid his older brothers, you know, the ones who actually wanted to be doctors and are set to inherit Asclepius Hospital, do anything useful.

~One Month Later~

The automatic coffee maker was set to start brewing at exactly 5:30am, and despite it being the best money could buy, the coffee it made more often than not tasted like a steamy cup of sump oil. Needless to say, the overwhelming desire to drink said coffee wasn't what would wake Ludwig up every morning. Usually it was Berlitz, his Doberman pup, who would jump onto his bed in order to snuggle next to him followed by his Golden Retriever, Aster, and Blackie his German Shepard. However, this time, Ludwig woke up due to the cold. The young German tried to roll onto his side to curl himself into a ball for warmth but found that a certain weight prevented him from doing so. Lazily opening his eyes, he glared half-heartedly at his oppressor.

"Off, Johan." His command was met with a deep meow as his cat did as asked. "Good boy."

Ludwig stretched to soothe his sore muscles, the movement tugging his sheets from him, causing bumps to rise on his otherwise smooth skin. With a yawn, he brought a heavy hand on his alarm just as it read 5:29 to silence it before it could ring. "Let's go watch the sun rise, Johan."

He slipped on a pair of slippers and moved to open his balcony door. Ludwig noticed that his black feline hadn't budged from the bed. "Johan," he questioned, chuckling when he saw how all three of his dogs were sprawled on the other half of his bed, Berlitz sleeping on his back with his hind legs spread. "Come on, kitty. Let them sleep a bit longer." His cat gave one last look of disapproval at the sleeping dogs before jumping down to follow his master out to the balcony where he spotted an unsuspecting pigeon on the rail. Interesting.

"Isn't it beautiful," asked Ludwig as he leaned against the rail to gaze at the city's skyline. Having the privilege of living at the highest floor of the building certainly had its perks. For one, he got to witness the sun rise at a great vantage point. The way it crept over the buildings, casting a stunning golden glow over the park made him feel at peace. Usually there were fluffy clouds in the sky but today wasn't one of those days. Tearing his gaze from the rising sun, he instead observed the buildings. There were three towers that belonged to an Italian family—Var-something, including the one he was currently living in. The other two served as business fronts for companies—all rumored to be owned by the family themselves. They were simple in design but no less regal. Not that he was surprised; Lars was always one for practicality. Ludwig marveled at his cousin's architect talent for a few more moments before looking to the heart of the city, the Medical District.

Sleek hospitals clustered around a glorious water fountain that was visible to the young German
despite his current location. Those had been creations of his Uncle Timothy, his mother's brother, and Lar's and Emma's father. He and Wolfgang had collaborated in their design years before, back when there was only Roderich for young Gilbert to torment. At least that's how it was always oh so fondly recollected. The smell of bitter coffee tore Ludwig from his observations. "Great," he muttered. "Time to get ready for another day. Come along, Johan." Ludwig reached down and plucked his cat just as the miniaturized panther made a leap for his prey. With cat over his shoulder, he made his way back inside for a quick shower.

Feliciano could sleep through anything for the most part. Storms, five o'clock traffic, that one time there was a shooting near his apartment complex. He wasn't completely sure what went down with that one and Feliks was too excited to give him the proper details but he had an idea. Sometimes he'd wake up to find said man in bed next to him because their heater had gone out, but more often than not, he'd wake up alone. Today was one of those days. However, it wasn't as if he was gently coaxed out of sleep by his internal clock, nor was it the insistent head butts from his hungry Tabby but the stench of something gone horribly wrong in the kitchen. That and the sound of their fire alarm. Golden eyes opened in terror. The fire alarm?!

Rushing out of bed, Feli didn't even bother putting on a pair of pants. His desperate need to salvage whatever nutrients he could was greater than his sense of modesty, not that he had much sense of modesty to start with.

"Feliks, what is this," he cried out to his roommate as he switched off the stove. The Italian eyed the questionable substance in the pots and pans in effort to distinguish it. Shaking his head, Feli went over to the fridge, "Did you try and cook all the food?"

Feliks looked up from his laundry as he tried to stuff as much as he could into the dryer, "I, like, had to! Speaking of which, if you want a shower you should take one now."

"Why?"

Not giving his friend an answer, Feliks dragged Feli over to their shower and stuffed him inside before adjusting the knobs, "Just take one. And, like, be quick about it. I don't know how much longer we'll have."

"I don't understand. Feliks, what's going on?" From the frosted glass door, Feliciano could see that Feliks sat on top of the counter. "Fe?" Deciding that it was best to humor the man, Feli squirted a generous amount of shampoo into his hair and started to scrub it in, "Fe?"

"Well, you know how you haven't been working and I'm still only making a little over minimum wage?"

"Yeah?" His gut was starting to twitch in anxiety. Feli knew where this was going but was praying desperately that he was wrong. Standing under the water he let the suds wash out of his hair and down his body.

"And you know that I had to pay my own tuition for the summer sessions…"

"Ve, Feliks, please just come out and say it. You're making me nervous."

"The bills are past due, Feli. I think that-"

"Merde! Fe, get me a bottled water please!"
Feliks jumped off the counter and rushed to get a couple bottled waters. This was precisely what he'd been worried about. Because they hadn't been able to pay their water and gas bill, the company had threatened to shut it off. Seemed like they made good on their promise. When he returned with the bottles, Feli's eyes were red and from the looks of it were in pain. Taking a bottle from his friend, Feliciano flushed his eyes to get rid of the shampoo. "Grazie, Feliks. Ve, that hurt!" He used the rest of the water to rinse off the rest of the suds from his body before wrapping a pink towel around his waist, "Why didn't you use the money from the savings account to pay the bills?"

"Mr. Pig is, like, totally empty. We used it to fix that leak on the roof and then also to fix the damn plumbing because the landlord was being a total jerk about it. Wasn't our fault that the douche upstairs wanted to get rid of his weed before his P.O came. Why should we have been the ones to pay for that idiot's bad life decisions?"

"Ve~" Feliciano agreed and thought hard about what to do for money. He couldn't go back to waiting at the restaurant. His boss hadn't taken it so well that his best, and often abused, waiter had gone out and actually succeeded in obtaining the title MD. "Well, technically I am working, you know."

"You're doing your residency at a public clinic, Feli. And while I like totally dig that you're sticking to your morals or whatever, you have to understand that we are barely making ends meet. And I'm, like, using the term very loosely. Not to mention all those times we've been in the middle of freaking gun fights…gun fights!" Feliks followed his friend out the bathroom and lightly kicked at the trash bin, "I mean look at all this!" He bent over to retrieve all the unopened letters from hospitals addressed to Feliciano, "Look at how bad these guys want you."

"But those are all private places…they don't take in your average person in those."

"Sick people are sick people. Why not take a job there and like, I don't know, volunteer or something elsewhere. Heck, I'll tell you what. Do this and I'll go on one of those international medical relief missions you've been nagging me about."

"Really? You'd be willing to go with me on one?"

"So long as you get a real job, yeah sure."

Feli pouted, "But I do have a real job, I'm happy there."

Vibrant green eyes narrowed in exasperation, "Fine! Then at least accept help from your fam~"

"No."

"But~"

"No, Feliks. They were more than crystal clear when they told me that this was something I had to do on my own. I won't let them change their minds now that I'm done. Besides we don't need their money, that's what Mr. Pig is for."

"You can't have it both ways, Feliciano. Either get a real job that pays or accept help. I'm trying here but I can't support both of us."

Feliciano observed his roommate through his mirror as he pulled on some boxers. Feliks prided himself in always looking his best despite their financial situation. However he could tell that the worry of what they were going to eat, whether or not their plumbing was going to work, or if they would even have energy to be able to warm up their apartment when fall rolled around, was taking its toll on him. And then of course were the shootings. He may have slept through the first one but
after he was made aware of them, he had tried his hardest to make sure he didn't sleep through the rest. He had to keep his best friend safe. Feli turned around with a sigh. It wasn't fair for either of them to live in their current conditions. Not when he had the means of getting them out of it. Technically it wasn't as if he wouldn't be helping people. After all, a person is still a person no matter how rich or poor they are. And, he could take time off to go give his attention to the less fortunate. Quickly making up his mind he gave a nod.

"Thank you!" Feliks let out a squeal and gave Feli a hug. "I'm glad. Ok, get ready."

"For what?"

"I-uh…I may have sent out your applications out to a couple hospitals."

"Ok…"

"And you may have a couple of interviews lined up for," Feliks coughed uncomfortably into his hand, "today."

"…At what time?"

Feliks looked over his shoulder and read the time on the Felix the Cat clock. His belly read a quarter after 6, "I'd say you have about thirty minutes before your first one."

"Ve?!" Feliciano stumbled over to his closet in search for something suitable to wear. Ah! Grabbing one of his gifts Lovino gave him for graduation, he tugged out a grey long sleeved dress shirt and matching grey tie.

The drive to work was uneventful aside from the usual cars honking at each other to get a move on. Well that was until some lunatic rushed by him cutting off various cars ahead of him. 'Wherever that guy was going, I certainly hoped it's worth driving like a madman out of hell,' thought Ludwig as he parked in his reserved spot next to the cute little seafoam green Volkswagen he recognized as Lilly's. His sister was probably here to drop off some baked goods for breakfast before heading off to school.

On his right was a creamy white and black Mercedes SLS AMG GT Roadster. Now the fact that he even knew that was because Gilbert wouldn't shut up about how 'awesome' it was. Well, that and he harbored the same love for German automobiles as his family, just, perhaps, not to the degree his eldest brother and father did. They literally jumped at the chance for someone to ask them their opinion, something Ludwig regretted when he was in the market a few years ago. All he'd wanted was a fuel efficient car that would prove loyal and had a working air conditioner. Instead, he had been dragged to every dealership that sold German brands until he finally settled for his black Audi TT. It was sleek and well…he practically drooled over it.

Shaking his head free of such an embarrassing memory, he locked his car and walked down the lot past Roderich's Audi and Berwald's…Audi. Did they all have one? Aside from Gilbert and Lilly, it would seem so. Well no, not Vash. He had decided to go vintage and had bought himself a 1970 Volkswagen Karmann Ghia.

He ran his badge over the door sensor desperately praying that it would work for once and he wouldn't have to go ask their receptionist for assistance. It wasn't that he didn't care for Jessica, it was just that he didn't care for her. He probably would if only she would leave him alone. Honestly, one would think that curt responses to questions that oozed with flirtatious intent
would've told the girl that he wasn't interested. But no. If anything, it seemed to only fuel her attempts.

"Oh, thank God," he muttered when the tiny bulb flashed green and a chime alerted the door that he was clear to pass. Tucking his ID card back into its clip, Ludwig continued onto his shared office. Or rather, it was his office seeing as though he was senior resident…and his family's name was on the building.

"Hey, big bruder!" Lilly was twirling on his leather swivel chair with a bright smile, "How has your morning been going?"

"Better now that I got to see you, Lil." Ludwig leaned down to give his sister a kiss on the head.

"Me or this?" Lilly pulled out a brown bag and jiggled it so that the contents softly banged around its surroundings. "I brought you some breakfast streusel cake, Luddy. Toris told me that you weren't going to stop by this morning so I decided to bring you and everyone else some breakfast."

"Danke. Do you know where Vati is?"

"Mmm..oh! He said that he was going to be in a couple meetings with the all the administrators in the district area."

"Then who's going to conduct the interviews for today?"

"Well…Oh, would you look at the time." Lilly handed the bag containing Ludwig's breakfast over to her brother and skipped out of the room, leaving the baffled German with a terrible feeling that it was going to fall on his shoulders to conduct said interviews.

Ludwig sat his breakfast aside and went to the lounge where he knew he'd find at least one of his brothers, if not all. Speak of the devils. He frowned when he saw that Gilbert had Roderich in a choke hold while the latter held his bag of pastries protectively against his chest. Berwald greeted him with a wave while Tino watched as Matthew tried to pull his husband off his brother in law.

"Come on, Gil," grunted Matthew as he tugged at Gilbert, "I made you breakfast before we came to work!"

"Yeah, Birdie," agreed Gilbert but refused to loosen his grip on his brother, "but it's the principle of the matter. Why should Roddy get to have the whole bag of Engelsaugen cookies? Angel Eyes are my favorite too and Lilly brought them for all of us, not just Four Eyes."

"Oh, real mature, Gilbert," muttered Roderich as he tried to wrestle out of the head lock. "Besides, you took two huge slices of cake yesterday. Not to mention Elizabeta has been craving these."

"You can't keep using your pregnant wife as an excuse, Roderich!"

"She isn't pregnant…yet. She's just been-"

"Woah," Gilbert let go of his brother and stared at him before smirking, "Then has she been getting-"

"Don't say it…"

"Hand over some of those damn cookies and I won't!"

Berwald cleared his plate before slipping on his white coat, "Just give 'em a few. 'int gonna kill ya.
'Sides we need t' figure out who's gonna take care of th' interviews." He motioned for Ludwig to come join them and stuck out his fist. He waited for Roderich to hand over a couple of cookies over to Gilbert, which he gave one to Matthew before shoving his in his mouth, so that they too could stick their fist into the center of the group. Ludwig sighed and stuck his fist out. "Ready? Eins, zwei, drei!" The three older Germans flattened out their hands to make paper when Ludwig kept his hand fisted. They exchanged smirks, "Looks like Ludwig is doin' th' honors."

Ludwig looked at their pale hands in confusion before furrowing his eyebrows, "You three collaborated! That's not fair! Let's draw straws. I know where Vati keeps them."

"Not our fault you're so predictable," argued Gilbert as he slipped on his 'lucky' scrub cap with little yellow birds. "Besides, I've got surgery to prep for. Later boys." He turned to his husband for a quick peck before strutting out of the lounge. Matthew smiled apologetically before he too went to his side of the hospital.

"I'm afraid that I too must to depart," said Roderich in a tone that betrayed his words. He didn't sound at all sorry! "Ms. Krane is coming in for her checkup," he explained. Well perhaps…if that was the case, Ludwig could forgive him for his part. He watched as his brunet brother walked out of the lounge after tucking his bag of cookies in one of the cabinets. "I'll see you all for lunch."

The young doctor turned to face Berwald with a raised eyebrow, "And what's you're excuse? You work the ER this week and it's a Monday morning. It's hardly busy."

"Alfred is takin' care of th' ER." Berwald said with a shrug. He walked over to Tino and helped the petite blond man with his white coat, " M' fiancé needs help with James."

"I'm sorry, Luddy." Tino pulled his stethoscope around his neck and gave his brother-in-law a sheepish smile, "It's just that James doesn't want to take his medication and the nurses won't go near him. He bit Arthur and…well he needed stitches."

Well that explained why Alfred jumped at the chance to relieve Berwald of his duties in the ER. Arthur was scheduled to work the early shift due to the usual lack of traffic. Heaving a suffering sigh, Ludwig took the files his brother was handing him. "Ja, well, have a good day," he said stiffly before turning to head back to his father's office where he'd conduct the interviews. At least he'd get to be in an office with an actual window.

Feliciano rested his head miserably against his steering wheel. He had sped a couple of miles over what was considered socially acceptable and nearly hit an Audi; that alone had given him a near heart attack. The last thing he needed was to have his insurance increase in price. If that wasn't bad enough, he'd missed his first interview and stumbled through his second. The third hadn't gone as he had hoped either. "What's wrong with me?" Feli groaned and hit his head against the wheel. "Why can't I do this right? It's not like I'm not qualified. I'm more than qualified." But did he want it? Therein lied the real question. Sure he could virtually work at any hospital he wanted if he live up to his family name…

Running a hand through his auburn locks, Feli reached over for his list of interviews. The first three were scratched out and only one remained. Beilschmidt at 9:30 am. Glancing over at his dashboard, he saw that the clock ready 9:15. Damn. Pulling out of the parking lot, Feli made his way to the cluster of hospitals that stood out from the rest of the medical facilities in the district. Now, which one would he have to go to? He found a decent parking spot, in front of a black Audi
"Ve, what a coincidence," he chirped to himself, "It looks like the one I almost hit this morning." Feli shrugged on his leather messenger bag and shut the door of his old Toyota. It wasn't a sports car or even a luxury car but it had been unbelievably faithful throughout his time in school. He had to sell his first car in order to pay his bills but he wasn't going to complain. "Maybe I can get a new one if I get a job." With thoughts of his old car, current car, and the prospect of a new one, the young Italian checked his watch for the time. "Oh crap, I need to hurry, else I'll miss this one too!"

With a sudden urgency, Feliciano ran into the first building he saw. "Erm, excuse me." The auburn man bit his lip when the receptionist turned around with a look of annoyance. He realized that he'd have to play up the charm if he was going to coax her into assisting him. So with his best flirtatious smile he leaned against the counter, "Would you mind terribly in pointing me in the direction of a Dr. Wolfgang Beilschmidt? I have a very important interview."

Jessica felt her annoyance disappear as soon as she saw him smile at her, but for once in her life she couldn't find the means to communicate. "I-uh…"

"His office, bella?" Feli looked down at his watch again then at the woman in front of him in question. Any time now!

It had been the most excruciating three hours of his life. And that was saying much considering. It began when Ludwig arrived at his father's office, a line of ten candidates were already waiting for him. His initial impression of them was that they were obviously nervous. And they had every reason to be. The hospital had very high standards as to who would be accepted into their residency program. His father had very high standards.

Needless to say, when they saw that it wasn't the senior Beilschmidt who would be interviewing him but his son, they had lost their nervousness and immediately turned on their cockiness. He recognized a few of the candidates from school but that wouldn't help them. Their letters of recommendations seemed like the generic crap most would write so he wasn't very impressed. And now here he was, three hours later, waiting for the last one to show up. He didn't have his application in the file but he had been scheduled on the roster of applicants.

Ludwig cast his blue eyes down to his watch, 9:35. Always being one for punctuality, he made note of the applicant's lack of courtesy for time. He leaned back on the chair and swiveled with a bored expression. This was a complete waste of his time. He had rounds to do damn it! Then again…there were a couple of new recipes that he’d been formulating in his head for pastries. Having nothing better to do, the young doctor flipped over a new page in his yellow tablet and started to write down all the ingredients he’d need.

Finally, after coaxing the location of the office out of the flustered receptionist, Feliciano dashed down the hall and up the stairs only to find that the fifth flight was closed off by the janitor who was polishing the marble. Grunting in exasperation, Feli ran back down to the fourth floor. 'I'm going to have to use the elevators,' he thought, frantically looking at his watch, 9:50. The Italian rushed by nurses, one with large eyebrows who was muttering angrily at a doctor. Something about
him being a 'bloody tosser' or along those lines. He reached the elevator and started to abuse the 'up' button repeatedly until the silver doors opened to reveal two doctors.

"Had my husband in a headlock did you," she hissed angrily as she had her victim in a choke hold. The man's strange red eyes darted to Feli in a silent plea for help. "You were going to call me fat, huh-oh, hi, dear."

Gilbert took this time to break out of her hold and darted past Feli with a maniacal cackle, "Later, Lizzy! And I did you a favor. You don't need those cookies! What up, Bear?" He waved at his stoic brother as he made his way towards another elevator.

"Damn that, idiot." Elizabeta cracked her knuckles and stepped out of the elevator as well. "Forgive me, dear. Things aren't always this crazy. It's just that my idiot brother-in-law really knows how to press my buttons."

Feli didn't know what to say to that so he offered a polite smile and stepped inside the elevator to go to the top floor. He was going to need a miracle for this interview to go well.

The clock in his father's office read 10:05. Ludwig looked down at his list of ingredients and procedures that he'd try during his lunch break. "I think I've waited long enough," he said out loud. Gilbird, a canary his father and brother loved enough to bring him to work, chirped in response. "Good thinking. If I do my rounds now, then maybe I can finish early enough to go to the bakery for my lunch."

Ludwig gathered his things and set the desk as he found it, spotless with the exception of pictures of himself and his siblings. One frame in particular caught his eye. It was of his father and mother on their wedding day. The picture next to it was of his father and his best man. The man looked strangely familiar. It was in his honey colored eyes and unruly stray curls that escaped his otherwise near perfect hair. Well, whoever it was, he was sure more important than his other uncles for his father to pick him to be his best man. The cheerful look on his face vaguely reminded him of a certain Italian. The one who held his hand at graduation. "I wonder where he's doing his residency at," he muttered to himself.

Perhaps he shouldn't have been too hasty in dismissing him. Not that it would've been the first time he did. Ludwig held memories of the ditzy Italian trying to talk to him during their time in med school like he did in graduation. It was a shame...he was kinda cute. Groaning to himself with annoyance, he tapped his flushing cheeks in an effort to return them to their natural pale state. Why now of all times must he remember that idiot? Well, not idiot. He did best him in school. No, yes idiot. It was probably luck that got him those high marks. As a matter of fact, the difference between their GPAs were microscopic. But enough for the other to graduate with the highest honors...

Muttering to himself about stupid attractive Italians, Ludwig closed the door behind him. When he turned around he bumped into the one person he never thought he'd see again. "You?!"

Feliciano looked a mess. Of this he was absolutely sure. On top of that, he was completely winded. All that running and distressing sucked out all the remaining energy he had left. Panting he looked up with weary eyes and said the only thing he was capable of in his current state, "Eh?"

Before Ludwig could process how the universe could curse a man like this—or bless, he wasn't sure yet—he heard a deep rumble beside him, "Did you find someone for me to hire, Ludwig?"
A man nearly identical to all his sons looked at Ludwig, but the young German had lost all ability to think due to his shock and voiced the only thought he could formulate, "It's him!"

Wolfgang’s gaze followed his son’s gaze curiously. The young man looked terrible. Sweat stained his grey shirt and the papers in his messenger bag looked like they'd been hastily shoved in there. His shoelaces were undone and a watch with Feliks the Cat stamped in the center was peering under his sleeve. When Feli lifted his head to meet his eyes, Wolfgang smiled and offered a hand, "Congratulations, and welcome to Asclepius Hospital."

"Ve?"
At The End of The Day

Chapter Summary

Ludwig can't catch a break and Feliciano is dragged into a mysterious car. Ps- Never let it be said that Beilschmidt family dinners are boring.

"What?"

Ludwig and Feliciano exchanged shocked glances then looked at the long-haired doctor before them. Was he serious? Feli hesitantly took the outstretched hand and stood up. "Sir, I-

"Are perfect," interrupted Wolfgang as he shook the tanned hand enthusiastically. "You graduated top of your class, have phenomenal test scores and will help me win the bet."

"B-bet, sir?"

"Ja. You see, I just came back from a meeting with the other heads of hospitals in the city and we were just discussing which of us you were going to choose."

"But, sir." Ludwig tried to get his father's attention, "I didn't-"

"You're dismissed, son. Thank you for conducting the interviews. I'll take care of the rest." Wolfgang waved his son away and led Feli into his office. The Italian sent an apologetic look over his shoulder before shutting the door behind him. "Sit, sit. Would you like something to drink?"

Feli did as he was told and clutched his messenger bag to his chest, "No, thank you, sir." He watched Wolfgang shrug before pulling out a leather portfolio, shifting the tabs until he found whatever it was he was looking for. The elder pushed a stack of documents and a pen towards the Feli who looked between the two before giving Wolfgang a confused stare, "Uh, sir, what is this?"

"This is the paperwork you need to fill out. It's just the standard procedure, insurance policies, rules of conduct." Wolfgang paused to take a sip of coffee before continuing, "Benefits and salary."

Golden eyes widened when he saw the amount he'd be earning his first year, "Dr. Beilschmidt, this is too much, sir. I couldn't-"

"Hmm?" Wolfgang looked at the sum, "Is it? Well, perhaps that's why so many want to start their residency here," he said with a chuckle. "Not only do we train the very best but we make great doctors greater. Not to mention, I understand how student loans work. It is such a crime what those banks do to you students. Why erode at the stones that are meant to create not only our economic but country infrastructure stronger? I'm aware of your...current situation and while I know that you will not suffer as your other fellow students, it doesn't harm to reward those who have earned their worth."

Feliciano looked down at the documents again. This was truly a blessing but how did he know about his economic situation? No matter. Reaching out for the pen, he signed and initialed all the
slots before pausing, "Do I need to include my title?"

"You don't have to but one would think that you would want to write that on everything."
Wolfgang chuckled to himself, "As a matter of fact, my eldest, Gilbert, after he completed his residency, would sign everything from checks to correspondence with MD MS after his name. There is no shame in doing it. After all you earned the right to do so." He watched as Feliciano timidly signed his name on the last document, only taking a slight pause before adding the abbreviations. "My, my! Ludwig’s seemed to have found me a gem worth polishing!"

Wolfgang reached out for the paperwork and ran his eyes over all the slots with a satisfied smile. "Ok. We're done for today. Come back tomorrow and I'll set you up with your partner and supervising physician. Tomorrow, you'll go through orientation with two others so it will be an easy day. You'll get a tour of the facilities and you'll get to meet the rest of your colleagues."

Feli smiled and reached his hand out, "Thank you so much for this opportunity, sir. I won't let you down."

"I know you won't, Dr. Feliciano." Wolfgang returned the handshake, impressed by the other's grip. "I know you won't."

Feli skipped out of the hospital giddy with a happiness he didn't think he'd feel by working at such a prestigious location. Not only was he going to be able to get paid more than he ever would have anywhere else, given that he was the low man at the totem pole, but he was going to get to work with him! Ludwig Beilschmidt had been on Feliciano's radar since he first laid eyes on him but he had constantly been brushed off.

But now he'd have this chance to court him; oh, how wonderful the universe could be to bless him with such an opportunity after years of constant heartbreak! He continued skipping towards his parking spot, "I'm also going to be able to get Feliks and Gino out of that hell hole of an apartment. Maybe after I save enough we can move somewhere…else…What?!" Feli looked around his spot for his car. Didn't he park it here? In front of the Audi?

"Ve~ did someone steal it?" Feli backed up slowly towards the building before furrowing his brow, "Who would want that piece of tin when they could've taken these!" He turned around to ask to see the security footage, muttering as he went and completely unaware of a sleek black car pulling up behind him. "This is such a thing the universe would do, give me a taste of happiness then tinge it with poison so that-Oh!" Feli felt a pair of arms wrap themselves around his torso before tossed inside the dark car.

"Drive."

Ludwig ran his hands down his face after he checked up on his last patient. Checking his watch, he realized that it was time to meet his siblings down at the cafeteria for lunch. "I'll see you in a couple of hours, Mr. Busa." At the man's sleepy nod, the young doctor made his way to the elevator. He pressed the button and leaned back, his head resting against the wall. "I can't believe I made such a fool out of myself in front of him," he mused out loud. "Not that he acted any better." A gentle chime alerted him that he reached the third floor Cafeteria. As soon as he walked out, he was pulled into an embrace.

"There you are, sweetie!" Elizabeta released him and grinned cheekily, "We heard who you hired. Quite a cutie, that one." She followed after him to their usual table where Tino was setting out their
lunch in the center of the table for everyone to get. "Mmm, that looks great, dear."

Tino blushed as he set out the last of it, "Thank you. Berwald told me that it was our turn to bring lunch and I thought maybe I would try my hand at cooking Wurst."

The Hungarian giggled, "Yeah, that's their favorite thing to eat for some reason."

"Some reason?" Gilbert sat down across Ludwig and draped a napkin over his leg, "Maybe 'cause wurst is the most awesome thing ever created! After my Birdie’s maple syrup covered buttermilk pancakes that is." He leaned over and kissed his husband on the cheek before looking over to his soon to be brother-in-law, "Beware, Tino, your fate rests in this delicious smelling delicacy."

Tino’s hand froze midway inside his bag for the drinks, "W-what?" His brown eyes widened in terror as they darted between the Beilschmidt brothers to Elizabeta and Matthew. "Ber, you didn't tell me that!"

"Didn't think ya needed t' know," said Berwald once he settled into his own chair. "'sides yer cookin' is delicious no matter what ya make."

Roderich removed his coat and rolled his sleeves delicately up his forearm, "Don't mind them, Tino. They're just pulling your leg." He reached out to fill his plate, "Anyway it's our father whose palate you need to impress."

"Enough, guys," cried Matthew with a half-hearted frown, "You're scaring him."

"Aww come on, Birdie." Gilbert pulled his husband down on the chair next to him. "We're just teasing. Remember when they did the same to you and Elizabeta? It's like a tradition." He grinned when he heard Matthew grumble to himself. "Speaking of teasing," he took a bite from his spicy wurst, "this is pretty awesome by the way Tino," he winked at Berwald who nodded, "I think it's Ludwig's turn to be in the hot seat."

Everyone turned to the youngest Beilschmidt present with a grin or a smirk, or in Berwald's case a raised eyebrow. Ludwig felt their eyes on him and sighed, "I'm not in the mood to be teased about Natalya."

Roderich rolled his eyes, "Why on earth would we even-"

"Anyway," interrupted Gilbert, "that's not who we're talking about. What's this I hear from Lizzy, you got Vati to hire that Italian cutie whose hand you were holding during graduation?"

Matthew and Tino shared an amused look as Ludwig suddenly came down with a coughing spell. When the young doctor wiped his mouth, he sent a glare to his brother, "I did no such thing. He held mine." Oh great. He furiously smashed his potatoes with an embarrassed flush as Gilbert cackled to himself. "And I most certainly didn't make Vati do anything. I didn't even interview the idiot."

"What?" Berwald looked up from his lunch, "How did ya get, Vati t' do that?"

"I didn't. I was waiting for him to show up, the man was late to the interview, and when I finally decided that I waited long enough he runs into me. Vati shows up and assumes that he's the one I picked since I had already sent everyone else away."

"Well, I saw th’ list of applic’nts and none of ‘em really looked like a match save fer one. What’s his name?"
"Feliciano Vargas." He continued to eat until he realized that the table was silent. "What?"

"Vargas? Vati hired Vargas?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Dude, Feliciano Vargas is going to work with us," asked Alfred excitedly. He pulled out the seat next to Matthew and flipped it around so he could rest his arms on the back as he sat down. "Man, that dude is wicked awesome."

"Hey there, bruder," Gilbert slapped his brother-in-law on the back. "How did the ER treat you this morning?"

Alfred reached out for a potato wedge with a shrug, "It was slow but that was ok. I got to spend some time with Artie. There was this dude who came in asking for a refill of pain meds. Man," Alfred took another potato and shook his head, "I don't know what the deal is with these junkies. It's like, if you're going to come in here asking for that, at least don't look the part. I don't know if you get any during your shift, Berwald, but when I'm down there, I get these patients who are complaining about massive pains. Sometimes those are the hardest to distinguish."

"How can you tell?" Elizabeta took a sip from Roderich's drink before getting a second helping.

"Well, usually, we check the system and see how frequently-" "Hey-eh," interrupted Gilbert. "As much as I love talking about work during our break time, I wasn't done ragging on Ludwig and his little Italian."

Ludwig cursed to himself. And here he thought he'd been saved the embarrassment of talking about Feliciano. He rolled his eyes, "He's not my anything. I don't even know him."

"The dude is pretty awesome," complimented Alfred again. "Mathias took this one patient to the free clinic off the interstate between Fulton and Crumb road. You guys know which one I'm talking about?"

Tino chewed on a bread roll thoughtfully, "Hmm…oh yeah, I do! It's the one where I did my first year residency after graduation. Before…” he looked over to Berwald, his eyes saddening when he saw the tip of a faint scar on his fiancé's throat. "I know where it is."

"Mm! Who made this sausage?"

"I did," admitted the small doctor timidly.

"It's delicious, bro. Good job!"

"Thanks."

"Anyway, Mathias took the patient there 'cause he was losing too much blood too quickly and it was the closest place he could get to. I think it was from like a turf war or something. Remember that time a few weeks ago we got so many patients with like bullet and stab wounds in the ER that everyone on call had to come down? I think we even called you down, Gil."

"Yeah, I remember that." Gilbert frowned at the memory, "that was a rough night."

"Well, you can imagine what it was like at the clinic. I don't think they have the kind of funding we do here." Alfred paused when Ludwig suddenly stood up, "Dude, don't you want to hear the
Feli glared at his captor, arms folded in annoyance. It was a battle of who was the most stubborn at this point, but he didn't care if he was acting like a child. The man before him was acting like one as well. It was a few more minutes before a woman spoke up, "Oh, for heaven's sake, Babbo." The woman lightly smacked her father's arm before spreading hers in invitation, "Feli, come here."

The young Italian uncrossed his arms and smiled warmly at the woman in front of him. Her long auburn hair was curled into soft ringlets with the exception of one single curl that curled to the left. The bangs were pinned to the side of her face with an elegant brooch in the shape of a sun. Piercing green eyes glittered with happiness when Feli did as he was told, "I'm so happy to see you again, Feliciano."

Feli nuzzled into the woman's abdomen affectionately, breathing in deeply to take in her scent. "Ve~ you got even more beautiful since I last saw you."

She giggled and lightly ran her fingers through his thick hair, "Ever the flirt, Feli. I swear you take after your grandfather."

"I missed you, mama." Feli met his mother's gaze and smiled, "But now I get to come home for dinner again. Right?"

Nicola looked over to her father, "That's for your grandfather to decide, figlio." She felt his arms tighten around her, "But, you've more than earned your place amongst us. Isn't that right, Babbo?"

"Feli, look at me." Romulus patted his grandson on his shoulder, "Feli?"

"Grandpa may I ask you something?" Feli released his mother and sat back in his seat, "Did you have something to do with my car?"

"Of course, I did."

Feli pouted, "Don't look so happy about it!"

"I'm sorry, but I couldn't have you driving around in something so... beneath you."

"Beneath?" Feliciano narrowed his eyes, "That car has been very faithful to me. Not to mention it was all I could afford."

"What happened to the car I bought you for graduation?"

"I had to sell it to pay the bills." Feli leaned back in the leather seat, "What am I going to do now? Is this another one of your tests?"

"You could've always tapped into your bank account like your brother and cousins did," countered his grandfather. He looked at his young grandson with amused eyes. "After you graduated the first time, it wasn't against the rules, you know?"

"Ha, and not learn the lessons I needed to learn along the way?" Feli scoffed, "It would've defeated the purpose of this rite of passage and besides," his face softened and the corners of his mouth
lifted up in a fond smile, "I like knowing that everything I achieved was done all by myself. Wasn't that why you make us do this, grandpa?"

"He's not saying anything bad about it, figlio," said his mother gently. "We just think that it has taken you a long time to come back home to us."

"I know what awaits me there."

Romulus's eyes hardened momentarily, "Are you turning your back on the family, Feli?"

Feli looked as if he had been slapped. With his brow furrowed and jaw tightened, he shook his head furiously. "Never, grandfather. I would never turn my back on the family." His eyes softened again as he reached out to take the older Italian's hand, "Nonno, I'll always be loyal to the family, but I'm sure you'd understand that I enjoy the freedom I have."

Content with that answer, the older Italian nodded, "I'm glad to hear that because today is the day you come home. Just to take care of a few things," he added quickly when he saw that Feli was going to protest. "You need to get your mark finished."

"I thought it would be finished when I found a significant other?" Feli brought a hand to over his heart. "Why would I-"

"Have you found your other half?"

Lowering his eyes, Feli shook his head, "But I'm working on it."

"Do you have your eye on someone special, bambino?" Nicola looked at her son with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

"I…I do, si."

"Hmm, well then perhaps we should wait on finishing your mark. What do you think, Babbo?"

"Very well." Romulus smiled at his grandson and reached over to pull him into a hug, "I'm so proud of you, Feli. My adorable baby grandson is all grown up into a man." He nuzzled against Feli's hair, "You have no idea how much we've missed you. Did you like the presents we sent you with Lovi?"

"I did, grazie."

"You know that you are now free to use the money in your bank accounts as you please, si?"

"Si, grazie, nonno." Feli returned the embrace lovingly. He looked out the window and saw that he was back at the hospital where they picked him up. "But…how am I going to get home?"

"You'll see." Romulus released his grandson so that the young man could hug his mother goodbye. "There is going to be a party at the house in a few weeks. I trust that you'll be there."

"A party? Will there be pasta?" Feli grinned when he saw his grandfather wink. He waved at the departing car before looking going back to his parking spot, gasping when he saw that a new car was already waiting for him. Well, it wasn't new new as a matter of a fact…Feli ran to his first car and touched its body gently, "My little Romeo," he cooed happily, "I've missed you!" He slid inside, placing his bag in the passenger seat before turning the key to ignite the engine. "Did you miss me too?" The loud purr brought a grin to his face. As he drove down the road he realized that perhaps it wouldn't be wise to bring his car home. After all he didn't live in the safest place. "Ve, I
know!

It was around eight when Feliciano finally returned home. He'd taken his car to a garage for safe keeping and had taken a taxi back to his shared apartment. "Fe," he called out as he placed his messenger bag in the closet along with his shoes. "Feliks, I'm home!"

His roommate came out of his room still in his work uniform, "How did it go?"

"Ve, I missed the first one and the other ones didn't go so great but the one at Asclepius Hospital…"

"Yeah?" Feliks followed Feli into the living room, climbing over the couch and sat on it with his legs tucked underneath him while the latter took a seat next to him. "Like, come on, don't keep me in the suspense."

Feliciano grinned brightly, "I got it! I'm a resident at Asclepius!"

"That's, like, toots awesome!"

"Ve, I know! But that's not the best part. My grandfather told me that I can come back home whenever I want!" Feli noted how his friend's face fell and reached out to place a hand on his shoulder, "But I'm not going to live with them, Fe. It's more like I can come over for the family dinners and be invited to the parties they throw. You and I are still going to be roommates."

"Oh, it's not that. I, like….what about…." Feliks frowned into his lap as he tried to figure out how to put his concerns into words. He picked at his white sleeves in thought. "They aren't going to make you take over the business still are they?"

So that's what it was. Feli leaned back against the couch with his knees pulled into his chest. He'd had the same concern but his grandfather knew how much being a doctor had meant to him. Surely, he wouldn't force him to take over the family business; not when he had two other siblings and countless of cousins that would be more than willing. "You know, when I was younger I would've given anything to be the successor but…I think my grandpa knows that I enjoy this path I've chosen. No, don't worry about it, Fe. I'm sure he'll find someone else." Feli thought of his cousin, Marcello. He owned a successful club. Not to mention that he was also very business savvy. Perhaps he'd get to inherit the business.

Shrugging, Feli stood up before ducking back down when he heard gunshots. Oh, come on! Couldn't the universe just let him have at least this moment of peace to enjoy his accomplishments?! Was that too much to ask? He dragged Feliks with him and motioned for them to crawl behind the couch when he heard more gunshots ring out, one breaking through their window. "Ve, come on, Fe. Let's move to the hallway!" Feliks nodded and together they crawled swiftly into the hallway that connected their bedrooms.

Feli watched as his friend bumped his head against the wall softly in silence as they heard more gunshots followed by angry screams. He chewed his lip in thought before reaching a conclusion after another bullet pierced their window. "Let's go. We need to pack what we can and leave."

"Like, where?"

"We can stay in a hotel until we find a better place. Go and stay low to the ground. Only take what you need. We can come back for the rest tomorrow."

"Ok."
The Italian made his way to his own room to pack fresh clothes along with a pair of scrubs for tomorrow. Looking back into his closet he pulled out a small black safe box. He wasn't sure why the neighborhood went to hell. As far as he was concerned it hadn't been all that bad. Maybe one or two street punks who, in their desperation, would mug an unsuspecting victim. And it would always be with the most ridiculous weapons. But now…all this firepower…for what? Or rather for whom?

With steady hands, he poked the combination into the box and pulled out what was inside. There was no need to get anyone else involved. If his suspicions were wrong, then he'd just cause more trouble than it was worth. After all, they hadn't directly or intentionally shot at him or Feliks. But still, "Ve, better safe than sorry, no?"

Ludwig pulled into his family's estate and parked next to his father's car. He'd been the last one to leave the hospital as Mr. Busa had gone into cardiac arrest and he had to stay behind to take care of it.

Heaving a long sigh, the young German pulled out the house key to enter. The house smelled of floor polish and their dinner. He rolled his eyes when he heard his family bicker in the dining room, or rather, Gilbert bickering with Elizabeta about one thing or another while a complex version of Ode de Joy played in the background.

When he entered the dining room it was just as he suspected. Roderich sat in the corner at his grand piano wearing the same deep purple dress shirt he wore to work only now he had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows while his fingers danced across the ivory keys. With each indented key, melodious notes escaped from the instrument, piecing together Beethoven's classical piece. Beside him, Lilly was reading a textbook on microbiology, her green eyes moved rapidly across the page as she highlighted important sentences while taping her foot to the music their older brother produced. At the small table across from her, Vash was playing a game of chess against Berwald. Neither were winning or losing.

"West," cried Gilbert, "tell your sister-in-law that that stupid stream soda thing is a bunch of lies. Nothing is going to beat the original, Lizzy. You can carbonate that water and pour all the syrup you want but it ain't going to change the fact that it tastes like you took the residual water from a coffee machine and mixed it with baking soda and sugar."

Vash looked up from his game with his brows furrowed in disgust, "That's awfully specific, Gilbert. Matthew, please tell me he doesn't actually have experience drinking something like that."

Mathew—bless him—smiled brightly and said, "I have no control over what he drinks when he’s with his friends. He knows this and if he chooses to go along with their dares, he alone must deal with the consequences."

"Yeah, I’m gonna go ahead and take that as a yes."

Elizabeta huffed in annoyance, "It doesn’t taste that bad."

"I have to agree with Gilbert and say that that stuff’s pretty gross, Liz,” said Ludwig as he sat across his eldest sibling and removed the cap of a beer bottle. "It tastes almost as bad as the coffee my machine makes." They made more small talk while Roderich played the piano in the background until they heard the front door open again, signifying that their father was home. They quickly sat up, Roderich gently closed his piano before going to his seat, Berwald and Vash ended their match.
in a draw and Lilly marked her book before scurrying to her seat next to Vash.

"Welcome home, Vati," they said in unison.

"Danke, mien kinder," he said tiredly. The elder German handed his blazer to a maid before running a hand through his long hair, pulling it into a loose ponytail. "How was your day?" Wolfgang took his seat at the head of the dining room table, followed by his children and in-laws. He listened intently as they took turns retelling the exciting parts of their day while more maids brought out their dinner. Tino placed a plate out for his future father-in-law with trembling hands.

"I hope you enjoy this, sir. I made it myself."

Tino scurried over to his seat next to Berwald and watched Wolfgang poke at the wurst, testing its texture. From underneath the table, his stoic fiancé held his hand in reassurance.

"This is delicious, Tino. Thank you for making it," said Wolfgang kindly after he took a bite. "My son is lucky to have found someone to make wurst as good as you. Actually, all my eldest are lucky. A spouse who can make good food is hard to come by these days." He cast a look towards Ludwig, "I hope Natalya knows how to cook for your sake."

"Vati, must we invoke her name at the table," groaned Vash. "You know what they say, speak of the devil and he shall appear."

"That's no way of speaking of your brother's fiancé, son," reprimanded Wolfgang as he dabbed at his mouth.

"He has a point though," muttered Gilbert into his drink making Roderich smirk.

Ludwig felt his stomach churn at the thought of his fiancé. There were only eleven more months until his freedom ended. For the time being, Natalya was staying in Russia with Ivan and their older sister, Natasha, where she was planning their wedding. It had been their unspoken agreement to stay away from each other until then, much to his gratitude. What they did in the meantime was their business and as far as he was concerned he could do whatever he pleased. Gilbert had insisted that he find someone to hook up with but the younger man had rejected the idea. He didn't want some cheap fling that wouldn't mean anything.

"Ludwig did you hear me?"

Ludwig unfurrowed his pensive brows and looked up to face his father, "I'm sorry?"

"I asked if you heard me."

Ludwig flushed in embarrassment. "Sorry, no."

Wolfgang sighed, "I was just letting you know that you are going to be partnered up with one of the new residents, seeing as though you are the senior resident we currently have. The task of supervising them will fall on all of you during their rotations. I'm counting on you."

"Which one am I going to be partnered up with?" Ludwig smashed at his potatoes gently while he waited for his dad to answer. He had a feeling but oh god he hoped he was wrong about it. 'Please don't let it be him. Please don't let it be him. Please don't let it be.'

"Feliciano Vargas."

Damn.
Ludwig realizes that Feliciano is actually a competent doctors. Feli tries to befriend his partner.

You could always count on Gilbert to disturb the tranquility that often accompanied silence, though this time Ludwig was grateful for his brother's obnoxious laughter. Even if it was directed at him and his misfortune. Ignoring Gilbert, Ludwig turned to address his father, "Vati, I would rather not..."

Wolfgang's fork paused halfway to his mouth, "Why not? I would've thought that you would have appreciated being partnered with someone of your level."

"Level, sir?"

"He'll be able to keep up with you, son. You're not going to have to hold his hand." He smirked into his drink while Gilbert let out a snort.

Gilbert wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and grinned at his brother, "Not to mention he's easy on the eyes, West. Who knows, this might be your chance to get it in at least once before you lose your vitals to some-"

"Honestly, Gilbert," squawked Roderich, slamming his cup onto the table. "Have you no restraint? How on earth Matthew deals with your uncouth behavior is beyond me."

"Oh, pull that stick out of your ass, Roddy. You're thinking it, too. West should get the chance to have some fun before getting married to her."

Roderich narrowed his eyes at his brother and huffed in annoyance. "There is no stick in my rear, Gilly."

"Kesese~ could've fooled me. Oi, West, whatever happened to Herr Stick? Didn't you lose him after Roderich borrowed him to use as a baton for his make believe orchestra?"

Roderich flushed in embarrassment, "W-what are you talking about?"

His young stoic brother leaned to whisper into Tino's, "He's talkin' 'bout th' time Roderich played with dolls."

"They weren't dolls!"

"Pretended they were musicians." Though Berwald's face was blank, Tino could clearly see the mischievous glint in his eyes and had to bite his lip to keep from giggling out loud.

"No, I did not!"

"Technically, dear, they were stuffed animals," clarified Elizabeta as she sipped some tea. "And leave him alone, Gilbert. At least he didn't have handmade Fritz dolls."
"Hey," cried her brother-in-law indignantly, "I'll have you know that those are collector's items. Not to mention old man Fritz was one of the greatest leaders Prussia ever had. Oh!" Turning over to Matthew, Gilbert asked, "Did I ever tell you that I have Prussian blood coursing through my awesome veins?"

He had, but Matthew humored his husband, "No, you haven't. That's awesome, Gill."

"Oh, please." Roderich glared at his older brother, "What's the point of bringing that up? You're only like, one-twentieth Prussian."

"Right, just like your one-fiftieth Austrian! No wonder you're such a sissy."

"Don't insult the Austrian in me!"

"I'll insult it all I want!"

"At least I'm not a barbarian like you and Berwald!"

Berwald glared over at his brunette brother, "Don't insult a Viking durin' a meal."

"You're not Swedish, Bear," muttered Vash.

Lilly cleared her throat to speak, "Can't we just agree that our ancestors all hailed from the great nation of Germania and call it even? Our parents are German after all, heh." But her suggestion went unheard by her older siblings and they continued to bicker amongst themselves. She sighed and leaned back into her seat, "Every dinner."

"Don't worry, Lil. They're all idiots." Vash reached out for his sister's hand, "Come on, let's go study for that test we have. Thank you for dinner, Vati." They both went around the table to bid their father farewell. Lilly gave her father a kiss on the cheek and Wolfgang nodded and patted his youngest on her head before giving Vash a warm pat on the back. When they left, he turned his blue eyes back to the scene that was so common on Mondays and Fridays for the Beilschmidt household, he continued to watch his oldest argue with one another.

"And why don't you—wait a minute…" A sudden wave of realization hit Gilbert, "I know what this is about. You're pissed about the cookies I took from the cabinet this afternoon, aren't you?!"

Roderich pointed at his albino brother with his fork, "Those cookies were mine and you knew it!"

"I didn't see your name on them!"

"How convenient!"

Ludwig blushed when he realized that they were fighting over his cookies. Were they really that good? Emma had said that they weren't that popular at the bakery so he only made a single batch. Perhaps he should start making more. A lot more. He should stop by the grocery store before going back home.

While he was making a mental list of things that he would need to make more Angel Eyes, his father decided that he let this night's argument come to an end. Placing his empty beer stein down, Wolfgang stood up abruptly and firmly said, "Gilbert, Roderich, Berwald. Office. Now."

The two bickering brothers immediately silenced and stared at their father in surprise. Usually, he didn't care about their petty arguments and would let them continue until they ran out of steam. Also, Berwald almost never got in trouble with the old man. Was he upset? If so, they didn't want
to upset him further so all three men stood up and quietly followed their dad to his study.

Elizabeta and Matthew exchanged amused glances before the Hungarian addressed Tino, "Welcome to the family, dear." The night ended when the three younger Beilschmidts and Beilschmidt senior left the study a half an hour later. Each couple, and Ludwig, dispersed back to their respective home for much needed rest.

Wide green eyes stared at the hotel their cab driver had taken them to, "Feli, is this the right place?" Having been in his panic mode, Feliks hadn't paid much attention to the address his friend had given the cabbie, nor had he paid attention to how suddenly the streets were full of people still bustling about as if it wasn't almost eleven on a Monday night. "Feli?"

"Ve?" Feliciano pulled out his bag and cat carrier after paying their fare before looking at the building before them, "Yeah, this is the right place."

Feliks turned around to gape at Feli, "Like, how the hell are we going to afford to stay at the freaking Olympia? This place has a waitlist for the waitlist. No way are they going to just, like, give us a room." Looking down at what they were wearing, well he, then at the people entering and leaving the hotel, he blushed in embarrassment. "I'm not even dressed for this place."

"Don't worry, Fe. You look just fine." Feli gently nudged his friend towards the revolving doors. "And I'll explain when we get our room." They walked up to the concierge desk and waited patiently for the man to acknowledge their presence. When he finally did, the young Italian smiled brightly, "Hello, my friend and I would like a room, please."

The concierge, Bill was his name, looked at the two men, taking in Feliks’ ripped jeans and black t-shirt with the polish flag and the Feli’s disheveled state. Both made certain bells go off in his mind. Luckily for him, Bill saw something in that would give him an excuse not to give them a room. "Sorry, no pets allowed, I'm afraid."

"What?" Feli looked down to Gino's carrier then at Bill, "Yes, you do. I specifically came here because the Olympia is animal friendly."

"Oh, well," Bill looked surprised that someone so… common would know that but quickly came up with another excuse. "You know that this is an exclusive hotel. All of our rooms are completely booked through the next year."

"Not all of them. You do have one. I know you do."

"Sir, I don't appreciate your tone."

"Fe, maybe we should go," muttered Feliks as he started to tug on Feli’s arm. "There are other hotels we can go to."

But the Italian held his ground. Shifting the carrier from one hand to another, he cast a glance to the large clock above them. He didn't have time for this. "My name is Feliciano Vargas. Look it up."
"Mr. Feliciano, I've been working here for quite some time now. I know exactly how many rooms are in this hotel and I know for a fact that they are all occupied." Bill reached over and pressed a small button to call security from under the desk. "Now, if you would kindly leave the premises…"

Feli’s golden eyes darkened as they met aloof grey but before he could say anything, he felt rough hands grab him by his arm.

"What's going on here?" The small group looked over to a man dressed in a smart suit and, given the time, still looked highly alert. The dark-haired man blinked behind his glasses when he recognized who his security was man-handling, "Feli?"

Feli stopped struggling and looked over to see who called him, "Ve?"

"Feli, it's me, Milen!" The Bulgarian glared to his staff, "Let go of them. Jeez, don't you recognize a VIP client when you see one?" He called for a bellhop cart to help them with their bags before encasing Feli in a hug, "Long time no see. Honestly, when your grandpa called me to tell me you graduated; I expected to see you a lot earlier."

"Ah, well, I did graduate more than once you know," said Feliciano sheepishly. "I'm a doctor now. Oh! Meet my good friend, Feliks. Feliks Łukasiewicz."

Milen extended his hand to shake Feliks’ who offered his with a confused smile, "Pleasure to meet you Mr. Łukasiewicz. Any friend of Mr- sorry, I mean Dr. Feliciano is a friend of mine."

The Italian blushed at the title and mumbled, "Just Feli is fine."

"Whatever you say—hey! Can I see it? Show me the thing, please!" Under normal circumstances, Milen would never let himself get this personal with a client but then again not everyone who frequented the hotel was his childhood friend. At Feli’s hesitation he added, "It's just us here. Besides," he shot Bill a look, "my subordinates need to be able to recognize you."

Sighing Feli undid a few buttons from his shirt and pulled it aside to show them, "It's not finished yet but—"

"What exactly am I looking at," interrupted Bill, seemingly unimpressed and very put off by how his boss was treating these riffraff. "Sir, where are we going to put them? There isn't a vacant room available."

"Forgive his ignorance." Milen waved the bell hopper away so that he could personally take the duo to their room. "I was told that it was on a need to know bases and he…well, after tonight’s behavior, I seriously doubt he'll be working here for long. Do you have your key?"

"I do." Feli couldn't help but feel a bit guilty that Bill would be dismissed but hey, that would mean there would be an opening and someone more deserving would get a chance to work.

Feliks followed after them, still too stunned to say much. Were they going to get a room because Feli knew the manager? No, wait, he said key. 'Feli has a key to a room in one of the most sought out hotels in the city?!' When the elevators opened, Feliks understood how it was possible. Smiling wryly he stepped in, his suitcase covering the dip of a V on the floor, encased within a sun.

Downstairs, Bill looked peeved by what had occurred and decided to look up in the system to see if there had been a check out done without his knowledge. F. Vargas, F. Vargas...VARGAS. His grey eyes widened with realization and he cursed his stupidity. Oh, he was going to be fired for sure! Reddening with shame and embarrassment, he saw that on the monitor that there was in fact one room available. It was marked with red lettering to insure that it would never be booked. How
could they? It had after all been reserved specifically for the Italian, five years ago.

Upon Milen’s departure, Feliks turned to face Feli and waited for him to release Gino from his carrier. Feli startled at his friend’s rigid stance and stuttered out, "F-Fe? What’s wrong?"

"You know,” started Feliks with arms crossed over his chest and brows furrowed in a hurt expression, “when you said that your family was pressuring you to take over the family business, I imagined something smaller like a pizza joint or something. When were you going to tell the truth?"

"Ve! I'm sorry, Fe. I wanted to tell you but I couldn't until my family said it was ok to do so…”

"I don't understand."

"Why don't you go shower while I order us some dinner? I'll explain afterwards. I promise."

"Ok."

When Feliks stepped out of the shower, cheeks from the heat, dressed in a fluffy white robe, he flocked to the kitchenette where Feli sat waiting for him. The promise of something not soaked in concentrate had him rushing to his seat. Feli watched his friend eat as he hadn't all day, wincing when he realized that that could very well be the case. "Fe, I'm going to tell you everything, ok?"

He waited for Feliks to acknowledge him. With a mouth full of pasta, he nodded and Feli sighed, "So, I guess it all started when I was five…”

Ludwig pulled into his designated spot, taking note that his brothers cars were already in their spots. Sighing, he reached out for his briefcase and coat. Another day. He got out of his car and waited for the taxi that pulled up to drive ahead before crossing the walkway to the building without paying attention to it had dropped off. It was when he felt a shy tug on his shirt sleeve that he bothered to acknowledge them.

His heart sped up.

There standing with a cheerful grin, dressed in dark blue scrubs was Feliciano. Next to him was a shorter man with black hair dressed in a similar fashion. "Ve, hiya! Are you here to take us to orientation? A doctor with white hair said that you would."

‘Damn you, Gilbert,’ thought Ludwig to himself. He gave a short nod and took out his I.D. card to let them in. He tensed when the light wasn't turning red. Oh, please. Please, no. Not wanting to call Jessica, Ludwig wiped the black strip on his card with his thumb before trying again, releasing a sigh of relief when the light turned green. He opened the door for the two residents. Leading them into a conference room, he went to his office to put his things away before rejoining them.

Inside, Roderich was already waiting, chart in hand and a mug of coffee in the other. Feli, Kiku and two other residents were sitting around the table. Ludwig sat on Roderich's right and opened his leather folder.
His older brother took one last sip of his coffee before clearing his throat, "Good morning, doctors. I am Dr. Roderich Beilschmidt and I am an Oncologist. Congratulations on being selected as Asclepius Hospital’s newest residents. As you know, Asclepius Hospital is unlike any other teaching hospitals. It was founded by Christopher Beilschmidt himself and started as a tiny cabin back in 1790 and has obviously reimagined into this modern institution by my father. Upgraded as it is, however, the concept in which it was founded remains the same. Here in Asclepius Hospital we treat everyone like family both colleagues and patients alike—partly because most of us are family—but don’t mistake our friendly attitude as weakness. We are not here to babysit you. The only reason you were selected was because you are the best and Dr. Beilschmidt Senior saw gems worth polishing so we expect you all to demonstrate it through your work."

Feli let his gaze wander from the dark haired doctor Ludwig sitting stiffly next to him. He felt the corners of his lips lift a fraction. How lucky he was to work next to Ludwig himself. Perhaps now that they were colleagues, he'd see him as an equal. And if that happened, then perhaps they could become friends and hopefully, if he played his cards right, something more.

It was true that Feli had had his heart set on Ludwig, and after so many hit and misses, he'd managed to come up with a strategy.

'Ve,' he thought to himself, 'I hope I don't screw it up.' Feli returned his attention to Roderich as he was wrapping up the basics in regards to policies and such. It was pretty much the same in every hospital setting.

Ludwig felt eyes on him and already knew it was from Feliciano. He fought to keep the blush from actually reaching his face and had succeeded throughout most of the meeting. Though his face betrayed little of what he was feeling, his insides were chewing him up with anxiety. Why would his father force him to work with Feli? Was it to add insult to injury because he had graduated with superior marks to his? Or perhaps it really was because the Italian would be able to keep up with him. Honestly, he doubted it. It was one thing to learn theory and do clinicals in school and something completely different to actually be in the work environment. Then again, Feli had worked in a previous hospital before. Even if it was practically falling at the seams.

"And that concludes this portion of the orientation." Roderich stood and calmly pushed his chair in, "Remember, the program is broken down into five rotations between the ER, ICU, Pediatrics, General, and OR. Each of you will be paired with a senior residential partner as well as a teaching physician." He motioned for the rest to stand, "I will now take you on a tour of the facilities so that you know where everything is located. You will meet the rest of the staff and be assigned a mentor. This mentor will be yours for the remainder of your residency. Afterwards, Jessica, our receptionist, will take your photograph for your identification cards."

Roderich allowed Ludwig to leave to perform his rounds while he took the first year residents on their tour of the hospital. The young German was halfway through his patients by the time his older brother was done. Feli shyly came up to him with his freshly printed I.D clipped to his scrubs pant pocket. "Hello, Dr. Beilschmidt. I was told that you are my partner and that Dr. Berwald would be my mentor."

Ludwig offered no comment; instead, he continued to jot down readings from the monitor on his sleeping patient. Perhaps if he stayed absolutely quiet, then he'd go bother Berwald. Moving to the next patient, he heard soft footsteps follow. Then again, maybe not. Sighing he checked her x-ray to make sure she wouldn't need surgery. He smiled when he found that it would be a simple procedure. "Hallo, Ms. Garza, I have some good news for you today; we're going to be able to set your arm." She didn't respond with other than a scowl.
"Ve," breathed Feli as he reached out for the clip board on the edge of Ms. Garza's bed. The young girl arrived a few minutes ago due to having dislocated her shoulder falling down some stairs and was currently glaring at her television screen. "How are you feeling today, Isabel," he asked cheerfully.

The teenager turned her brown eyes to her doctor then to the shorter one, "I'm sitting in a freaking hospital bed while my friends are on live TV performing for the high school game of the century. How do you think I'm feeling?"

Feli looked at the game on TV, and noticed that it was W.H. Academy versus Durmstrang. Two strong schools indeed. "Ooh, that is going to be a good game. I'm surprised that W.H.A. actually made it though."

"What?! I'm from that school you know, we're plenty awesome!" She pouted angrily and fist her uninjured hand in her bed sheets, "Besides, what would you know about football, old timer?"

"Hey, I'm not that old. Though it does say here you're sixteen…guess I'm only nine years older than you!" Feli grinned at the girl as he removed the ice pack from her shoulder so that they could set the bone back in place.

"Whatever." Isabel flinched at the gentle pressure being lifted from her, "You're still an old timer." She glared at Ludwig. "You are too."

Ludwig ignored the insult at his age and looked through the chart again, "Your parents have already signed the documents okaying this procedure so do you mind if we start?"

"Whatever," she muttered again. It didn't escape Feli's notice that the girl's eyes were misting over and, given that she had been administered some morphine, it wasn't because of the pain. He looked over to the TV again before nodding at Ludwig.

"Dr. Beilschmidt will do the honor today. You are his patient after all." Ludwig switched positions with his partner and felt the bone, gauging her reaction. He frowned when he noticed her wince but before he got a chance to ask if she wanted more he saw that Feli give a subtle shake of the head.

"Isabel is really pretty name."

The girl's eyes narrowed in annoyance, "Whatever. It's my mom's name too so it isn't very special."

"Ah, but it is because it's your name." Feli noticed that he wasn't getting a reaction out of her he changed tactics. "You really want to be at the game don't you?"

"Duh! Everyone's there. Even my stupid brother."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, he's the quarterback on the team and my parents are out there now." So that explains why she was so miserable. It also explained the misty eyes.

"They must be proud. You must be proud."

"I guess. It's his senior year and I…well I'm only a sophomore but, I actually made it into the drum line this year and I thought…"

"You wanted to be out there with your brother on the field."

Isabel sniffed and nodded. Ludwig looked at the teenager then at his partner who shared a
sympathetic smile. How on earth did this guy just bulldoze his way past all her walls? He saw Feli give him a ‘get on with it’ motion with his finger as he gently spoke to the weeping girl. 'So he was distracting her verbally?' Ludwig heard that the girl giggled and took that moment to pop her bone back in place.

"Where is the game going to be, Bella?"

"It's going to be at the V Stadium." Isabel wiped at her eyes and cast a look at the TV to see that they were starting to sing their anthem. Her brother's helmet was marked with a blue paw and she pointed it out, "He put our dog's paw print on his helmet so that we could see where he was."

"Ooh, that's pretty smart of him." Feli noticed that Ludwig was writing something on the chart, probably notes, before taking out a sling from one of the cabinets and handing it over to him. "Here Bella, let me put this on you."

"Am I done here?"

"I believe so."

“My parents signed some documents saying that I could go home when I was done. So…I guess I'm off."

"Would you like to go to the game?"

"I'd love to but…” Isabel looked sadly at the TV. "I can't drive and I don't have money for the bus. Not to mention that my parents don't like the idea of cabs."

Ludwig handed over a small baggie with pamphlets on how to care for her arm, "Your arm wasn't so bad. Just a dislocated shoulder. I advise that you do not do any heavy lifting, exaggerated movements, actually, keep your movements to a minimum. Come back in two months so that we can perform another x-ray. Here is your prescription for anti-inflammatory and painkillers."

Nodding to her, he moved on to another patient.

"He's cute but seriously? I have no idea what his problem is.” Isabella wrinkled her nose and shook her head, “He’s so...stiff.”

"Hey now, he's not so bad. We went to school together. He didn't have many friends I don't think."

"Are you his friend?"

Feli blushed, "No, not yet. But I hope to be. Come on, I'll take you to go check yourself out."

After making a quick call and sending Isabel on her way, Feli trailed after Ludwig like a lost puppy. He made their patients smile with his charm and Ludwig was, in spite of himself, becoming more and more impressed with the auburn idiot. Really, not once did they have to consult with Berwald. If Ludwig wasn't sure of something, Feli was ready with the answer and vice versa. And yet, the German couldn't help but start to feel flustered. The only other partner he'd ever had was Berwald and they were brothers so there were no feelings of awkwardness with each other. As matter of a fact, the two were so alike that they never had problems arise. Not that Feli was causing problems for Ludwig. Not intentionally at least.

"Mr. Busa is the last one, right?" Feliciano looked through the chart before greeting his new patient, "Ciao, I am Dr. Vargas, Dr. Beilschmidt's partner. How are you feeling today…” Ludwig tuned out the Italian's voice and watched as Mr. Busa immediately opened up to Feli.
'How the hell does he do it,' thought the German to himself as the elderly man chuckled at something Feliciano had said. He'd been caring for the man for months and he'd never so much as received a thank you. Perhaps it was him…Nah. He followed procedures to the last minor detail. But then again…he looked at Feli. His face was cheerfully relaxed; one leg was swinging from where it dangled off the bed where he had taken the liberty of taking a seat. His sneakers looked a little too worn out for only having worked a couple of months at a clinic. As a matter of a fact they looked like they'd seen better, _cleaner_ days. They must be awfully comfortable though.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the thought, he cleared his throat. Feli looked at his watch then smiled apologetically to Mr. Busa, "It's time for lunch, Jay. But, I'll be back when it's over and we can discuss the parallels and contrast in Van Gogh and Monet’s art."

"I'll hold you to that, son." Jay settled back on his bed for a nap, a content smile on his face. He didn't even acknowledge Ludwig's presence.

"Ve, are you ok, Luddy," asked Feli once the elevator doors closed.

Ludwig nearly choked on his spit at the nickname. Narrowing his eyes, he gave his partner a side glance, "I'd rather you not call me that."

"I'm sorry!" Feli ran in front of him and took his hands in his, making the other blush heavily, "I'm sorry, I didn't know you didn't like being called that. I should’ve asked if it was ok. Please don't be upset!"

"I-it's fine." Ludwig wrestled his hands away from the smaller man, ignoring how the feel of the other's warm hands on his made that annoying flutter in his stomach reappear. Perhaps he was simply hungry. It _was_ lunch time after all. "It's just that my family calls me that and you and I aren't exactly…properly acquainted." Not that he wanted to be any more acquainted than what his father was forcing him to be. This fool was clearly an unstable cannon waiting to shoot. A rather cute cannon but a cannon nevertheless!

"We could be." Now was it his imagination or did the way Feliciano say that sound…flirtatious?

Feli looked up at him through his lashes and smiled kindly, his hands inching for the other's again, "I know we didn't talk much during med school, but maybe us working together can make up for that. I'd really love for a chance to get to know you, Lud-er- Dr. Beilschmidt."

And there it was. Ludwig shoved his hands into his pockets just as Feli's fingertips brushed against his. Here he thought that perhaps Feli could be different given his genuine desire to help others. But no, he was just like all their classmates. _This_ is why he should wear his damn engagement ring. To ward off vultures like him who were clearly only after him because of his last name.

"Could I sit next to you during lunch?" Feli gave him another kind smile but Ludwig shook his head.

"I'm not eating lunch here," was all he said as he walked out of the elevator. '_I have better things to do with my time. Wonder if Emma saved me some vanilla extract?'_
As days turned to weeks, patients were more and more endeared with their new doctor. Feliciano seemed to light up every room he entered much to the staff's joy. Hospitals weren't known for their cheer but their new member was certainly living up to his name. Berwald was, admittedly, a bit put off that he hadn't been approached by his resident as often as Ludwig had in his first year, but he dismissed the thought. It was no doubt because the Italian had already covered the basics at the clinic and had probably seen a lot worse in his first months there.

Despite this smooth transition into the new workplace, Feli had yet to impress the one person he so desperately wanted to. Ludwig would continuously ignore his numerous attempts at conversation outside of work and requests to eat lunch together. As a matter of a fact, the German never bothered to show up to the cafeteria at all. Such was the case today as Feli looked around for someone to sit next to. So far, he hadn't truly had a chance to interact with the rest of his colleagues, having taken to eat lunch in his shared office in hopes to catch Ludwig there. But eating lunch in a lonely stuffy office was beginning to drive him mad and he'd decided to try having lunch at the cafeteria instead. If anything, at least there was noise to keep his mind occupied.

Feli spotted his mentor, Berwald, sitting alone near the window and made his way over. "Ve, hi Dr. Berwald. May I sit next to you?" He waited for the stoic man to say something. After a couple minutes of awkward silence, Feli took that as a sign that he could sit with him. He noticed Berwald slow down his intake until he stopped all together. "Are you ok, sir?"

Berwald said nothing, instead the crease in his brow grew and he abruptly stood up and walked away without his tray. The Italian clenched his plastic fork in his hand, "You could've just said no," he whispered as he poked at his spaghetti sadly, suddenly having lost his appetite. What was wrong with these Beilschmidts? First Ludwig treated him coldly, then Berwald gave him the cold shoulder. And earlier, even Roderich had appeared exasperated with his light hearted attempts to change the iPod in the break room with his own music to lighten up the mood just a few days ago. Apparently the brunette was picky about what he allowed others to enjoy...even though not everyone was particularly fond of listening to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony every day. On repeat! He hadn't met the other siblings but he was starting to pick up that perhaps they were all cut from the same cloth.
"Hiya," he chirped happily. "My name's Tino. Sorry I haven't introduced myself properly yet, actually, I'm very sorry that I haven't, but the children's ward has been a bit busy lately what with school starting and what not. What's your name?"

"I'm Feliciano but you can call me Feli if you want."

Tino pulled off his white coat and settled down in his seat. "Don't mind Berwald. Odds are he didn't hear ya."

Feli looked up from his plate, "Oh?"

"Mhm. He wears a hearing aid but lowers it when he eats in here cause he hates how loud it gets. So if you want to get his attention you have to talk a bit louder." Tino dug into his lunch just as Matthew joined them.

"Is this seat taken?" Matthew smiled kindly at Feli when the Italian shook his head no and motioned for him to take it. "Thank you, Dr. Vargas."

"A-ah, no. No need to call me that. Just Feliciano or Feli is fine."

"Ok." Matthew also removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves, "You can call me Matthew or Mattie if you want. Either will do."

"Ve, okie dokie!"

"So, how has general been for, ya," asked Tino, "I hear the patients are all smitten."

"It's been great! I really like working with Dr. Beilschmidt." When the two raised their eyebrows in surprise, Feli clarified, "Not senior. I mean Ludwig. Only he doesn't really like me calling him anything other than that."

"Don't take it to heart, kid." Gilbert dropped himself on the seat next to his husband and pulled off his surgical cap with a grin, "My unawesome little brother is like a clam with strangers. Especially cute ones, isn't that right, Birdie?"

Matthew gave a thoughtful tap to his lip with his spoon before answering, "I suppose so, though there really hasn't been that many guys that Ludwig normally clams up to."

"Ve..." Feli felt his chest clench. Maybe this was why Ludwig ignored his advances. He probably wasn't even interested in men and here he was making him uncomfortable to the point that he was literally chasing him away from his own meals.

Gilbert picked up on his sudden gloom and started to laugh. "Oh, you can bet your ass my brother's plenty gay. It's just that no one's gotten this close to him that wasn't a blood relative, you know? Which is why he's so-so-er, how did I put it, Birdie? I said something good this morning."

His husband sighed, "I'd rather not say, Gil. It was kinda rude."
"It was poetry is what it was." The albino pointed to Feliciano with his fork, "Poetry."

"You and poetry go together much like laxatives and sleeping pills," muttered Alfred as he pulled up a chair tiredly next to Feli. His brother-in-law made a face making him chuckle, "Don't ask, dude. Just know that I'm so going to owe Artie a romantic dinner for taking that patient to his ward." He grabbed a handful of fries from his tray and stuffed them into his mouth, "So what are we talking about?"

"Oh, nothing, just my socially awkward brother. Feli here keeps hitting on him and it's not working."

"I can see why. Ludwig isn't exactly avail-ow!" Alfred yelped his brother swiftly kicked his leg under the table. He glared at him but was met with an innocent smile. "Any way, the thing about Ludwig is that he's German."

"Huh?" Feli cocked his head to the side in confusion. "I'm not hitting on him, I don't think." He frowned to himself. Not that he didn't want to flirt with the man but Feli genuinely cared about him and the last thing he wanted was to treat him like he would any other guy or girl he flirted with for the hell of it.

"We're pretty tough cookies to crack, kid. Well, not me," boasted Gilbert proudly. "But not everyone can be as awesome as I am. Take my brother Roderich for example. It took Lizzy like practically all our youth to get his attention."

Tino spoke up with confusion, "Berwald told me it was because Roderich thought you and her were a couple."

"Well, yeah but the thing was we weren't. You see, Lizzy and us go way back," he explained. "She was the first person outside my dad I told about my sexuality. Despite how much we bicker, she's actually one of my closest friends. You should've seen the look on Roddy's face when I came out of the closet. It was like Bach himself had risen from the dead and complimented him on his symphonies. After that, he and Elizabeta were together. But it obviously took that bombshell to crack Roderich's shell. It was easy pickings after that."

Feli turned to Tino, "What about you? Was it hard to get close to Dr. Berwald?"

Tino flushed at the question. Memories of his first encounter with his gentle giant of a fiancé flooded his mind but before he got a chance to speak Berwald came back with a tray full of pastries, "Sorry I left ya alone," he said to Feli. "M' sister told me she was bringin' some pastries for us." He began to distribute the chocolate éclairs to them before settling back down in his seat, taking a hold of Tino's hand from under the table and giving it a small squeeze.

"So tell us about yourself, Feli." Matthew cut a bite sized portion of his éclair and looked at his coworker expectantly.

"What would you like to know?"

"Everything," answered Gilbert with a devilish grin. "We want to make sure you're going to treat our little brother right. If we like what we hear then we'll help ya out."

The Italian studied his coworkers suspiciously. It wasn't often that he was offered assistance in this aspect of his life; then again, he'd never needed it as he’s only ever had one serious relationship. "Thank you but I'd really like to do this myself. His friendship is something that would mean very much to me and it would be even more precious if I earn his trust on my own." He heard his pager
go off and he checked it before offering an apologetic smile, "Ve, I'm sorry, I gotta go. Grazie, for letting me eat lunch with you guys. It was getting really lonely eating alone in the office."

The small family watched him take his tray to the disposal before skipping out of sight. Berwald and Gilbert exchanged glances. Perhaps father had been correct in pairing their serious brother with the Italian. And perhaps they wouldn't need their help after all, but knowing Ludwig, a little nudge of encouragement wouldn't hurt.

~October~

Ludwig wasn't stupid. As the weeks turned into months, he could see that his partner had upped his advances. It began with small things. For example, on mornings when it rained, there would be a nice hot cup of coffee. Real coffee, none of that crap his machine made him, along with two heart shaped cookies and a note telling him to have a wonderful day. On mornings when there was no rain, he'd find small boxes of sliced fruit and a cup of yogurt or perhaps handmade breakfast sandwiches with freshly squeezed orange juice. At first, he thought it was one of his siblings that left these behind, but when he'd meet with Feliciano to start their rounds, the Italian would blush and ask if he liked his snack after offering a shy greeting.

That was another thing, Ludwig noticed. Feli tended to tone down his over-zealousness whenever he was around. It had been strange at first. Almost like Ludwig was a feral puppy and Feli was trying to coax him into his arms with gentle coos and lots and lots of patience. The German slapped at his reddening cheeks in embarrassment. "What nonsense am I thinking? Me, a puppy… preposterous!" He dug his large hands into the bowl and scooped out his dough onto the floured counter.

The German continued to mutter to himself as he kneaded the dough, "If I were said puppy then that would mean he'd be my master." Despite his mutterings, Ludwig couldn't help but acknowledge the fact that saying that out loud had made his heart skip a beat and the cursed blush return to his cheeks. Bah! It wasn't as if he enjoyed being doted on. Of course not! He certainly didn't ask for the attention…but then, again he hadn't exactly told him to stop either.

He sighed as he reached out for more flour to dust his rolling pin. Feli hadn't been like his other pursuers. He didn't quit despite his lack of response. Normally whenever others had tried to get too close, his glare was enough to send them running for the hills. But no. Not Feliciano. If anything it seemed as if the Italian would always figure out a way to keep him on his toes, never repeating the same thing twice if the first had truly offended him, which in all honestly, if he was truly being honest with himself, it rarely did.

"Is something wrong, Luddy?" Emma looked over from a birthday cake she was decorating and furrowed her neatly groomed eyebrows at her cousin in worry. "That's the eighth time you've sighed since you got here."

"Is it?" Ludwig winced then averted his eyes in embarrassment. He'd been so engrossed thinking about Feli, er baking, that he'd forgotten that Emma was in the room with him. "I'm sorry."

"No, no. It's ok. I was just worried because you never really sigh that much unless something is really bugging you. Wanna talk about it?" Emma rolled closer to Ludwig while wiping her hands on an apron. "Is it about the Berwald and Tino’s wedding? Because I told you I can totally make both the groom’s cake and the recital one so that you can take care of the one for the reception. I know Berwald wanted to help make that one so…"
"It's not that."

"Your wedding then?"

"That's not for a while so no."

Emma blew a lock of hair from her face, "Come on, Luddy. Work with me he-" She was cut off when Lilly walked in as she tied her own apron around her waist.

The young German girl gave a bright smile to her cousin and brother, "Hi, guys. Um, Em, Mathias is in the front. He wants to say hi."

She bit her lip to keep her giggles in when she saw how the older girl gave an annoyed growl. She took the now vacant seat and peered out the window to see her cousin smash a cupcake in the paramedic's face. "Why is she so mean to him? He's a very nice guy."

"Lately he and Lars have been hanging out more than usual and she's jealous."

Lilly turned to face her brother in shock, "Really? Which one is she jealous of?"

Grinning, Ludwig continued to roll out his dough, "Not sure."

"What were you and Em talking about before I came in? Are you not feeling well, Luddy?"

The smile evaporated from his face and was replaced by a frown, "It's not that." At his sister's expectant expression he continued. "I'm not doing all that well at work."

"Oh." Lilly reached out a small hand and placed it on Ludwig's shoulder. "I'm sorry to hear that, big brother. I wish Vati hadn't pressured you to do that."

"He didn't."

"Well, no, not directly I guess. But really," she frowned to herself and played with some of the flour on the counter, "a whole family—well, lineage—of doctors…one person not wanting to be part of that, it practically spells out black sheep, but you know, I don't think Vati or our brothers would've cared if you didn't become a doctor."

"He gave me this bakery. Me following the path already set was the least I could do."

"But you're not happy."

"I'm content enough. It's just that…I don't really feel all that appreciated for what I do." Ludwig thought back to how appreciative Mr. Busa had been to Feliciano when he was discharged yesterday. It was as if the Italian had done all the work himself when it was Ludwig who had to deal with the man for the first month's duration of his stay.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's not your fault. Actually, it's no one's fault by my own."

Lilly twirled in Emma's stool in thought, "Well, there is one positive thing about working there." At her brother's grunt she grinned, "Dr. Feliciano is really nice. He seems to care about you."

Her brother froze, his hand on the knob of the drawer where he kept his cookie cutters. "What?"

"He cares about you. Teddy told me about the flowers Dr. Feli's been leaving you."
The flowers. Berwald. Ludwig busied himself in his search for the cookie cutters to keep Lilly from seeing the intensity of his blush. Internally, he halfheartedly cursed his older brother for telling. And he was supposed to be the normal one. The one who wouldn't tease him about this new found attention Feliciano was showering him with. He bumped his head when he heard what his sister said next, "What?"

Lilly giggled, "I said, do you like him, too?" Her green eyes glittered with amusement as she watched her brother's ears turn red. She knew the answer of course, Gilbert, Tino, and Elizabeta had always made a point to text her when Ludwig reacted in a very cute way to one of Feliciano's advances. Of course, she wouldn't tell her easily flustered brother that.

"I…appreciate that he's a good doctor," muttered the German after fumbling around in his mind for a proper response. 'Yes', he nodded to himself with self-satisfaction, 'that was a good answer.'

"Argh," groaned Lilly. "Is that really how you feel or…"

"Well what more do you want me to say? That I now have something to look forward to in the mornings, that the way he looks at me when we're in our office working on our paperwork makes my breath hitch? Or that his annoying 'Ve' tic has really grown on me to the point that when he doesn't say it I worry? And that, perhaps, maybe, deep down I…I…enjoy his…company when we have to work overtime, even though he usually makes me do all the filing." Ludwig was stabbing at his dough in frustration. Having said all that out loud had definitely lifted a weight from his shoulders but a new one quickly replaced it. It wasn't because Lilly was left speechless; he knew she was simply waiting for him to get it all out before offering her input, rather, he knew that nothing would ever happen between him and the Italian.

"Why not? It's," Lilly giggled again to herself, "it's clear that you're interested as well. What's stopping you from answering his advances?" Ludwig turned around and raised an eyebrow making her sigh in defeat. "Right, I forgot about her…"

"Ja." He turned to grease a pan for his cookies, "Not to mention I can't shake the feeling that he's only after me because of my name."

"Ludwig?"

"No, Beilschmidt-"

She rolled her eyes at him, "I know what you mean, I was simply calling you."

"Oh."

"Ja…anyway, what makes you think that? He's a doctor, isn't he?"

"Do you know how much debt new doctors have when they graduate? Even in Europe and with Asclepius's salary, which is a lot more than what normal teaching hospitals pay, I doubt that he'll be able to get out of debt anytime soon."

"Does money really matter to you, big brother?"

"Of course, it doesn't, but I've had enough people come after me with that same intent. What makes him any different? How do I know that he just doesn't want me for my bank account."

Lilly paused to think, "Do you think Tino and Matthew only want our brothers for money?"

"No, that's love. Anyone who could stand Gilbert's ego and not be afraid of Berwald is definitely
"And anyone who is-"

Lilly was interrupted when Emma opened the door to peek her head in. "Could you guys come out to the front for a few? Lunch hour traffic is picking up and Mathias decided that he wants me as his waitress...the moron." Despite the insult, the siblings couldn't help but notice how their cousin's eyes warmed up when she directed the insult towards the Dane.

Lilly hid a smirk, "Of course, Em. We'll be right out." She hopped off the stool and washed her hands. They were both going through the door when Ludwig suddenly turned back to the kitchen.

"Luddy?" Lilly tilted her head to the side in confusion, "What on earth..." Then she saw it. Or rather, she saw him. Feliciano had entered the small café with a person on his arm, both talking cheerfully. She frowned momentarily until she realized that they weren't lovers but friends. "Come on, big brother, aren't you going to help out," she called into the kitchen.

"N-no," said Ludwig, "I'll-uh-I'll fill in orders. I'm sure you three will be just fine." Shrugging to herself, she pulled out her notepad from her apron and went to ask their customers for their orders.

Feliks sat across from his friend and took in the smells of the café, "Like, this place smells tots amazing!"

"Ve, doesn't it?" Feli opened a menu and looked through the options, "My co-worker, Tino, said it was delicious. He also winked, but I'm not entirely sure why." He squinted to see the small print, mouth watering when he found that they served actual food aside from pastries. Pasta!

"Maybe he meant that the place has things that are delicious aside from the food."

"Ve?"

"Like, check out that waiter." Feliks discreetly motioned to a slender man with piercing blue eyes and a small ponytail gathered at the nape of his neck. He was smiling pleasantly to a couple leaving before making his way over to them.

"Hi," he said politely, "my name is Toris and I'll be your waiter for your visit. Can I start you off with something to drink?"

"I'll have some green tea, please."

"Ve, and I'll have some lemonade." Feli watched the waiter blush at his friend's smile before turning to get their drinks, stumbling into a chair and nearly tripping in the process. He gave a chuckle and turned to Feliks, "All you have to do is order something to drink and already you have them falling to your feet."

Feliks shrugged, "Like, what can I say? I'm irresistible."

"Wish I were as lucky." The Italian played with the seam of his favorite soccer team T-shirt. He'd taken off his scrubs shirt before coming down to the café due to some blood splatter from a patient. "Ludwig doesn't even realize I exist."

Unknown to him, Lilly and Emma, and even Ludwig himself had been straining their ears to listen into their Italian customer. It wasn't too hard, Emma had purposefully seated them near the kitchen in order to keep their eye on them. Ludwig nearly cut himself when he heard what Feli said. Not know he existed? Was he serious?
"Ve… I mean I'm really trying to get him to like me. I remember back in school he didn't really like it when I invaded his personal space, but now that we're working together, it's really hard not to. He's just so close but," he chuckled to himself at the cliché he was about to say, "so far. You know?"

"Like, not really." Feliks rested his head on his fist, "Why do you even bother? If he's not into you why keep chasing? It's not worth the effort I don't think."

"I guess you’re right and if he pulls me aside and tells me that he is not interested and that I have a snowball’s chance in hell, then I’ll back off and keep our exchanges strictly professional. But—d" Feli looked up when Toris carefully placed a glass of fresh lemonade and a pot of steamy hot tea in front of Feliks.

"Careful," he warned quietly, "the tea is really hot and…I wouldn't want you to burn your tongue," he finished with a blush. He cleared his throat and pulled out a pad and pen, "Are you ready to order?"

"I'll have the shrimp pasta in the bread bowl," said Feli.

"And I'll have whatever you think I'll like." Feliks smiled once again and handed his menu over to the flustered waiter.

"I-I'll have that right out, sirs." Toris gave a yelp when he bumped into Emma once again and all but ran into the kitchen.

"Alright, how do you do that?" Feli reached out for his friend's hand and looked at him pleadingly, "Tell me your secret, please!"

"Like, I honestly don't know. I swear I'm not even trying."

"Well, is there something wrong with me? Am I really that unlikable?" Feli withdrew his hand and used it to cover his face, "I know I'm not as manly as my cousins or Ozzie but…"

"You can be when you want." Feliks examined his fingernails, "I still don't know what you see in him. Yeah, Germans are hot, but, like, what's the point if they won't give you the time of day? Hey! You never answered my question." Feli stopped drinking his lemonade and raised his eyebrows in question. "What do you see in him? This is the same guy who was with you in graduation right?"

"Ve!" Feli nodded happily, remembering when he got to hold his hand for a brief moment, "I really like him."

"I know, Fe. But why?"

Ludwig handed over the food to Toris and came closer to the door to hear what Feli had to say. Not that he cared or anything. He was just…curious. Yes.

Emma and Lilly were also making their rounds around the café quickly so that they could hear how Feli would respond. What? Could you blame them? This was their Ludwig they were talking about. The one who was selfless in their eyes and deserved someone to love him before he made the worst mistake he could possibly ever make. If things worked out, then perhaps he would be spared the fate of marrying someone he didn’t love.

Feli mulled over the question for a second before smiling fondly at a memory only he could see. He ran his hand through his auburn hair and giggled to himself before saying, "I remember when I
first fell for him. It was during the semester I was taking Gross Anatomy, and I stayed in the dorms at school because of the dissection. I wanted to work on it as often as I could, remember?"

Feliks scrunched up his face in disgust, "I'd rather not. That's pretty gross, Feli."

"Ve, not really. The human body is a beautiful thing. Well anyway, I was pretty hungry after finishing up a session with my body so I snuck into the cafeteria kitchen after hours to whip up a snack. That's when I saw him." Feli's amber eyes glazed over in soft pleasure from the memory, "I've seen Ludwig before, mind you, but never like that. Usually he was, is, so serious and looks kinda cranky but at that moment he was, as my friend Kiku would say, Zen-like."

"Kiku?"

"He's a resident at the hospital. We've had lunch together a few times."

"Ah."

"Ve~ as I was saying, Ludwig looked so beautiful in the kitchen. His face was free of that crease he has when he's frowning, which is almost all the time," he said with his head ducked sadly. "His eyes were sparkling with the same joy you get when you're working on your designs or me when I'm painting."

"Among other things."

Ludwig frowned slightly when he heard the duo giggle and wondered what exactly those things were. Perhaps he should ask sometime. He handed another tray of food over to Emma, ignoring her suggestive eyebrow wiggle and continued to listen in on his coworker's conversation. Feli sipped at his lemonade and continued to tell his friend about his memory about the night that Ludwig had apparently captured his heart. Ludwig felt himself smile in spite of himself as he too recalled that night. He had been very uneasy about his assignment but knew that he had to get over it. It hadn't helped that he had been stuck with a group that were queasy with dissecting a cadaver and had forced him to make all the incisions and pull out the unnecessary tissues.

He had gone into the kitchen after hours to bake an apple cake because not only was it his favorite but it was his mother's own recipe and he found a comfort in creating something that he often shared with her. Ludwig hadn't realized that he had had a guest in the kitchen until he had cleaned everything up and sliced his cake to fit into a tupperware container. He was leaving the room when he spotted Feli gazing at him with wonder and an emotion that had been difficult to place at the time. Ludwig felt the corners of his mouth expand further as he heard the Italian speak of him. He knew now what it was. Adoration. So, perhaps after that night, Ludwig had unknowingly marked Feli's heart. What he didn't know, what he barely now realized himself, was that he had done the same to him.

Ludwig turned to the insistent tug on his shirt and found Emma smiling knowingly at him, "You know, I think someone who is willing to stick around to gently tap out the bricks in that wall around your heart instead of bulldoze their way like the others, is worth the trouble."

He smirked and motioned towards Mathias, "Are you speaking from experience?"

Emma bit her lower lip with a blush, "Maybe." Her green eyes squinted in his direction, "Idiots are sure surprising aren't they?" She showed him a packet of cigarettes and a small package of tobacco, "He took these from Lars and made him try the patch. See that purple eye? Big brother gave it to him because he refused to give it back."
Ludwig also noticed something on his neck and, he'd later blame this stroke of immaturity on his sudden good humor, decided to tease his cousin. "Did he kiss it better?" Never had he been so grateful of the Beilschmidt genes that allowed him to maintain such a straight face as today. He nearly barked out a laugh at the sudden wave of jealousy that ran over Emma's face.

"As if Lars would ever put his lips on that neck. Mathias's skin is too soft for my big brother's..." she trailed off when she noticed Ludwig's shoulders shake with silent laughter. Puffing out a breath of annoyance she took a new tray of food and walked out of the kitchen leaving her cousin chuckling at her.

~.~

Feli and Feliks parted ways after paying for their early dinner; the latter pocketed the receipt with a certain waiter's number with a grin. "Toris was such a cutie," he mused to himself as he leisurely walked through the crowd at the mall. Feli had given him a card and told him to buy whatever he'd like and to purchase some furnishings for their new penthouse. They hadn't left the hotel yet, but Milen had informed Feli that the room would need to be vacated because another relative would be requiring it in the near future. The two friends had already checked out a few places before Feli decided that it would be best to just stay in one of the V towers close to the hospital. They would be moving in as soon as it was ready for them.

At first it had bothered Feliks to just accept the card but Feli had made a point to comfort him. 'Ve, you shared with me when I was at my lowest, and now it's my turn. What's mine is yours,' he had said to him. And it was at that point that the Feliks had felt extremely grateful to have met the Italian. Feliks had met Feli at a college party way back when Feli was just Feliciano. No last name. No fancy letters following after. Just Feli. The two had hit it off really well like the brother Feliks never had, and he often joked with the other that he was probably the sister the Italian never had. It was when Feliks came out to his family and was shunned that he truly saw the kind of man Feliciano was. He had opened up his small dorm room to him until the end of the semester. Afterwards, they searched for an apartment and the rest was history.

 Feliks never really questioned why Feli never used his last name until he finally admitted that he wasn't allowed until he made something out of himself. At the time, it had made Feliks laugh, but when the Italian hadn't joined in, he realized he was being serious. He didn't ask for more information, but Feli offered what little he could. Now, as he walked over a black tile with a gold V encased in a sun, he understood. He glanced over to a boutique when something sparkly caught his eye and gasped. There on a limbless mannequin was one of the most gorgeous dresses he'd ever seen. The rose gold satin bodice was swept into a gentle sweet heart line and detailed with various crystals to form flowers. The detail continued briefly down to the soft tulle skirt that looked like it would fall just above the knee.

Releasing a breath he wasn't aware he was holding, Feliks made a move to enter the store. Inside was a lone woman no older than twenty-four, looked from her work to acknowledge her customer, "Hallo, welcome to M. I'm-"

"Monika," breathed Feliks in wonder, rose gold dress forgotten. The young German woman blinked once in confusion before offering a small smile.

"Ja, that's me."

"Like, you are totally my biggest role model! I've watched your fashion shows religiously."

"D-danke," murmured Monika bashfully.
"I really loved your summer collection, it was art!" Feliks tried desperately to contain his excitement. Who knew that one of the youngest most successful fashion designers lived in the very same city as he?! Ok, maybe everyone did and the only reason he didn't was because he couldn't afford to shop at the V Galleria Mall. How could he when just about every boutique inside was couture?

Monika smiled at the compliment, "I'm glad you thought so. It was inspired by my — ah, excuse me." She turned to another greet another shopper before smiling at him again and saying, "I'll be right back; I just need to fetch her dress." Feliks watched his idol go into the back for the customer's order. He walked idly around the shop, admiring all the clothing when he heard a woman from inside one of the changing rooms call out for help. He turned to the front and noticed that Monika was still busy with the customer.

"Hello," called the woman from one of the stalls, "Moni, are you out there?"

"Um, she's busy at the moment but I could, like, help you if you want." Feliks walked over to where a brunet woman poked her head out. He tensed when she eyed him up and down, taking in his dark jeans and grey V-neck shirt, his blond hair was left down, only kept out of his eyes by twin hair clips.

Seeming to approve by what she saw, she walked out in her dress and turned so that her back faced him. She lifted her long chocolate colored hair, "Hi, I'm Elizabeta and would you? I need help with the zipper but I don't think that it'll go all the way up." Elizabeta pouted when she realized that she was right. "I have no idea why she insists on only making them in one size. They're either too big or too small."

"But they're one of a kind, right?" Feliks struggled to make the zipper go further up. "If she made more then, like, they wouldn't be as special."

"True," grunted the Hungarian when Feliks managed to force the zipper further up, "But then she has to make adjustments and those tend to pile up on the poor dear. She doesn't have any help here."

"She does this all by herself?!" Feliks turned around when he felt a soft hand on his shoulder.

Monika gently tried to make the zipper go up herself, "I do. It's really tough but I don't have that many people who are eager to work for me."

"Why? It would be an honor to work for you!"

"Danke. It's because...of my lover I guess you could say. There aren't that many people who want to work with me because of my preferences."

"Which is ridiculous," muttered Elizabeta. "What age are we living in really?"

The German shrugged, "Not everyone can be as open minded as you, Lizzy. Then again, it's probably normal for us seeing as who our family is." She turned to Feliks and explained, "I have three cousins who are gay, one has a husband and the other is about to marry. And I'm almost positive that my uncle is bi."

"What gets me, though is that elite in this city don't care about any of that. It's the lower classes that seem to have a problem with it. I just don't understand why."

Feliks nodded in agreement, "I can. It's, I think, because the lower classes don't have much but their traditions. My family wasn't that well off and they all but disowned me for being gay." He winced
as he thought about it more, "They probably would disown me if they knew I liked to wear women's clothing."

Elizabeta's eyes widened with glee, "You do? Oh, I bet you look so cute!"

"Like, thanks, heh. Yeah, I'd like to think I do. It's hard to come by clothes that flatter my structure so I tend to just buy them at a thrift shop and rework them until they do."

Monika perked up at this, "You can tailor?"

"I do! I've been sewing since I can remember and what with, like, my economic situation, I became a real expert with a needle and thread. My roommate got me a sewing machine a few Christmases ago and that made everything a lot smoother."

"So," continued Monika after giving up with the zipper, "If I were to…ask you to fix this dress so that it would fit my cousin-in-law, you would be able to?"

"Totally! That's actually one of the first things I learned how to do."

"I see." The German looked at her dress then chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully. "Do you have any work experience?"

"Well, I used to work as a waiter. Right now I was on my way to the MAC store to submit my application and give them my portfolio."

"I see." Monika stared at Feliks, her eyes a cross between cerulean and baby blue, measured him up. "I have to go out of town in a few weeks and I don't have anyone to mind the store. Not to mention, the annual ball fundraiser for one of the hospitals is going to be this week and I'm going to need someone to help me while I work on fittings. Usually I get one of my cousins to help but they'll be attending the ball themselves and I wouldn't want to burden them with such things." Felik's breath hitched. Was she asking what he thought she was asking?

"I would very much like to see samples of your work but until then, would you be interested in working here as my sales associate. If I like what I see, you can even be my intern." The German smiled again at the blond man before her.

Feliks felt his jaw drop. Oh my…she totally was! He stood up straighter and grinned, "Like, I would love to work for you!"

When Ludwig finally arrived home, he went straight for his shower before checking his email. He immediately clicked on the one from his father.

To: Ludwig Beilschmidt

CC: Gilbert Beilschmidt, Roderich Beilschmidt, Berwald Beilschmidt, Vash Beilschmidt, Lilly Beilschmidt…etc.

Subject: Annual Fundraiser Masked Ball

Children,

As you know, Asclepius Hospital tends to host the annual ball at our Manor. This year, however, a very dear friend of mine has offered to host it at his Villa. I've attached a document with the
address of his home. He has already given me your invitations so there is no need to print anything out; I will hold on to them until the night of. As I said, he is a very dear friend of mine so I expect you all to be on your best behavior. Yes, I am referring to you Gilbert. Please refrain yourself from taking Gilbird with you. I know you are fond of him but I don’t want a repeat of last year’s fiasco. Roderich, I’m sure whatever music they’ll be playing will suit your taste, please don’t bring your own scores. Vash...LEAVE YOUR GUN AT HOME. There will be plenty of security at the party. Believe me. Lilly, dear, of course you can bring your boyfriend. He is after all practically part of the family. Again. Vash Leave your gun at home. Better yet. Just lock it away with the rest of them.

I will see you then.

Your Vati,

Wolfgang

"Lovely," muttered Ludwig as he leaned back in his chair. He could already imagine the bickering his brothers were going to have over the course of the next few days until the ball.

NEXT>>

Chapter End Notes

I will update the next chapter tomorrow! Please don’t forget to subscribe and review~
Ludwig tires to steal his brother's beer at the party and gets the shock of his life when he see's who Feliciano's family is. How is it possible that the family that practically founded your city is the most mysterious?

"W-would you like to have lunch with me?"

Feliciano's pen froze in mid-signature at the question while Ludwig shifted uncomfortably behind him, both of their hearts began to thump rapidly behind their chest. The second hand softly ticked away before he could form a response. Feli turned around on his swivel chair with apologetic eyes, "Ve, I'm really happy you asked me." Ludwig's eyes brightened considerably at this response until he heard the rest of what his partner had to say. "But I'm afraid I already have plans. One of Dr. Tino's patients just came out of the ICU and he doesn't have any family. I promised to play with him during my break."

"Oh." Ludwig looked away, cheeks reddened with embarrassment. He thought back to what his book had said to do when such an answer was given but… Blue eyes discreetly looked at the Italian; there was no reason for him to believe that he was lying and he didn't remember reading a chapter on selfless suitors so he was at loss of how to respond.

Ludwig bit back a smile; Feli was known to do such things for their patients when not on the clock. Tino had told him that the Italian would come in on days he was off and play with the kids whose parents were too busy to visit. Heracles, the head neonatal nurse, had also mentioned that Feli would help out with the newborns. 'He's going to be a great father someday,' he had told him sleepily.

There were other countless stories either his family or coworkers would tell him about how kind their newest resident was with their patients that he was inclined to believe that Feliciano hadn't changed his mind about trying to go on a date with him. Ludwig flushed and thought to himself, 'Not that I'm going out of my way to date him or anything. This would simply be a date between friends, or rather colleagues. Yes! That's right, a very much necessary, work releated, serious lunch date. That's a thing right?'

"Dr. Beilschmidt? Did you hear me?"

“Huh?” Ludwig frowned in confusion as he was pulled out of his daydream, his face immediately turning scarlet. He leaned back, pulling his leather folder away from Feli’s eyes, “ I mean…Why are you so close to me?!"  

Feli blinked slowly, barely realizing that they were practically nose to nose. He took a step back, "Oh, I’m sorry! I was just worried because you were getting all red and your eyes were starting to glaze."

Ludwig didn't even bother to dignify that with a response. It was far too embarrassing that he had allowed himself to daydream about his coworker in front of said coworker.
The Italian smiled gently and glanced at the leather folder in his partner's hands, "Is there something wrong with one of our patients? You've been studying that for an awfully long time. Oh, I know! Let me take a look and I could help you-"

"Nein!" The German quickly shoved the self help book he was concealing behind the leather folder into his bag, "I—I mean it's nothing, just some…personal stuff."

"Mi dispiace, Dr. Beilschmidt, I didn't mean to pry." Feli bounced on the balls of his feet with his arm holding the other behind his back.

"It's fine." Ludwig checked the office clock and continued to put things into his bag, "I have to go meet my bruders. Will you be fine with the rest of the paperwork on your own?"

"Si. I'm just about done. Er, um, Dr. Beilschmidt?" Feli reached out and took hold of Ludwig's hand to pause him.

"Ja?" Ludwig felt the skin under Feliciano's hand tingle with warmth but he tried to push it aside. Feli pushed himself up onto his toes to place a friendly pair of kisses on his partner's cool cheeks but quickly stopped himself. Even if he did kiss all his other coworkers goodbye, the last thing he wanted was to scare Ludwig off. "Ve, h-have a good day. I'll see you at our night shift." Ludwig nodded and stumbled out in a daze, hand gripping onto his messenger bag to keep himself from turning around and forcing his own lips on his adorable coworker.

"Chigi!"

A dark haired Italian fell back against the rubber-like rope encasing the sparing deck, his hair frazzled in echo of his annoyance. His breath came out in heavy pants as he slumped over to take a minute, knowing that his opponent wasn't going to attack. He wouldn't dare.

The Italian's muscles quivered, all but begging for him to throw in the towel and accept defeat. Lord knew he was tired and a part of him wanted to indulge his weakness, to just fall flat onto the cushioned padding and take a nap. But he wouldn't. Not even with Antonio punching at the air between them, sending ominous puffs of wind towards him, cooling his sweaty back. A part of him wished that Antonio was in front of him so that he could cool his face. Instead he had to settle for the beads of perspiration that ran down his temples. He closed his eyes momentarily to relieve the burning behind them. He wasn't going to cry, mind you, someone of his position would never do something so childish where the mass could see. Even he knew better.

Still, this week hadn't been the worst of his life, didn't even make it to his top ten, but it was still pretty close.

*Usually, Lovino never showed his face during business transactions but lately people had been getting too comfortable around his territory. He flicked a nonexistent speck of dust from his bespoke suit. Beside him, his second glanced at his watch, "I'm sorry, boss. I don't know why it's taking them so long."

"When the group gets here, and yes there will be more than two, shoot one. They're taking their sweet ass time getting here because I've been generous lately."

"Well, you've been in a good mood. I wonder why~"
Lovino flushed and turned to glare at his smirking boyfriend, "Sh-shut up. You know why, you stupid bastard." He drowned the rest of his wine glass and tapped his leather shoe against the floor with impatience, "Why did we have to pick this location of all places."

"You know why, Tomate."

"Che palle," muttered Lovi, his blush increasing, "What did I tell you about flustering me like this in the middle of business?"

Antonio leaned over and placed a hand on his partner's thigh, his other hand went to his neck to pull it in for a kiss, "Business hasn't started yet, Lovi," he murmured into the skin. "They haven't showed up."

Running his tongue over his lips, Lovi let out a shiver. "B-but they will be soon."

"And? Let this hound take care of his master, si?" The Spaniard smirked against Lovi's rapidly heating neck, closing his eyes to revel in the cologne his lover had applied. One hand inched his way teasingly up his thigh only to be roughly removed. He pouted, "Lovi, that's not fair."

"Shut up, bastardo! They're here." Lovi shoved Antonio back to his seat and straightened his suit. He put his leg over the other, and poured himself some more wine. The Italian watched as two of his subordinates dragged three people to his makeshift table. They stepped away to block the exit, leaving them to cower before their boss. Lovi sipped his wine, looking down at the three. He eyed the first two, a man and a woman. The third was another man and from the looks of it seemed he was someone they chose to bring last minute. "Tonio," The Spaniard stood silently to retrieve his gun from his holster within his suit.

"W-what are you doing?" The woman eyed the gun warily, "I swear we ain't wired or nothin'. You don't need to worry!"

"Mm. I know you're not, but this job is only for two. You brought one man extra so take your pick before my second makes it for you. Three seconds." The woman immediately pointed to the extra and Antonio shot him, a dark stain growing in diameter on his shirt. The extra fell onto his knees in shock, his eyes rolling back before falling motionlessly onto the ground.

Antonio placed the gun on the table, "There was a reason why my Boss only wanted two. Now we're going to have to clean this up."

"No, we don't. They brought him. They'll clean it up." Lovi handed his now empty glass to another and leaned forward, motioning the couple to sit. "So, I see you sentencing another to death doesn't make you squeamish. That's good."

"It's easy. What I'm going to ask of you won't be."

"We can do anything," said the woman. "Right, babe?"

"Uh, yeah. You-uh-a guy on the inside already told us what kind of job it was. We wouldn't be here if we didn't think we could do it."

"Yeah!"

Lovi watched the woman before him tug at her black hair in annoyance, her onyx colored eyes were becoming wild with excitement. He lowered his gaze to her hands. They were trembling but something told him it wasn't fear. It was as if looking at an impatient child waiting to be told that she could go on a ride she wasn't supposed to and perhaps that's what she was. Nothing more than a child trapped inside the body of a thirty year old woman. Still, that wouldn't sway his opinion nor
what he had in store for her. “I see,” he said finally.

With nimble fingers, the Italian worked to open a few more of the buttons on his shirt to expose his pectoral, "You see this?” He pointed at the tattoo, a tribal like sun encasing a V, "This is the family I represent and we don't take kindly to peasants who try to take us for fools." He slammed his hand onto the table and pulled the man towards him by his collar with his other, "If you think that I'll believe that two scrawny little shits are capable of murder-

"We are!" The woman tugged at Lovi’s arm, "I've already done it! Honest to God, I did."

The Italian darted his eyes over to the woman, "Ellen, you know who I am, do you not?"

"I do, sir. I've heard of your name."

"Then you know that someone’s word is as good as shit to me."

"I can show you proof! I can."

"Ellen," growled her boyfriend in warning.

"No, Joe. We need the money, babe. Besides, I ain't lying. Boss, let me show you. I'll show you where I did it and tell you things only I can know. I'll even show you the body."

Lovi exchanged glances with Antonio before slowly releasing his hold on the man. The Italian gave a nod, "Fine, but we'll drive."

The couple was ushered into a Lamborghini Urus, Antonio opening the door for Lovi before jogging to the driver's side. Behind him another Urus followed at a distance. They drove for forty minutes, Ellen leading them into a remote road far away from the city. As soon as the car stopped she jumped out and ran towards where she claimed to have murdered, reenacting everything in disturbing detail.

Antonio walked out of the car and made sure that everything was clear before letting Lovi out. The Italian moved forward, his eyes not leaving Ellen. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the signal that his backup was in place.

"And then I tossed her over here, Boss!" Ellen got up and dusted her knees, "Come see."

Lovi stuffed his hands into his pockets, "I'm coming." Both he and his Spaniard followed the couple down the trench and into the woods. His gut started to churn the instant Joe snapped a twig under his foot. "Merde!" He shoved Antonio against a tree for cover as bullets grazed the bark, drawing out his own gun while Antonio shouted orders into his wrist.

"You think we're stupid, Lovino," taunted Joe. "Yeah, that bitch's body is around here, but did you honestly think we were going to work for you? You who are nothing more than the Don's bitch!"

"Fucking dumbass," snarled Lovino, his eyes darkening in anger. He peeked out and took his shot, hitting Joe between his eyes before the man got the chance to raise his own gun. "Do we need the woman alive?"

The Spaniard shook his head, "I'll take care of it."

"Right." Lovi watched his boyfriend walk around the large tree and waited silently for a few minutes until he heard a shrill scream followed by two gun shots. Pulling on a pair of gloves he sighed, "Why are people so stupid?" The Italian tugged his watch out and pressed a button, "Call
He heard a quick acknowledgment to his command before Antonio all but yelled into the darkness, "She's still alive! Tomate, there's more out he-" gunshots interrupted whatever his lover was going to say.

This past week's debacle was enough to infuriate him. Sure, they had gotten two amateur hit men off the streets and found their so called victim, but still, they had dared to make an attempt on both his and Antonio's lives. He knew that there were plenty who wanted them dead, and while that was fine, he couldn't help but worry for his twin brother. If they wanted him gone, then they could easily mistake Feli as himself and make an attempt on his life. Not to mention the others in his family. There were some not directly involved in his line of work and they were vulnerable. No. Nothing would happen to them, he'd make sure of it. And if that meant that he would have to tighten his hand around the necks of their pet Judas, then so be yet.

With renewed motivation, he stood back up, turning to glare at his boyfriend. The Spaniard grinned in response and tapped his padded fingerless gloves in glee, "I knew you had more fight in you, mi tomatito."

"Shut up," growled Lovi as he cracked his knuckles through his own gloves. "And don't cheat like you did last time."

They began to circle each other again while Antonio pouted, "I did not."

Marcello chuckled when Lovino launched himself towards Antonio. The younger Italian leaned against one of the padded poles to watch his cousin spare with his lover. When Antonio knocked Lovi back onto the floor he couldn't help himself and started to laugh even harder. "Come on, Lovi! What would Bernardo say if he were to see his blood get his ass handed to him so easily, ah?" Marcello dodged the mouth guard Lovi threw at him and giggled into the towel he had around his shoulders.

"Stai zito, bastardo!" Lovi tried to glare at his cousin through the gap of his boyfriend's arms. "Not all of us have a belt given by The Ring." When Marcello childishly stuck out his tongue he replied in kind, only to have Antonio take that as an invitation to suckle on it.

"O-kay, guys! I think that's my cue to leave. See ya at the party tomorrow." Marcello quickly jumped off the ring and scurried towards the locker room.

"Ge aw meh, sthupid!" The Italian wrestled a leg from under his affectionate lover and stuck his knee between Antonio's legs only to let out a pained wail.

Antonio pulled away and smiled cheerfully, "I knew you were going to do that at some point so I took extra precautions so it wouldn't hurt." He stood up and helped the cranky Italian up, "And you say I'm the cheater."

"You pulled my hair," muttered Lovi as he allowed Antonio to help him out of the ring.

"But you like it when I do that."

"Only when we're in the privacy of our own home, idiot!"

He ignored Antonio's giggles, biting back an insult to answer his phone, "Pronto." Lovi allowed Antonio to wrap an arm around his shoulder, "Uh-huh... Yes... Yes... Of course, grandpa, we'll be there...Yes, Antonio, too. Marcello is going. What about the quadruplets?... I see. Felicia?... Hmm." He pulled off the short towel from his shoulders and tossed it into the locker room's...
hamper and waited for one of the assistants to hand over their belongings. "Things didn't go as planned, no."

Lovino leaned against the black tile to watch Antonio gather their bags. His eyes traveled down his lover's back, zeroing in on the tattoo on his shoulder blades before inching down to the small of his back where his shorts were barely holding up. "Casualties were nonexistent on our side, the others didn't make it but we picked up the package. Uh, give me a second." The Italian slipped a grey shirt over his head and walked back to the exclusive part of the gym to wait for his boyfriend. "Sorry, you were saying…I understand, grandpa. I'm fine...No, Antonio was very effective...No, I don't need Cerberus to protect me. Those idiots have enough on their plate on top of protecting their brother." He rolled his eyes to the animated ceiling that reflected both time of day and whether.

‘Great, rain,’ thought Lovino. He felt Antonio's hand on his shoulder indicating that he was ready to leave. "Listen, grandpa, as much as I enjoy our conversations, I'm afraid I need to go. The day is still young and I need to take care of a few things before tomorrow… I l-love you too, ciao."

"Grandpa sure can talk your ear off, huh?" Antonio leaned in to press a kiss to Lovi's head as they made their way out, "What did he want?"

"The usual. Mostly stuff about the party."

"It's going to be something. Can't believe after all this time, your brother is finally going to be with the family again."

"Yeah," Lovi allowed a fond smile to make its way to his face. "Let's hope the little idiot isn't as bad to assimilate as the quadruplets were after their time away."

"Was it really that ba-ooof!"

"I'm sorry, are you ok?" Ludwig looked with concern at the man he accidentally bumped, "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Antonio grinned and shook his head, "No worries, amigo. I should've paid more attention to where I was going. I'm o-"

"Bullshit," growled Lovino. "Why don't you watch where you're going?"

"But Lovi-"

"But nothing!" Lovi glared at the German before him, "What, you think you can just stand around with your hand on your junk like you own the place?!

Ludwig frowned, "My hand wasn't anywhere near my-"

"Psh, what are you even doing up here?" Lovi's glare didn't subside, if anything it burned greater, "Don't you know that the Ludus Magnus is an exclusive part of this gym?"

Before Ludwig could retort Gilbert jogged up to them and placed an arm over his little brother's shoulders, "Oi, West, what's going on?"
"Gilbert?" Antonio tilted his head to the side as he regarded the albino before his mouth split into a grin, "Long time no see! How are you?"

"Tonio? Hey it is you!" Gilbert released Ludwig to wrap his arms around his friend, "I haven't seen you since my wedding. How have you been, man? You haven't called me in forever!"

Antonio rubbed his head guiltily, "Ah, yeah, I'm sorry. I've been busy. My little tomato here keeps me on my toes."

"Oh, nice!" The albino turned to Lovino and offered his hand, "Hi, I'm Gilbert Beilschmidt. I see you've already met Ludwig."

Lovi’s glare softened a bit and took Gilbert's hand to shake, "Right, Genovia’s blue bloods and lords of the medical district."

Ludwig was surprised to see Gilbert flush with embarrassment as he stuttered, "I-I wouldn't go that far. Old ancient grandpa Hans would roll in his grave if he knew that his descendants called themselves that after fighting to make this country a republic. ‘Sides, if anyone, it’s my little brother Roderich who acts more like an aristocrat than us."

"Right." Lovi turned to look at Ludwig before snorting. "Well, it's been…enlightening to say the least. Potato bastards," he nodded at the two Germans and walked around them. Antonio gave them a sheepish grin before jogging after his boyfriend.

Gilbert chuckled and slapped Ludwig on his back, "I'm surprised you're not staring or gaping after that guy. He looked an awful like your little cutie."

"Feliciano isn't a jackass," muttered Ludwig as he made his way towards Ludus Magnus, sticking his wrist into the slot to open the glass doors. "Besides, Lovino had darker hair and lighter eyes and his curl was in the wrong way. Not to mention he didn't once say 'Ve'."

"Jeez, West, for someone who claims not to have feelings for someone, you sure know all the gritty details."

Red faced, Ludwig settled into a weights machine, "Things change I guess." He waited for the taunts and teases but none came. Instead, his brother placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled kindly.

"I'm glad that you're making progress with yourself, baby bruder."

"What's the point?" Ludwig tugged on the metal bar to lift the weights, "I'm getting married in eight months."

"You keep saying that but eight months is a long time away, West. Who knows, maybe Vati might cancel it if you really want to."

"I-I don't know, East. I'm not even sure what I feel. I've read a few books and they all point towards a mild form of love."

Gilbert scoffed in amusement, "You and your manuals. Ludwig, you can read all the books you want but none of them are going to tell you if you feel it or don't because love doesn't have a rhyme or reason."

"It should. There should be a recipe for it and I'm sure there is. I just have to find it."
"Love has no rec'pe." The two brothers turned to find Berwald wiping the sweat off himself, scar running down his neck gleaming, almost glowing, under the rain clouds and lightning of the ceiling. "Take it that ya saw Lovino."

"Ja, practically the spitting image of our little Dr. Feli only he was a little spitfire in comparison. Ain't that right, West?" The two older Germans glanced down at their brother who only grunted in response. Ludwig was too focused on his exercise, at least that's what his siblings assumed and he was all too happy to let them believe that. He'd never hear the end of it if they knew what he was really thinking about or rather who.

Feli coaxed Gino into his carrier and gently locked the gate, "Ve, don't worry, kitty. This is the last time we're going to move in a long while. I promise that I'll go buy you that fancy cat tree you want as soon as we settle in." He lifted the carrier and placed it above his and Felik's luggage on the bellhop, "You're going to love our new place. It's really big and you'll get to see the park and river. It's so pretty."

The Italian motioned to Milen that their bags were all ready to be taken downstairs and the Bulgarian nodded. Feliks came into the kitchenette wrapping his scarf around his neck, "Like, are we all set?"

"Just about. There is still something I need to do." Feli pulled out a pen from his denim pocket and twisted the metal barrel making the tip glow red.

"What are you doing?"

"Olympia started out as an old tavern slash inn back in the mid-fifties. When it was converted into a proper hotel, this panel was kept. All my family members have passed through this room: my aunt and uncles, mom and dad, cousins and brother. We burn our initials on it as a reminder to others that'll pass by that they're not alone."

"This place has been you guy's halfway house for a while then, huh."

"Ve," responded Feli with a nod. He opened the pantry and lifted the mat that kept the spices from moving about. "It's been renovated plenty of times but this is never moved. Look, come see."

Feliks came closer and peered over his friend's shoulder. He gasped at all the carvings. There were a lot of initials, all ending with V. The earlier ones were obviously done with a pocket knife and he could see where the newer ones were burned into the grained wood with the aid of a heated pen like the one Feli had in his hand. Feliks traced over some pictures that were carved into the wood. One was an intricate sun with a V inside while another had a wolf paw, "Who are all these people? Like, I know they're your family, but anyone I know?"

Feli grinned, "Oh, I'm sure you've probably heard of them in passing." He traced over the last one marred in heat, "This is my brother, Lovino. He came by here about seven years ago. This one is my cousin Marcello. You know him, he's the one who owns that club we go too."

"Yeah, he's a cutie. Like, he tots made a name for himself with that place."

Feli nodded, "Si. Not bad for a guy in his early twenties. This one here is his sister, Felicia."

"No way!"
“Yeah, I know. My mom threw a fit when my aunt named her. Apparently, they both had a claim over Feliciano but my mom won because she had me first. When my aunt had her she decided that she could feminize the name.”

“Aww!”

Feli giggled at Feliks's coo squeal and said, "She's dating your boss you know, so I'm sure you'll get a chance to meet her very soon."

“And the others?"

The Italian grinned and looked back to the rest of the initials. He found one that had a tiny polaroid of himself with his diploma from Europe’s most prestigious academy for the performing arts. He pointed to to the initials on the panel, "There's my cousin Eric who is really sweet. He's-"

"Opera singer slash composer on the side. I've seen him before; he stars in the Phantom of the Opera, right? Remember I went to see it for my humanities class? Gosh, how is he related to you. Uh, no offense. I mean he doesn't really look Italian."

"He wouldn't. The only things he got from our family was the hair curl and our eye color." Feli pulled out another picture of his cousin with his parents, "See? His mom is American. My uncle Paulo met her while she and her family were vacationing in Italy. His brothers, however, are beautiful. I mean Eric is handsome and all but those boys..."

"I bet. Are these their initials?"

"No, those are my uncles. Those are their initials and here’s a picture of them." Feli bit his lip to keep from laughing out loud at his friend's reaction. Feliks turned bright red with excitement, his green eyes widening with disbelief.

"N-no way. I don't believe it. Like, that's…No way!"

"They're very nice. Coming in tonight, maybe you'll meet them tomorrow at the after party."

Feliks let out a very high squeal and had shifted into fanboy mode rather quickly. He hid his giggles behind his scarf and blushed, "Sorry."

"Don't be, I'm happy that you like my family. I'm very proud of all of them."

"Like? Like, I love them." Feliks patted his cheeks to lessen the flush, "Heh, I'm gonna go head down stairs. I'll wait for you in the cab, ok?"

"Oh, no need. I have a car waiting. It's the red one. Milen should be standing by it." Feli watched his friend leave before turning back to the pantry. With a ready pen, he burned his own initials into the wood along with a quick sketch of a sun and a wolf sitting above it howling. Stepping back to look at his handy work, Feli let out a happy 've'. He switched off the pen before quickly tapping the surface to make sure it was cool enough to cover it back up with the mat.

"Ve, good luck, fratellino." The last things he saw before completely covering up the carvings were the burned initials of his cousins: Ser. Ber. Os. V. He paused to trace over the letters before kissing his finger pads and pressing it to the last set. With a final affectionate pat to the door beam, he walked out of the hotel room.
Loud music blared inside as Bernardo's fingers danced across buttons on his controller. He was singing along to the battle song, his voice growling out the words. In the bathroom, his brother Oswaldo, or Ozzie as he liked to call him, was singing along as he finished packing up their stuff. Seraph's leg was the only thing he could see from where his older sibling, by six minutes, was speaking with someone.

Seraph smirked at the housekeeper who was assigned to bring up their dinner, "My, doesn't this look delicious," he purred. He looked at the petite woman through his black fringe, "The pasta you've brought isn't so bad either."

The girl shivered and tried her best to keep her resolve but she rarely, if ever, had a man so out of her league flirt with her. "I-It's been p-prepared just as you ordered it, sir."

"Wonderful~" The Italian knew the effect he was having on her and he reveled in it. This was his last night in Sydney and the last thing he wanted was to spend it with his brothers. "Tell me, bella, are you free tonight?"

"Oh, um, sorry, no. I have the night shift I'm afraid. B-but I do have tomorrow open if-"

"I'll be long gone by tomorrow." Seraph sighed and ran a hand through his black hair in disappointment before lighting up, "I should give you your tip now. You probably have a long night ahead of you."

The young woman bit her lip in her own disappointment and nodded, "Yeah."

"Hey," the Italian lifted her chin up with a pale finger and brought her face close to his, "Don't be sad. You gracing me with your presence was more than satisfying, but I must ask, if it's not too much, may I have something to remember you by?"

"L-like what?"

"Well, where I'm from, we tend to give a kiss." He smiled when he heard her breath hitch, skin heating up under his fingers. "Well?"

"Dude, get your ass in here with the food," yelled Bernardo.

Seraph rolled his eyes at his brother's outburst and tried to at least press his lips against hers.

"Bro, I know you heard him," growled Oswaldo from the bathroom, "Get your ass up in here and fucking help us clean! This is as much as your mess as it is ours." Seraph sighed. He knew that tone, his younger brother, by eight minutes, tended to revert to his old mannerisms when he was really upset and the last thing he wanted was to anger him before their flight back to Genovia. The flight was already going to feel like a lifetime and would be even more so if they were all in a bad mood. "Seraph!"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm coming." The Italian pecked the housekeeper on the forehead and took the food back inside, leaving her dazed.

"'Bout fucking time, Ser." Oswaldo pulled off his red stained shirt and stuffed it into a black plastic bag, "I hate it when you make a mess and refuse to help clean it up."

"Deep breaths, Ozzie," chirped Bernardo after he saved his game and shut down his system, "I don't think we can get your little angel on the phone right now. It's kind of late in Genovia."

"…Yeah, alright." Oswaldo stretched his arms and took in a deep breath before letting it out
slowly, "Sorry, I'm just stressed. Grandpa called and said that the party is tomorrow. Tomorrow! We still got that guy in the tub and you guys aren't even helping me pack and Eric's probably fucking some loser in his room."

Bernardo and Seraph made a face. The former spoke up, "Why are you thinking about our baby brother having sex?"

"Because if Eric could’ve kept it in his pants just this one night, we would be in an Olympia instead of this third rate hotel with shit room service!"

"Aww, are you jealous that the cute girl was flirting with me?"

"You know I’m not!" Oswaldo glared at the ground before sighing, “I just want to get home as quickly as we can and we can’t do that if we don’t tie up lose ends. I…I don’t want to miss the party, you know?"

Seraph chuckled and shook his head, “Fine, fine. First thing’s first. I’ll call in the sweepers to come clean the room. Oz, you pack up our stuff. Ber, you go check on Eric. Make sure he gets his stuff together before we hit the road. And take him his plate of pasta.”

"Alright." The three identical men set out to do their jobs, Bernardo setting his suit case out for his brother to fill before taking a plate and slipping on his shoes to visit the baby of the bunch.

He crossed the hall way, fist lifted to knock at the door but it opened before his knuckles brushed the wood. A flustered young man walked out as he buttoned his shirt, cheeks reddening when he felt the glare of the black haired Italian on him.

"Do you have to mean mug everyone I have sex with?" Eric pulled on his boxers and stretched before taking the pasta plate from Bernardo. "What time are we leaving?"

"We've got an hour and thirty minutes till take off." Bernardo looked around to find the room spotless, with the exception of the bed. His blond brother’s suitcase was also propped against the wall, leather messenger bag next to it. "I see you're ready to go. Did you enjoy your last minute snack?"

Eric frowned, "What are you talking about? You just brought me — oh!" He blushed into his plate at his brother's smirk, "Yeah, I-uh…it's been a while, ok?"

"Hey man, I’d been prowling out there for someone too if I didn’t have work to do. He was kinda hot, could've done better though, I think."

"Whatever. He was nice."

Bernardo smiled at his brother and ruffled his hair affectionately, "Get dressed when you finish up. We'll come get you when we're done cleaning up."

Eric had the decency to look abashed as he lowered his fork, “Ah, yeah, sorry. I would’ve taken him to Olympia but everyone knows that that’s where I stay when I tour with the show. And I did like the guy but the last thing I want is breaking my fanbase again with stupid rumors that I’m dating.”

"Hey, you let your big bros worry about the mess, ok? Be back in a few."

"Right." Eric watched his brother leave his room, "Wait, we’re all the same age!"
Ludwig dragged himself inside his apartment and dropped his keys onto the bowl on the table in the entryway. Tonight had been hectic in the ER, though the Thursday rush was nothing compared to Friday's, but lucky for him and his family, they were off both tomorrow and the day after. He pitied Kiku and Feliciano who would no doubt be forced to work well into the night. In all honesty, he would've loved to work with them instead of having to go to the stupid ball. He had found it strange that his Japanese co-worker had bonded so quickly with Feliciano, but he supposed that the Italian had that charm about him.

He took a quick shower before dropping himself on his bed. Johan eyed his master wearily, his nose nudging against Ludwig's face. "I'm ok boy, just had a long night. And that text message Natalya sent me didn't exactly do me any favors. Can you believe she wanted me to force Tino to change his flowers for the wedding just 'cause she wanted to use the same kind for ours?" The black feline narrowed his blue eyes and let out a deep meow. "Ja, tell me about it. She's out of her mind." He turned on his side muttering about how ridiculous it would be to change flower arrangements a week before the wedding. "Gut nacht, Johan."

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"Kesesese~ he looks so cute when he's sleeping doesn't he, Birdie?"

"He certainly looks more relaxed, eh."

"We should totally do the feather and whip cream thing on him."

"It would be a waste of cream and we could always use it for other things, Gil."

"You know I can hear you guys, right?" Ludwig shifted on his bed to glare at his brother and brother-in-law.

Matthew had the decency to blush, "I'm sorry, Lud. We just came to make sure you had your clothes ready."

"And score some of your delicious whip cream," added Gilbert as he wrapped his arm around his husband. "Not for anything naughty! Jeez, West, get your mind out of the gutter."

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Ludwig sat up and yawned, "What time is it?"

"About to be four."

"...in the morning?"

"No, the afternoon." Matthew bent down to pet Blackie, "Are you still tired? I know I would be if I had to work 'till six in the morning."

"Argh, I can't believe I let myself sleep so mu-wait why are you two here again?"

Gilbert shrugged, "It's not just us. Bear and Tino are in the kitchen with Roddy and Lizzy."

"How the hell did you guys get in?!" Ludwig turned to glare at his oldest dog, Aster. "Why didn't they bark?"

The albino clutched at his chest, "You wound me, bruder! Why would they bark at the awesome me when I'm the one who gives them real bacon? None of that doggie treat crap you giv-hey!"
Gilbert ducked just as a pillow went flying over his head.

"Get out of my room!"

"But your suit…"

"Just leave it there. I'm going to take a quick shower. And don't drink all my beer this time!"

"Kesesese, no promises, West."

A couple of hours later, they shared a limo with their father. Gilbert and Roderich were bickering with one another while Matthew and Elizabeta chatted with each other about work. Tino was fretting over his clothes but Berwald assured him that he looked wonderful. Ludwig watched as Vash sent death glares to Emil when the young Nordic reached for Lilly's hand, the youngest Beilschmidt smiling brightly when she entwined her gloved fingers with her boyfriend's.

Ludwig sighed to himself and leaned back against the leather seat to observe the trees become denser and denser as they left the city behind. From what he could tell, his father's friend lived in the outskirts of Victrola where he owned the largest vineyard in Genovia. Ludwig allowed for his thoughts to wonder to what his little admirer was doing. Was he reading to the patient in room 103? Or perhaps playing a board game with one of the children in the pediatric ward, or maybe he'd been called down to the ER once again, it was Friday after all.

"I want all of you on your best behavior." Wolfgang interrupted everyone's conversations as he handed out the black and gold invitations to his children and their guests, "My friend is a very important person both on a personal and business level." He purposefully ignored the grin his daughter-in-law shot him and continued, "This ball is going to serve two purposes. One is obviously for charity, and the second will be for the debut of his grandson to Victrola's society. Please act accordingly."

"Don't we always, Vati?" Roderich fiddled with his mask on his lap, "I mean we may act a certain way when we're at home but even we know better not to act like fools. Isn't that right, Gilbert."

"Why are you asking me? I'm not the one who-" Gilbert glanced at his father's stern look and cleared his throat, "I mean, ja, Vati. We'll be on our best behavior."

Vash snorted to himself, "Who is this mystery friend of yours, Vati? Why haven't we met him before?"

"When you see him, you'll realize why he can't stop by for a beer, son." Wolfgang reached over and fixed his son's hair. "You left your guns at home, right?"

His youngest son rolled his eyes, "Of course, I did. I'm not stupid."

"Good boy. Alright, mien kinder. We're here. Behave. Yourselves."

He was met with a series of groans and they all spoke in unison, "Ja, Vati."

Wolfgang smiled when the car came to a stop, "Gut, let's go." The Patriarch exited first, followed closely by the rest of the family. The gravel crunched under their feet as they made their way towards the massive villa. Wolfgang was quietly talking to Roderich ahead of Ludwig and Gilbert.

The albino took note of all the Italian cars parked along the path. Metal in reds and blacks gleamed in the moonlight. He nudged Berwald, "Look, Lamborghini, Ferrari, Maserati …shit, check out the Alfa Romeo! Wonder who that one belongs to."
"We'll know soon enough."

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Steam swirled around his body, encasing the Italian in warmth even after he stepped out of the bath. God, it'd been years since he last used high quality hygiene products. The ones at the hotel had been nice but they weren't what he had been raised in. He'd almost forgotten the wonders his sandalwood scented shampoo did for his auburn hair.

Sun kissed hands with nails freshly manicured removed the fluffy white towel from around smooth hips. They quickly set out to pull garment after garment, sliding black mother of pearl buttons into place, zipping and tucking until the outcome was perfection. Those same hands reached out for a heavy watch that had been waiting nearly ten years to finally be placed around the delicate wrist of his master. It would be hidden during the ball but it was nice to feel its weight.

"Pronto, fratello?"

Honey colored eyes glanced at his visitor through the mirror, "Si."

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Ludwig had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at how flustered Vash became when they passed through the doors. Apparently, he had a strong distrust for machines that could look through clothes, at least where Lilly was concerned. Regardless, he and his two younger siblings and Emil had been split apart from the others and ushered through a different door to get inspected by security. Why so many precautions had been taken was beyond him, but he assumed that to each their own.

When they finally made it into the ballroom, his father and siblings were nowhere to be seen in the sea of guests. Ludwig frowned at this, "That's odd. Didn't they say they'd meet us on this side?"

"Ludwig!"

The young German raised his head in the direction of where he heard his name called. A man wearing a simple black mask with copper detail came up to him and clasped his shoulder affectionately. The woman on his arm grinned, "What's up, Luddy?"

"Emma, Lars." Ludwig nodded in his greeting, "I didn't think you guys would come to this."

"Don't we always?" Lars released his sister to give his young cousin a hug, "You look beautiful, Lilly." He smiled at his young cousin before reaching out for a glass of wine, "Old man V knows how to throw a party, huh?"

"...Old man V?"

Lars swallowed a gulp of wine, "Mhmm. That's what I call him. He's a very nice man."

"So we hear," grumbled Vash. "What's the deal with this guy? Our dad says he's a good friend but we've never even heard of the guy."

"Oh, I can guarantee you know hi-"

"Oh my gosh," gasped Lilly, releasing her hold on Emil's hand to grab Emma's. "Monika is here, let's go say hello!" The two girls fixed their masks before linking arms to greet the blonde woman. "Come on, Emil, I want to introduce you to my cousin."
Emil smiled, "Coming, Lil. Gentlemen."

Vash pulled his own mask from his pocket and strapped it around his face, "Wait for me, Lilly. I want to say hi to Monika, too!"

"Man," said Lars with a chuckle, "That boy is attached to Lilly by the hip isn't he?"

Ludwig snorted, "You have no idea."

"So why were you guys hiding over here in the corner table? It's a party, Lud. You should get out there and socialize."

"I'm not wearing my ring, Lars. I step out there and everyone will come flocking."

"I wouldn't flatter myself too much, man. Not to say you aren't handsome or anything, but tonight there's going to be much bigger fish to fry."

"What do you mean?"

"Well for starters, Romulus' grandchildren are in town and here at the party. Not to mention that today's the debut of another one."

Ludwig took a sip from his own wine glass. "Ja, I don't get it. Why do a debut tonight out of all nights? Couldn't they have waited for Cotillion?"

"Cotillion is for young ladies. Emma, Monika, and Lilly did that crap in high school remember? This guy is around your age. As for why tonight, it's just how Romulus is. He's a two-birds-with-one-stone kind of guy."

"Speaking of, where is he? Isn't it rude for the host to keep his guests waiting?"

"Kesese~ you really need to stop hanging around Roderich, West." Gilbert walked up to his brother with an arm around his husband's waist and a wine glass in the other. "Hey there, Lars."

"Gilbert." Lars raised his glass to gently tap Matthew's, "How are you two doing tonight?"

"Very good, thank you." Matthew smiled at the taller man, "Where's Emma?"

"She and the others went to greet Monika."

"Oh, Moni's here? I'll have to say hello when I get a chance."

"Yeah, I saw her earlier. Poor girl was getting ambushed by socialites all asking for a custom. Good thing her girlfriend wasn't around, else there'd be hell to pay."

Ludwig's eyebrows rose behind his mask, "She's dating someone?"

"Uh, yeah. What rock have you been living under? They've been together for like five years now."

"We don't really talk about stuff like that."

Gilbert was about to retort when Berwald and Roderich returned with their significant others just as the lights dimmed, casting a hush amongst the guests. Lilly, Emil, and Vash scurried over to their table when the small orchestra began to play what Roderich was sure to dub as an epic piece, "Where's Vati?" Roderich hushed them and stared at the orchestra in awe making Elizabeta smile at her husband's enthrallment.
A tall man walked up the stairs with a woman on each arm and a man behind him. They held their Venetian masks delicately in their hands while the man himself wore a gladiator-like mask that only covered his upper face. He carefully removed it, revealing a rather youthful face, and handed it over to the man next to him.

"Welcome," he said cheerfully. "I am your host for this evening, Romulus. Thank you so much for gracing my humble home with your presence and of course for your generous donations." The Italian paused for the applause before speaking again in his thickly accented voice, "As customary, by the end of the night I will match whatever quantity has been raised." Their host winked at the crowd, "So don't be shy with your wallets. It's for a wonderful cause. My good friend and head of Asclepius Medical District, Wolfgang Beilschmidt, has decided that this year's collection will be given to a clinic that is in much needed assistance and is at the mercy of government funding. Perhaps with our generosity, we can help keep it functioning for many years to come."

The guests offered another round of applause for Romulus's speech, the women and man next to him clapping their hands as well. Ludwig looked at Lars questioningly, "That's Romulus? I pictured him a lot older. He's the man who was our Vati's best man right?"

"That's him alright. The man's older than he looks, I think he's around your dad's age. He swears that it's the wine he makes from his grapes."

Gilbert chuckled under his breath while Romulus continued his speech, "His lineages are a bunch of lucky bastards to have those genes."

Roderich rolled his eyes, "So are we. Vati doesn't look a day over forty himself. Then again, I have caught him drinking wine out of his stein."

"Bite your tongue!"

"Shh," hissed Elizabeta in annoyance. "Both of you shut up or so help me I'll swing my pan at you." Both men quickly silenced themselves.

"As you know, there is another reason I was so insistent in hosting this year's ball. Si, si, lo so." Romulus grinned at the mock grumbling from the audience, "How dare a hermit such as myself demand such an honor, when trying to get an audience with me is like trying to catch smoke with your bare hands--ah?"

Lilly cocked her head to the side in confusion while the guests around her chuckled politely. "Audience? I don't understand."

Lars leaned over to whisper to his cousins, "You know how we're all pretty well off?" At Gilbert's snort, he corrected himself, "Fine, loaded? Like those gossip papers call the Beilschmidts Victrola's nobility? Well, that man and his family are freaking royalty in comparison to us and anyone one who's anyone is always trying to get in their good graces."

Vash looked up from his cup in mild curiosity, "If that's true then why haven't we heard of them?"

"You have, you just don't know it. Listen." Lars nodded over to where Romulus was speaking. At some point, the Italian had transitioned to the second item in his agenda and from the looks of how people were practically at the edge of their seats, it revealed the real reason why they bothered showing up.

"My greatest legacy isn't the success of my businesses or the stadium. It isn't even my vineyard or this Villa." The orchestra picked up where they left off, images now being projected onto the
screen in such crisp detail. Romulus gently nudged the two women and man forward, "My children were one of the greatest gifts my late wife could have possibly given me, for they blessed me with even greater gifts, my beautifully talented grandchildren. It's in them that the true pride of our clan lies."

Everyone's eyes darted to the screen above them, the music increasing in intensity as the images began to come rapidly. A young Italian, Marcello, was shown swimming furiously against others in what looked like the 2009 Olympics where he was awarded many gold medals. That was replaced with present time Marcello smiling into the camera with his establishment behind him. Next was a woman, Ludwig's eyes widened at how much she looked like Feliciano. She grinned into the camera and ripped her coat off to reveal what he often heard Monika describe as grunge chic clothing underneath.

"Whoa," murmured Tino, his mouth forming an O shape, "I didn't know she was related to such a prestigious family. I really love her band."

"She's cute," added Elizabeta kindly as she watched the girl on the screen reach out to touch her fan's hands. The video cut screens to a very attractive black haired Italian knocking out his rival in the ring and being awarded a large ornate belt before zooming out so that they could see him, now clothed in a black suit, holding it over his head with pride. Beside him were two others of his spitting image. The names Oswaldo and Seraph appeared under them with the champion's name, Bernardo, in between.

"And they're hot." Everyone turned to face Matthew who reddened with embarrassment despite his husband's hushed cackles. Silently, everyone at the table couldn't help but agree with the his assessment.

Oswaldo and Seraph were shown once again in present time with Bernardo, this time it looked as if they were rapping, before a shy looking Italian appeared after them. He looked nothing like his predecessors, his hair blond and features more American than Italian. Nevertheless, Eric smiled kindly into the camera, his eyes strangely familiar to Ludwig but he said nothing. What he did comment on was how they all had a funny curl protruding from their heads. Unfortunately, his observation fell on deaf ears in favor of his siblings attention directed towards Roderich who had let out a rather unmanly squeal.

He cleared his throat, "What? He's got one of the most beautiful tenor voices I've heard."

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"Deep breath, cugino," whispered a dark haired Italian to his younger cousin, "There's nothing to be scared of, we're right behind you."

The young Italian allowed his older cousin to secure his Venetian mask around his face. His honey colored eyes looked at the screen in front of him just as the short film was reaching its ending, the images now showing full bodied shots of his cousins and brothers in rapid succession until it stopped with their family crest, "I'm not afraid." Seraph smiled and stepped back into line with his siblings and cousins.

"Signore e Signori," called Romulus proudly, "I present to you my adorable grandson and heir of my empire…"

Ludwig watched as everyone gripped their seats in anticipation and scoffed. Really? They might as well as stamp gold digging vultures onto their foreheads. Romulus was certainly not doing his grandson any favors by stating that so bluntly. He drowned the rest of his wine and looked around
for a beer. He spotted Gilbert's bottle on the table and wondered if anyone would notice if he took it. Probably not, his own siblings were engrossed with whatever their host was saying.

The German inched over in his seat until he was arm's length away from the amber liquid. Just a bit closer… Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that the fabric that was being used as the screen collapsed in on itself and fell elegantly onto the steps.

"Dr. Feliciano Vargas!"

Roderich choked on his wine while Ludwig's fingers slipped on the bottle of beer, knocking it over onto the table cloth. Everyone clapped for the newest member of their society, but the young German drowned them out. He craned his neck to see over Berwald's head. Four Italians lined on either side of the staircase, a lone man wearing an ivory mask with black and gold detail descending the steps with a grace fit for a prince.

"Bullshit," he murmured. It had to be. The Feliciano he knew wasn't capable of grace outside of medical techniques what with him always knocking things over and tripping.

Feliciano hugged his mother and gave her a kiss on the forehead before being embraced by his grandfather. He allowed it, but on the inside he was screaming.
Sweet Cherry Pie

Chapter Summary

The Vargas drag the Beilschmidts to a club. Feli is the OG Eros who pole dances his way into Ludwig's heart

Chapter Notes

Haha, I'm sorry, I'm just having fun with the summaries since this literally the fourth time I post these chapters up! I hope y'all enjoy this one. I remember it being one of my favorites.

There was perhaps once upon a time when the scent of his grandfather's expensive cologne would bring him comfort. He had actually found it very comforting during his visits in the past few months. However, now as his grandfather was practically smothering him, all he could feel was repulsion. The dark scent was too strong and it made him nauseous and it was all because of what he said just moments ago. Feliciano gripped his grandfather's shoulders as he returned the embrace, and muttered into his ear, "We need to talk."

"Now is not the time," whispered Romulus as he patted his grandson fondly on his head, careful not to mess up his hair, "Go on and enjoy the party. They're really here for you."

"Nonno-" Feli watched his grandfather lead his mother and aunt towards their guests with narrowed eyes only to have his vision blocked by his uncle.

"Don't worry, nipote, we all have the utmost faith in you." Looking at his nephew fondly, Paolo leaned over to kiss his cheeks. "I'm so proud of you."

"Grazie, zio. It means a lot coming from you. Everyone certainly set the bar high, didn't they?" Feli glanced over his shoulder to see Oswaldo, his cousins, and brother still standing along the staircase waiting for Paolo to leave so that they could have their turn.

"Fame and wealth doesn't measure the worth of a man or woman, Feli." Paolo's green cat-like eyes warmed as he looked up to his sons, "I am very proud of my boys and the others don't get me wrong, but I must say that if anyone of you children have learned the lessons from the Agoge, it is you."

"How do you know that, zio?"

Paolo scoffed, "Don't tell me you've forgotten what my job in this family is in your absence?" He winked before tying his mask back on, "Have fun." When their father walked into the sea of guests, the quadruplets pounced on Feliciano and pulled him into a group hug, Felicia and Marcello trying to squeeze in while Lovino watched with amusement.

"We're finally together again," chirped Felicia happily, "the whole gang."
"Ve," breathed Feli, his anger simmering down with his family's affection. He felt brushes of lips all over his face and never had he been as grateful in being born an Italian as tonight. Displays of affection were probably his favorite thing in the world and right now, after what his grandfather did, he could use every kiss and hug he could get.

Eric noticed his cousin's pout, "Don't be mad, Feli. Nonno knows what he's doing. You should trust his judgment."

"But I've made it clear how I feel. He can't just do things like this without asking or-"

"Enough," barked Lovino as quietly as he could. "There is a time and place to throw a tantrum and tonight isn't it." His face softened and he reached out to his brother's shoulder, "We're all here for you. Look, just suck it up for a couple of hours and then we'll take you to the real party. For now, let's just do what we do best, ok?"

"Lovi is right!" Marcello wrapped an arm around his sister's waist and another around Eric's, "These people paid ten grand a plate to see Grandpa's collection of freaks. Let's not disappoint."

Bernardo grinned, "Psh, we're not freaks…outside of bed anyway." While his cousins validated that statement, Feli risked a glance over his brother's shoulder. His golden eyes raked over the tables until they fell on one in the farthest corner where he saw a group of blonds, two brunettes, and an albino gaping at him. He smiled, he knew who they were, but the only one that mattered was the man wearing a wolf mask.

"I think I'm ready now," said Feli, his eyes not leaving the man in the wolf mask.

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Ludwig was having a difficult time breathing. Feliciano, sweet adorable Feliciano, was related to celebrities. He was related to Romulus, his father's best man. He was a freaking heir! Oh, but there was that shimmer of hope that he wasn't his Feli, the guy had a mask after all. And there had to be more Vargas in the world right? It wasn't like this family held a monopoly on the name. The young German watched the man pulled off his Venetian mask and all hope was diminished. Despite how far away he was from the staircase, he could clearly see the handsome boyish face he would every now and again admire when he was sure that the other was engrossed in his work.

"Well hot damn, West. Looks like you found yourself a keeper!" Gilbert cackled to himself as he reached out for his bottle of beer only to frown when he noticed that it was spilled all over the table. "The hell?"

"I spilled it," muttered Berwald, "Sorry."

"Ah, it's ok, little bruder. I'll go get a new bottle in a bit." Gilbert turned back around to talk to his husband about something that had happened in the surgeon’s lounge; he missed the wink Berwald sent to Ludwig.

"You know, Luddy, this means that Feli wasn't after you for the money after all." Lilly took a sip from her wine glass before continuing, "Guess this means that he's truly, honestly, totally into you. For real." She watched her brother carefully and knew that he was processing everything she was telling him, "But it's a shame."

Ludwig looked at his sister with a confused frown, "What is?"

"Well, now if you accept his advances he might think you're after his money."
"What?! I would never, I-" He trailed off when he realized that she was only teasing.

Roderich cleared his throat to get his wife's attention, "Would you care to dance, dear?"

"Thought you'd never ask, sweetheart." Elizabeta took his hand in hers and led the way. Lilly and Emil followed after them along with Lars, Emma, Gilbert, and Matthew, leaving the rest of the Beilschmids to sit awkwardly around the table. Ludwig sighed and returned his gaze to Feli as the man was swept into a dance with some socialite.

"Glare harder, Luddy, maybe you'll make Feli's dance partner combust," teased Tino, making Berwald chuckle. Tino plucked a cherry tomato from the center piece and bit into it thoughtfully. "You know, it doesn't surprise me that he kept his origins a secret. Feli probably wanted to befriend us without the pressure of his lineage hindering our judgment of him. Not that it would." He narrowed his brown eyes at his future brother-in-law, "And don't you go and give him a hard time for not mentioning it. It's bad enough that he gets mopey because you're always being mean."

Ludwig sputtered in defense, "I'm not mean. I just...I wasn't at all sure how to handle this sort of thing. Nobody's ever truly been interested in me before. How was I supposed to know that he was serious?"

"Jeez," groaned Vash at his older brother's response, "You complaining about him all through med school, two and half months of endless pursuit at work, not to mention that stunt he pulled at your graduation? Yeah, he's not into you at all... That's sarcasm by the way."

"I know what sarcasm is, Vash."

"Just making sure, Lud. I don't want to confuse you or anything, not when you've been making some progress. Roderich told me how you went to go bug him about lending you one of his self-help books."

Ludwig cursed himself for believing that his older brother would keep his mouth shut about that. He literally had a mental breakdown and demanded that Roderich let him borrow a reference book on relationships. Why his brother had a self-help book on same sex relationships was beyond him, but he liked to think that it was so that he was well versed in the field should Berwald or himself ever need his advice. Ludwig was pulled from his thoughts when he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see Berwald staring at him through his dark blue mask.

Neither said anything but the message was clear to the younger Beilschmidt. They were both free on Wednesday so any confusion he was feeling at the moment, Ludwig would be able to talk it out with Berwald during their bro day. The younger German smiled in gratitude and nodded. This is why he would secretly favor his stoic brother a little bit more than the others.

"Well, I'm going to go...mingle," said Vash after a while. "I see the Dr. Whales over there. He's the dean of the college of pharmacy at the university. I'm going to try and make a good impression, you know. Just in case." The younger Beilschmidt smoothed out his dark suit and made his way over to an elderly man wearing a bird like mask.

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Feli could feel eyes on him as he danced song after song with a plethora of young men and women. Truth be told, he was enjoying being able to flirt and have it returned but it was all in good sport. On his behalf, at least. Now he could understand where Ludwig's hesitance was coming from, though perhaps now that he knew that he came from money as well, he'd be more inclined to accept his requests for a lunch date. Speaking of which, Feli spun with the girl in his arms around
and caught sight of his crush. Ludwig was still staring at him despite all the songs he'd danced.

Checking his watch, Feli figured that it would probably be best to take a break and eat something before his family dragged him away to the after party which promised to go well into the next day. "Grazie, bella," he spoke smoothly into his dance partner's hand before kissing it. "It was a pleasure dancing with you, but I'm tired now and would like to go rest."

The girl blushed, "Would you like to sit at my table then, Dr. Vargas?"

"I'm sorry but I already have a spot. Please, enjoy the rest of the evening." Feli broke away from the girl and went to the side to find his name card on his family's table to get his plate of food. Along the way, he noticed Lilly and Vash talking with a group of men not that much older than him.

"So, Vash," started one, "I saw you talking to Dr. Whales earlier. Are you considering going into Pharmaceutics?"

Vash shrugged, "It's an option. I've actually taken a genuine interest in it."

"What about you Miss Beilschmidt? Are you going to follow Vash or your other older brothers?"

Lilly laced her fingers behind her back and said, "Actually, I was thinking of maybe going for a doctorate in Anthropological Medicine." The men waited a moment for the punchline but when they saw that she was serious they started to laugh. Lilly cocked her head in confusion, "I'm afraid I don't see the humor, gentlemen."

"I-I'm sorry, it's just you had us there for a moment. Honestly, anthropological medicine," the man trailed off in laughter again, hand clutching his stomach.

Another beside him, wearing a white half faced mask, controlled his laughter to slight chuckles, "Forgive us, dear, we don't mean to make fun of you. It's just that you come from a family of real doctors and I don't see why you would want to be one of those doctors."

Lilly inched a bit closer to her brother and looked down, "There isn't anything wrong with Ph.D. doctors."

"Of course, there isn't anything wrong with that kind, but why on earth would you want to do that?"

"I thought it would be interesting," she answered softly, now wondering if she should pursue a career in that at all. If this was how acquaintances acted, then how was her father going to react? She felt Vash's hand on her hip pull her close and she allowed herself to seek comfort in her older brother.

"Well, yeah it may be interesting," said the first man after calming down. "But you know what they say, 'Those who can't do, do research.' It's just something people do who aren't smart enough to do the actual thing. Kind of like the whole if you can't teach, you teach gym."

"Wow," said Feliciano, "I couldn't disagree more with you." He ignored his hungry stomach and strolled up to the two young Beilschmidts. He placed a hand on Lilly's shoulder but kept his gaze on the men before him. "While it's true that medicinal doctors are required to be very smart, the same can be said about research doctors. If anything, I think they're even smarter. You see, Lilly, what Michael and his friends here don't understand is that to be a Ph.D. you need to be more than intelligent. You need to be brave and creative as well. After all, people like you and me are the ones who dared to explore the unknown so that doctors like your brothers and father could venture into the field armed with our knowledge."
The Italian met Michael's eye, "Not everyone can be a successful Ph.D. Doctor because not everyone is creative enough or brave enough to do it, so they stand on the shoulders of those who can. Neither is superior to the other, if anything they go hand in hand. Of course, then you have those who can't do anything at all and just sit at their parent’s pseudo throne, reaping the benefits of someone else's hard work."

Vash had to bite his cheek to keep himself from letting out an ungentlemanly laugh but that wasn't enough from keeping a smirk from his face. He looked over to his sister and saw her gazing at Feliciano with grateful adoration. He coughed slightly to get the Italian's attention, "You said people like you and her, does that mean…"

"Ve," Feli smiled proudly, for once glad to boast about his own personal achievements, "Si. I am more than just a medical doctor. I have a doctorate in Astrophysics. Why I have one in that subject is a long story but I'd be more than happy to tell it some other time. Right now, I think I have a plate of pasta calling my name."

"Wait!" Vash reached out for Feli's arm to stop him, "Why don't you bring it to our table? I'm sure everyone else would love to hear about this. Not to mention Ludwig is going to eat his words about you being an idiot, he thought gleefully.

The Italian perked up at the chance to eat with Ludwig, "Ve, ok!"

The Beilschmidts were enjoying their plate of wurst stuffed ravioli when Vash and Lilly returned towing a bouncing Feli behind them. Lilly sat in between Emil and Vash while the latter pulled up an extra chair next to his blushing brother, "Why don't you sit next to Ludwig, Dr. Feliciano?"

"Oh, um…if he doesn't mind, sure." Elizabeta and Matthew exchanged glances at how rigid the Italian became as he held his breath.

Ludwig's fork froze halfway to his mouth when he realized that everyone was staring at him for an answer. He looked up at Feli standing awkwardly next to him, "Uh, ja, I guess." His heart did this silly thing that he would later have to look up the cause to, but something told him it had to do with the sweet smile Feli sent his way as he sat down. His food intake slowed down considerably while Feli stuffed his face as if he hadn't eaten all day.

"So," started Gilbert after taking a gulp of wine, "You're from the famous V family, huh?"

"Mhmm," was all the Italian said around his fork.

"And you kept this from the awesome me because…"

Auburn eyes looked straight into crimson, "I wasn't allowed to say anything until they recognized me." Feli wiped his mouth with his napkin. "When I graduated from high school, I was sort of cast out from the family so to speak. I-it wasn't because I did anything wrong," he assured them when everyone's eyes widened. He chuckled to himself, "It's like what the Spartans did with their boys when they reached a certain age. Coincidentally, my family also calls it the Agoge."

"So what, they disown you and you're not welcomed back until you're famous?"

"Nothing like that. I could've been an elementary teacher somewhere and I would've been welcomed back. Not that there's anything wrong with that, I think my little brother is doing it. Oh, but I'm not allowed to speak of him yet. Not here anyway."

Roderich raised an eyebrow, "What is the point of the Agoge?"
"To learn that nothing in this life is free among other things. We all worked hard for what we have, my cousins and brother and me." The Italian picked up a breadstick and munched on it happily, savoring the herbs it was peppered with. "It's a rite of passage for us Vargas, set down by my great great great great grandfather, probably even older but that's as far as I was allowed to look into in my family's records."

"No one helped you through college? You're just tossed out with nothing at all?" Ludwig had stopped eating, too curious about the man sitting next to him.

"Mm," Feli gave him a side glance, "I did it all on my own. Feels so much better in my opinion, plus I don't owe anyone anything. I got to do what I want on my own terms." Well, almost everything. "Actually, during our youth, my nonno would give us an allowance, you know as usual parents and grandparents do. What we did with it was our business but if we were smart, and come on, most of us are, we could set up bonds and other forms of investments to be ready for us to use in the future. I didn't use it though. I sold my bambino, instead."

"Your what?"

"My baby. My car. My Alfa Romeo."

"Holy shit," exclaimed Gilbert excitedly, "that sexy red beast is your car?! That's-" he caught his father's eye from over three tables and cleared his throat, "I mean, yeah, that's a nice one. Ain't German machinery but you know, not bad."

Feli laughed, his knee brushing against Ludwig's and it made his heart do that thing again, "They don't make them anymore, but I was really happy that the mystery buyer was my nonno. He gave it back after I got the job at the…hospital." The Italian's good humor suddenly vanished when he realized something. Wolfgang. His grandfather. Felik's hadn't even sent an application to Asclepius on his behalf. When he asked him all his friend had told him that he'd gotten a call from the secretary alerting him of the time and place. But his grandfather wouldn't have done this; he never helped out the others, so why would he bother with him?

His eyebrow twitched as he looked over to his grandfather's table. The family patriarch was laughing at something his uncle said, his arm around the Wolfgang's shoulders. He quickly looked away and back to his plate of pasta suddenly having lost his appetite. They wouldn't do this to him, right?

"Mr. Feliciano?" Lilly reached over and gently poked him on the arm, "Mr. Feliciano, are you alright?"

"Hm? Ah, yes, mi dispiace. I was…thinking about something." He drowned the rest of his wine and asked a passing servant for more.

"Was it about those jerks messing with my sister," asked Vash, taking this chance to get the Italian to talk about his doctorate.

"Ah, yeah, that. It really frustrates me that people can't appreciate other forms of educational achievement other than what society deems worthy."

Matthew cocked his head to the side, "What do you mean, eh?"

"Well, I think that sometimes doctoral doctors are more often than not overlooked because they stand in the shadow of medicinal doctors. I myself have a Ph.D. and while I don't mind not being recognized for it, I can't stand it when others who do have it and use it as their means of economic
support are dismissed as idiots by those not of their circle because it is assumed that they were medical school washouts." Ludwig choked on his own wine and started to cough violently.

Alarmed, Feli rubbed Ludwig's back, "Ve! Are you ok, Lud-Dr. Beilschmidt?" He offered him his napkin and Ludwig took it, his coughs diminishing but his cheeks reddening in embarrassment. When he was sure that his partner was ok, he addressed the rest of the table with a sheepish smile. "It's rather funny actually. I was so used to adding Ph.D. after my name in formal documents that when I signed my name under the Hippocratic Oath, I accidentally wrote them after instead of M.D. I had to scratch it out before putting the correct ones."

"Why? Kesese~ If I were you, I'd be marking those titles on everything."

Roderich rolled his eyes at his brother, "Of course you would, Gilbert. Need I remind you that not everyone is a vain show dog." He smirked into his wine, knowing that Gilbert wouldn't retort. His brother had already gotten a strike from their father and wouldn't risk another.

"So, dear, what did you get your doctorate in," asked Elizabeta kindly.

"Astrological Physics." Feli turned around in his seat again when Ludwig spit out his wine, "Is the wine bad, Dr. Beilschmidt? I could get you a fresh glass if you'd like." His eyes were heavy with worry at his crush not enjoying the fruit of his family's vineyard. "Or perhaps the pasta...is it the pasta?" He scooted a bit closer and rubbed soothing circles on Ludwig's back.

Good god, this man was going to be the end of him. Just how many surprises did he have up his sleeve? Ludwig waved his worries away, "I-I'm fine, sorry." He glared at Gilbert who at least had the decency of keeping his cackles to himself. Berwald and Lilly were looking at him, however, with worry where Roderich was amused and Vash...Vash, the little shit had a smug look on his face.

"That's quite the jump," marveled Tino. "Astrophysics to Medicine? Why did ya do that, uh, if you don't mind me asking?"

"No, not at all. It's kind of embarrassing but I wanted to prove to my brother that," at this Feli blushed heavily, "that Thor could exist."

Berwald's and Emil's eyes widened, the former's mouth actually parting in awe, "Does he?"

"In theory, yes."

"You're fucking with us." Gilbert didn't know whether to laugh or...laugh? He smiled weakly, "There's no way that's... how did you figure that out?"

Feli chuckled, "Careful asking a doctorate about their work. We can talk your ears off." He checked his watch, "In simple terms, math."

"Math?"

"Si! It wasn't all that hard really. I simply built off what Stephen Hawking and Einstein already theorized. Not to mention I may or may not have a crush on Thor." Feli looked down in embarrassment, "I like The Avengers, ok? Something about strong Germanic blonds with striking blues eyes does it for me."

To say that it took every fiber of their being to keep from smiling so wide that the act itself would cause them to pull a muscle, was an understatement. Elizabeta bit her tongue to keep from squealing while Matthew's face blushed sweetly at how bold his coworker and friend was to say...
such a thing while looking right at Ludwig.

Ludwig's eyes widened a fraction but he utilized all the self-control he had to not react to that statement. This surprising man before him was going to be the end of him. Truth be told, if they had been on a date alone, wait, could this count as a date? They were in a formal setting, dressed nicely…

"Kesese!"

No. No it couldn't be counted as a date because his obnoxious brother was present. Well, now that he knew that Feliciano was a hundred percent interested in him, he would definitely ask him out on a date. He still had eight months before he had to sign his soul away. Might as well as enjoy them.

"So ya pr'ved Thor exists," asked Berwald, excitement creeping into his usually stoic eyes.

"Mhmm. I have an equation for it. Actually, it proves that there are many dimensions in this universe, including Asgard. It got me a job as a professor but that was very short lived. Didn't last more than a summer semester."

"What could you possibly have done in a summer semester to lose your job," questioned Vash.

"Nothing. I just got bored. Astrophysics is fun, don't get me wrong, and I'll always have a framed parchment with my calculations, but that field wasn't for me. Almost everyone I met were glory hounds, always had to outdo one another. My roommate at the time while I lived in the dorms was a biotech major and that interested me for a while. I actually helped him out with some schematics for a machine that tells you exactly what's inside any pill in under a minute, only...he never got around to finishing it though." Feli looked rubbed his wrist sadly.

"I'm sorry," murmured Lilly, reaching out to place a comforting hand on the Italian's shoulder. "Did he...die?"

"Ve? Oh, no. He was just called back home for family issues. Took the first plane back to Russia and we never spoke again."

"He was Russian, your friend?"

"Mhmm. He was very misunderstood, but deep down I knew he had a good heart. He's actually the one who influenced me to be a doctor. His beliefs in what made a good physician were inspiring."

"Sounds like you were in love with him," muttered Ludwig. He was poking at his ravioli, musing about who this Russian could be. A part of him was glad that he was gone, another wondered if fate had anything to do with it. You know if he believed in such things.

"Nah, we were just really good friends. Besides, if we did have some chemistry, it wouldn't have worked. He didn't exactly stay in contact and I had a boyfriend at the time. But new doors have opened up for me, granted not the one I want but I'm willing to wait. I am very patient man."

The look Feli gave Ludwig paired with the brush of his leg against his own sent a new wave of sensations pulsing through his veins. Running his tongue over his lips, Ludwig looked away.

"Feli, there you are!" Eric and Bernardo grabbed either side of their cousin's arms and hoisted him up from his seat. The dark haired Italian winked at the table, "Mi dispiace, but we're going to kidnap our cousin now."

Eric brushed his blond fringe away from his eyes and grinned at Roderich, "Hello, amico. Are you
enjoying the ball?" He chuckled at the brunette's expression and motioned to his brother, "Fratello, do you think Marcello would mind if we invite them too?"

"The guest of honor is Feli," answered Bernardo. "What do you say, Feli? Think the Beilschmidts are worthy of the after party?"

Feli pushed his chair in, "Hm, I don't think it'll interest them, honestly."

"Where are you guys headed," asked Gilbert, now fully intrigued with Feli's cousins.

Seraph walked up with Felicia and Monika on either arm, "We, my friends, are going to the Den of Iniquity."

Gilbert's eyes widened, "That place is hard to get into, well any level higher than three is. How are we going to-"

"Marcello owns it, love," answered Matthew for him. "Weren't you paying attention?"

"I'm sorry but a place like that...I think Lilly and I are going to sit this one out." Vash stood up and shoved his mask into his pocket, "If you want to come hang out at the apartment, Emil, I don't mind." Well, he did but if it meant keeping his sister innocent of what was said to happen at that club, he'd make do. "I'm sorry, Mr. Vargas."

"Please, call me Seraph." The dark haired Italian glanced at his watch then over at his grandfather's table. "We should get going before my nonno changes his mind. So, what do you say ladies and gentlemen? Want to go see what the Vargas do for fun?"

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The ride back into the city was anything but quiet. Roderich was practically fanboying all over Eric while Elizabeta teased him about his man crush. Berwald still had questions about Feli's doctorate while Tino spoke animatedly about the possibilities of proving the existence of Santa Claus with that equation. Gilbert and Matthew had decided to join Antonio and another member of their trio who had apparently also been at the party as well and had hitched a ride with the Spaniard to the club. Marcello had gone ahead with Lovino to make sure the bouncers wouldn't turn their guests away.

Ludwig stared out of the window of the limo, his nerves going haywire. How he'd been suckered into going to a place of sin was beyond him. Originally, he had tried to use the excuse of work to get out of it but Elizabeta would have none of it. 'None of us have work tomorrow,' she had said, giving him her 'you-better-go-along-with-it' glare and he knew that it would be pointless to argue with her. So here he was, pressed a little too close to his door, wondering what was so special about this club that his siblings hadn't allowed him to get off with Lilly, Vash, and Emil.

Their limo finally arrived to a modern looking tower where a long line of eager patrons waited for a chance to go inside. The street was well lit and the keys to extravagant cars were being handed over to the valet.

Marcello, now dressed in light grey slacks and matching vest over a black long sleeved shirt, addressed the crowd as he usually did Friday nights, "For many in the Upper East Side of Victrola, it is easy to see, to think, that the world is exactly as it appears—refined, elegant, imposing. But sometimes all it takes is a little key to open the door to the wild side." He winked and slid his golden key into the slot to open the doors.

Only the lucky ones or the ones who reserved ahead of time were granted access. Marcello strolled
up to the Beilschmidt's limo as it drove up and opened the door for them, "Ciao. Feli told me you were coming along with a few others from work." He gave them a once over and raised his eyebrow, "I trust this is your first time here, ah?" The young Italian smiled, "Don't worry, just lose the suit jackets, pop open a few buttons and you'll be fine. Come." He lead the small group inside, "You have to check in your cell phones and any cameras you may have. Please, in the box." Marcello held open a steel cased box for the Beilschmidts to surrender their mobiles.

"Don't worry, you'll get them back," assured the Italian after sensing hesitation. "This is only to protect the privacy of you and the other Patrons. Usually, I allow them in level one but we're not going to level one."

"Which level are we going to," asked Tino when he finally handed over his Blackberry after Berwald placed his in the box.

"Five. Come on." Ludwig reluctantly handed over his own cell and watched as Marcello locked it safely away before handing it over to one of his assistants. "Each level determines the kind of fun you want to have. In our case, it's pretty exclusive. Family and friends and those with the means to buy their way are allowed." He sent a wink over his shoulder, "I am running a business after all."

"How many levels are there?"

Marcello ushered them into a large elevator, "Only six but anything past two is enough to want to take certain precautions. I created this place so that people can forget the outside world. I wanted a place where people could be free to do as they please so long as it's consensual, and the best part is that no one will have proof of their naughty behavior."

Roderich rolled his deep plum sleeves up to his elbows while Elizabeta removed the pins from her hair to let it down. She had also removed the top layer of her dress skirts to make it shorter, a quality that made Monika's designs so favorable amongst her generation. "What's to keep people from talking? We do have reputations to keep."

"There's a difference between mere gossip and a scandal. The only way for gossip to birth said scandal is if there is solid proof, hence why everyone who goes into the upper levels is required to surrender their phones and cameras." Marcelo leaned against the metal door and watched the number dial get closer to the five, "You'd be surprised what kinds of professionals visit my establishment. As I said, once you step through those doors, the outside world doesn't exist anymore. There are no titles or last names. It's just you and my Den of Iniquity." When the doors opened, Marcello stepped aside to let everyone out, "Have fun."

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Feli could hear the music blaring from outside the V.I.P. room and people having a good time. The lights were peaking inside his bubble of tranquility. He'd had a couple drinks while his cousins continued to beg him to go outside where everyone else was waiting.

Bouncing on her girlfriend's lap, Felicia groaned, "Come on! I know I didn't come down here to just sit around and watch you brood. Let's go play!" She changed earlier into a silver dress and black stockings to contrast Monika's own apparel. The German wrapped her arms around Felicia's waist to keep her still. "Feli," she drawled out her cousin's name.

"Ve…"

Lovino uncrossed his arms, "Che palle, stop sulking about what the old man said. You won't change his mind so just roll with it."
"Roll with it. Roll with it? How the hell am I supposed to roll with it?!" The younger twin clenched his hand around a glass of brandy, "How is that fair? All of you got to choose your roles in this family, why was I the only one not to? Seraph, you're the oldest. You should be heir, not me."

"Feliciano, you wanted this ever since you were a child. I can still remember you singing that Lion King song about how you couldn't wait to be king."

"I was an ignorant child! What did I know about our world?"

"You're being too pessimistic about this." Oswaldo finished sprucing up and turned around to face Feliciano, "Enjoy it. You know why Seraph, Bernardo and me can't be heir. You know why your brother or Felicia or Eric can't be heir. It has to be you. Or what," his eyes hardened, "are you turning your back on the Family?"

The glass in Feli's hand shattered from how tightly he gripped it, his jaw tight and eyes steel. "Fuck you, Oswaldo."

Oswaldo's eyes widened in shock, "Feli-

"No, fuck you. You of all people should know how much family means to me and the lengths I'm willing to go to uphold our family name. It's not the fact that I'm heir that bothers me, it's the fact that it was chosen for me without my consent."

"Look, angel…I'm sorry, that was out of line. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, you should be. I'm getting tired of hearing that you guys think I'd turn my back on you. After all we've been through together. After all the family's been through." Feli buried his face in his hands, shrugging off whoever's hand was placed on his shoulder, "Don't."\n\nOswaldo didn't give up; he pulled Feli into a hug and held him tight and murmured to him in Italian, "I'm so sorry. I didn't…I would never doubt your loyalty. Please forgive me." He kissed his angel on the forehead when Feli didn't react, "I'm sorry."

"I just wish he would've at least told me about it. I wouldn't have gotten upset at all if he would've just told me instead of just dropping it on my shoulders like this."

Bernardo pried his brother off Feli, "Listen, I know that a lot of responsibility has become yours but you're not alone, man. You've got us, and sure we may sometimes be at different corners of the world but like tonight, we'll drop everything to come back when you need us."

"Your cousins are right, amigo." Antonio, who had watched his friend slowly fall apart since the moment of Romulus' announcement, finally spoke up. "With family like us, who needs armies?"

Lovino drowned the rest of his drink and set it aside. "Don't forget that you've now become the third most powerful man in the country. Power like that…Nonno doesn't just hand out. Clearly you've done something that makes you worthy. We're not jealous, promise we aren't."

"Wouldn't have it any other way," added Eric from his perch on the table as he swung his legs back and forth. "You'll still get to choose, though. There are the brands, after all."

"Let's not talk about the brands." Seraph slapped Feli on the back with the grin, "We don't want to get ahead of ourselves just yet. Now, let's go out, yeah? Your friends are waiting." He noticed that his cousin's pout didn't go anywhere and sighed, "You know what you need to do?"

"Ve?"
"You need to do something to get your confidence back, man. Seeing you like this, it ain't right. You're Feliciano damn it! And the Feliciano I know doesn't sulk about shit like this. He goes out there with his head held high and does what he does best."

"And how, pray tell, do you suggest I go about doing that?" Feliciano stood up and stretched, his suit jacket riding up a bit and vest starting to become untucked. "It's kind of hard to radiate confidence when I feel like I don't have power over my life."

Felicia had watched her cousin's movements as well and exchanged glances with Seraph. Leaning back to nuzzle against Monika, she smiled sweetly, "You could always give us a naughty dance."

"Not just us," corrected Seraph, "but them out there too."

"And Ludwig." Monika bit her lip to conceal her smile when Feli instantly perked up at the mention of her cousin. "You never know, that may be just the thing to put a permanent crack in his shell."

Bernardo jumped up from his spot, "Not to mention we're here to celebrate, not talk about boring shit. And don't start that crap about you being a doctor. You're in the Den, no one outside will ever know what you did. Plus, I know for a fact you don't have work tomorrow so you can't use that as an excuse."

Lovino was about to speak against it but the look Antonio gave him made him switch gears. "As much as I hate the potato bastard for being, well a bastard, I think that could be fun. So long as nobody touches you."

"Ve, I don't know..." Feli felt himself grow excited at the prospect of Ludwig watching him and he'd be lying if said that it didn't excite him in more ways than one.

"You'll be the one in control after all."

"I'll even sing a song for you," chirped Felicia getting up from Monika's lap. "I know just the one too!"

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Ludwig sat at the bar with Roderich, Berwald, and Tino while the rest of their group was out dancing. Elizabeta was dancing with Emma while Gilbert and Matthew were dancing just a few paces from them. He was surprised when he saw Alfred and Arthur walk in along with Heracles and Kiku. Apparently, Feliciano had invited them days prior and had even given Arthur extra golden tickets for his visiting brothers. So far, the club had provided enough entertainment but the young German was starting to grow antsy. Where was Feliciano at?

As if to answer his question Marcello handed him over a shot, "Don't worry. He'll be out soon enough."

Ludwig frowned, "Who?"

"Feli! I saw the way you were looking at him. Actually, I'm sure by the end of tonight you'll be doing more than just looking if you know what I mean." The Italian winked and moved over to hand out more drinks before Ludwig got a chance to retort. The music suddenly stopped playing and all lights pointed to the stage where the DJ wearing a large cat like helmet was moving his tables to make way for Felicia and her band.

"Hallo," greeted Monika as she slotted in between Roderich and Ludwig. "I'm glad they convinced
you to come along, Lud."

"Ja, well, it was more like forced. How are you, Moni?" Ludwig offered her an affectionate pat on the head making her puff her cheeks in annoyance.

"I just got it to sit just so."

Roderich smiled, "You're still beautiful." He returned his watchful gaze on his wife who was now looking at the stage with curiosity. "What's your girlfriend up to?"

"You'll see. You're finally going to get some real talent to use that pole you had me install, Marcello."

The Italian laughed as he handed her a beer bottle, "So I heard."

Out in the dance floor Alfred was getting restless. "Dude, why did they cut off the music?"

"It would seem like they're getting ready for a live performance." David, Arthur's younger brother by a few years, ran a hand through his sandy locks. Elsewhere, their other brothers were probably hitting on girls so he had decided to hang back and mess with his older brother and his date. "I thought you said there were cute guys here, Artie."

"Oh, for goodness sake, David," growled Arthur in annoyance. "I'm not your babysitter or matchmaker. If you want someone to go home with, then go look for one yourself!"

"Jeez, so touchy. Damn, they're hot." Arthur and Alfred looked up to the stage where three men with wayward curls pulled up their stools while a girl with auburn hair set up behind them. David's eyes widened, "Bloody hell, that's Cerberus!" Around them others in the crowd recognized the triplets and immediately started screaming in excitement, some tried to get closer but the tables near the stage kept them from actually getting to them.

"You ready," asked Seraph. When he got a roar of cheers in response he chuckled, "Alright, let's go! This is for those of you that want to know what we're all about." He looked directly at the Beilschmidts, "It's like this y'all, come on!"

The triplets pulled out their own microphones and took a seat on their stools while Felicia got her own band together behind them. They rapped in unison, "This is ten percent luck, twenty percent skill, fifteen percent concentrated power of will, five percent pleasure, fifty percent pain and a hundred percent reason to remember the name!"

Bernardo stood up, "Oswaldo! He doesn't need his name up in lights, he just wants to be heard whether it's the beat or the mic. He feels so unlike everybody else, alone in spite of the fact that some people still think that they know him but fuck em, he knows the code. It's not about the salary, it's all about reality and making some noise, making the story - making sure his clique stays up. That means when he puts it down Seraph's picking it up!"

He sat back down and Seraph stood up, tossing his red tie over his shoulder, "Who the hell is he anyway? Eric never really talks much, never concerned with status but still leaving them star struck. Humbled through opportunities given despite the fact that many misjudge him, nobody knows he makes a living from writing raps." Roderich raised his eyebrows at this tidbit of knowledge regarding his favorite opera singer. "Put it together himself, now the picture connects. Never asking for someone's help, or to get some respect, he's only focused on what he wrote, his will is beyond reach and now it all unfolds the skill of an artist."

The second youngest of the quadruplets stood up after Seraph sat down. Oswaldo took over, "This
is twenty percent skill, eighty percent fear, be a hundred percent clear cause my brother is ill." He smirked and rubbed Bernardo's hair affectionately, "Who would've thought that Bernardo would be the one to set the west in flames. Then I heard he left the ring to take his chance in this musical game. Went in, dropped Cerberus, took y'all to church. Was told he couldn’t but now this dude is the truth, everybody's giving him guest spots. His stock's through the roof I heard he's fuckin' with the Diamond Dogs."

Lovino leaned back in his seat, his feet propped on the table when a light beam fell on him, and raised his drink in acknowledgment when Bernardo took the opportunity to sing a bit about him. The older Italian grinned and pointed to his cousin, "They call him Lovi, he's sick and he's spitting fire. Got him out the dryer he's hot. Found him in Barcelona with him," Bernardo motioned to the Spaniard sitting next to Lovi before addressing his cousin again, "What a fuckin' nihilist porcupine. He's a prick, he's a cock. The type people want to be with, and gangsters hope he get shot." Antonio wrapped a protective arm around his boyfriend while Lovino tossed his head back and laughed, truer words were never spoken.

Roderich exchanged glances with Berwald while Ludwig furrowed his brow in confusion. Gangsters?

Bernardo jumped off from the stage and draped himself over his cousin and Antonio, "Eight years in the making, patiently waiting to blow. Now the record with NGD's taking over the globe. He's got a partner in crime, his shit is equally dope." Rustling Antonio's hair like his brother did his, "You won't believe the kind of shit that comes out of this kid's throat!" He chuckled and took a seat with them while Oswald continued.

The light beam moved over to the bar where Marcello was bartending. "Marcello! - He's not your everyday on the block; he knows how to work with what he's got. Made his way to the top, he often gets a comment on his game. People keep asking him did it come with the name or did he raise it all on his own?" Oswaldo recalled how angry Marcello would get because people kept thinking that Iniquity was something Romulus handed down to him. "No, he's living proof, he raised this booth. He'll get you buzzing quicker than a shot of vodka with juice. Him and this place are known around as one of the best. Dedicated to what they do and give a hundred percent." Marcello nodded his head in gratitude. He was genuinely touched that his cousins had included him in their song. Maybe now pricks would believe that he did this all on his own.

Seraph reached around him and pulled in their only female cousin, "Forget Felicia - Nobody really knows how or why she works so hard. It seems like she's never got time because she writes every note and she writes every line." Felicia looked at Monika with saddened eyes, she knew she worked a lot but she really did try to make time for her lover and family. The German smiled reassuringly and with reddened cheeks, blew her a kiss, making the girl's pout morph into a beam. "And I've seen her at work when that light goes on in her mind. It's like a design is written in her head every time before she even touches a key or speaks in a rhyme. And those motherfuckers she runs with, the kids that she signed? Ridiculous, without even trying, how do they do it?" He let go of her so that she could finish getting ready.

"Wow," murmured Tino in awe after they finished their song. He took a sip of his drink, his eyes turning to face his fiancé, "Who knew the Vargas were so intense, huh?" Berwald nodded. The rest of the people at the club took the few minutes of silence to get refills on their drinks while others ordered something quick to eat to refuel for everything the night at Iniquity promised. Rhythmic drumming caught their attention followed by an electric guitar.

"Dirty, rotten, filthy, stinkin..."
Alfred's eyes widened when the band called out those words, a large grin forming on his face, "Dude, no way. I love this song!"

Felicia took Seraph's microphone and sang into it as Bernardo and Antonio tossed Feli onto the stage, "He's a cherry pie, cool drink of water such a sweet surprise. Tastes so good makes a grown man cry, sweet cherry pie."

During the brief interlude of guitar playing in the background, Feli looked around the sea of patrons. All eyes were on him but where was...ah! Immediately his eyes landed on Ludwig who was staring at him in curiosity of what was going to happen. Blue eyes that he had fallen in love with widened when Monika leaned over to whisper something in his ear. "So she told him what I'm going to do, huh," he thought to himself with a smirk. Feli walked boldly to stand in front of the pole, his body moving to the building beat of the music, hips and shoulder swaying sensually as his hands moved up his jacket, grabbing the front and effortlessly sliding it off his shoulders to the sound of women and men cheering and whistling.

"Well, swingin' on the front porch, swingin' on the lawn, swingin' where we want 'cause there ain't nobody home." Feli tossed his jacket aside, not minding if it got dirty. He swung his hips to the beat as he worked on his vest and tossed it aside as well. "Swingin' to the left and swingin' to the right. If you think about baseball, you'll swing all night yea!"

David swallowed heavily, "Artie, who's that?" His green eyes followed every movement the man before him made. A red tie was thrown into the crowd and he immediately caught it, not missing the wink the Italian sent him.

"Swingin' in the living room, swingin' in the kitchen, most folks don't 'cause they're too busy bitchin'. Swingin' in there 'cause he wants you to feed him." Felicia looked pointedly at Ludwig, "So why don't you mix up the batter? He'll lick the beater."

Ludwig's jaw dropped, his eyes practically bulging from their sockets when Feli dipped a finger into a drink set for him and licked it clean as he slid down the pole, eyes not leaving him. Beside him, he could hear Berwald and Tino chuckling at his reaction but at the moment he couldn't gather enough wits to give a damn.

"I scream, you scream, we all scream for him! Don't even try 'cause you can't ignore him. He's a cherry pie." Behind her, Feli unbuttoned the last of his shirt's buttons and peeled it off so he was now in a thin dark grey t-shirt. "Cool drink of water, such a sweet surprise. Tastes so good make a grown man cry, sweet cherry pie, oh yea!"

Arthur cast a side glance to his little brother and rolled his eyes. The boy was hypnotized by his friend on stage. Not that he could blame him, Feliciano did have a nice body. He shook his head; still, he had his money on Ludwig going home with the redhead.

"He's your cherry pie, put a smile on your face ten miles wide." Felicia moved around Feli and ran a hand over his biceps, "Looks so good, bring a tear to your eye. Sweet cherry pie!" She stepped aside so that he could grab onto the pole again. They both swung their hips in time to the lyrics, "Swingin' to the drums, swingin' to guitar, swingin' to the bass in the back of the car. Ain't got money, ain't got no gas but we'll get where we're goin' if we swing real fast! I scream, you scream, we all scream for him. Don't even try 'cause you can't ignore him!"

Ludwig shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Good god, he was going to be the death of him! Did he mention that already? It should be illegal to move the way the man on stage was moving. No doubt he was doing it on purpose. Not that he was complaining, not really. And there was no way in hell that he was going to be able to ignore him now. Felicia caught his eye and pointed directly to him,
"He's your cherry pie. Cool drink of water such a sweet surprise. Tastes so good make a grown man cry, sweet cherry pie, oh yea! He's your cherry pie. He'll put a smile on your face ten miles wide. Looks so good, bring a tear to your eye. Sweet cherry pie!"

Feliciano was already feeling high off the energy of the room. "Swing it! All night long, swing it!" His family was right; this was doing wonders for his confidence. Having all eyes on him, everyone begging him to lose just one more piece of clothing and then another and another. He wasn't going all the way of course, but it was certainly feeding his ego to see that even Ludwig was following his every move. And if that didn't give him proof that he wanted him, then he didn't know what did.

The Italian wondered if he should remove his shirt while he was at it. He walked all the way to the edge of the stage and toyed with the hem of his shirt seductively running his hands up his toned stomach, letting the dark cotton ride up, with it revealing honey colored flesh. Ludwig shifting in his seat didn't go unnoticed nor did the slight gulps of a few people standing close enough to the stage. Feliks gave him a slight nod.

Taking his encouragement, Feli worked on removing his shirt, earning even more rabid screams from the audience and skipped back to the pole. "Swingin the bathroom, swingin' on the floor." The Italian rubbed himself against it and popped his rear up and down before sliding down on the steel pole. "Swingin' so hard but don't forget to lock the door."

Some poor sap got the nerve to swat at Feli's rear making him gasp in surprise. Felicia grinned when she saw Lovino march up, "Cause in will walk Lovi standin' five foot eight and he'll say 'you ain't gonna swing with my brother no more'."

Ludwig had been pissed to say the least when some random guy dared to touch what he had been eyeing for weeks now and was grateful when Lovino dragged the guy off his brother and away to who knows where. Feli didn't look as abashed as he probably should have. If anything, his usually bright eyes had darkened more so as he played with his belt buckle.

On Felicia's behalf she continued on as if she was used to having strangers running onto her stage, "He's your cherry pie, cool drink of water such a sweet surprise. Tastes so good make a grown man cry, sweet cherry pie, oh yea!" She continued her song but Feli didn't remove anything else, just teased with the possibility that he might.

Blue eyes followed those devilish hips, every swing, dip and...oh dear god was that a thrust? Ludwig squinted when the light caught something dark on Feli's pectoral. Did he have a tattoo?! The thought of something on him like that...Ludwig turned around to tuck his legs under the counter and prayed that his brothers wouldn't force him to dance. Not that he could in his current state.

The song came to an end and the crowd cheered as Feli pulled his shirt back on, disregarding his other clothes. He'd get them back eventually. "You did great, Feli!" The Italian turned around to see Francis as he pulled him into a hug, "I'm sorry I didn't say hi at the ball. Grandpa had me run an errand for him and when I tried to find you, you guys had already left."

After waiting for what felt like hours but really was probably more like thirty minutes, Ludwig felt he had his...issue under control. He allowed himself to turn back around to face the crowd. Monika left to go find Felicia while Elizabeta had returned for a much needed break, "Boy, I haven't danced like that in ages! Honey, you should come out and dance with me after I catch my breath."

Roderich handed her some water with a smile, "Of course, dear."
"Holy shit, this night is awesome. Right, Birdie?" Gilbert let himself drop into his booth and pulled Matthew into his lap.

Matthew giggled breathlessly, "Mhmm." He nuzzled against his husband's neck, "Best part is that we don't have work tomorrow so it doesn't have to end when we get home." Gilbert blinked once before understanding the meaning behind Matthew's words.

"Kesesese~ you're the best, babe!" Gilbert heard his brother growl lowly, "West, you ok?" He followed Ludwig's line of sight and laughed again, "That's just Francis. He's like that with everyone. When he saw me and Matt, he groped both of us."

DJ Neurotic Kat switched gears and a faster paced song swept the patrons into its rush. Now with the attention off themselves, the triplets joined their cousins out on the dance floor. Lovino had pulled his brother close to him to ward off any possible gropers while Antonio had settled for dancing with Francis next to them.

…I promise to please you all night long. You'll be shaking long after I'm gone...

"No offense, fratello, but this song is a bit awkward to dance to with you," muttered Feli.

"Shut up, stupid," growled Lovi. "I'm only here so that guys don't try and pull another stunt like that other idiot did."

"You know if you want to dance with him, Luddy," started Elizabeta as she nudged her brother-in-law's shoulder gently, "Nothing's stopping you." She smiled when Ludwig blushed and averted his eyes in time to see Seraph, at least he assumed it was Seraph because he was wearing a blue tie, slide in between the twins and grind playfully against them. The twins changed their positions to accommodate him.

"Th’t could be you, L’dwig," said Berwald as he let Tino drag him to the dance floor.

Gilbert drowned the rest of his beer carefully then got up to dance some more with Matthew. "Jeez, West, even Teddy can see you pining over the little guy like a teenager at prom. Just go ask. Look, he's dancing by himself."

I'm not gonna hand over my heart over tonight, I'm not gonna mistake true love for mere passion...

The center of the club was flowing with a sea of sweating, gyrating bodies, illuminated only by the intermittent flashes of colored spotlights set to time with the thumping of the bass. The air was hot and thick, smothering, peppered with the smells of perspiration, alcohol, and a mixture of intoxicating body fragrances. Feliciano glanced over to where Ludwig was sitting and frowned. He was glaring at his brothers as he argued and waved his beer bottle angrily in Feli's direction. The Italian caught his eye which made Ludwig stutter red faced before turning away, sneaking a quick glance over Feli's body in a way that sent two kinds of shivers down his spine. On one hand, how dare he. If he wanted to check him out, all Ludwig needed to do was come out and join him on the dance floor. It wasn’t like Feli had been subtle in his desires.

What if he did accept Feli only to push him away when things were getting to be perfect? What if he didn’t let him love him?

…I don’t want to get hung up on all the ways things could go wrong, I’ll end up disappointed not to mention abandoned…
Shaking his head, annoyance quickly filled Feli’s chest. He’s too old to be playing this shit. Either Ludwig got with the program and flat out told him that he wasn’t interest instead of sending mixed signals or he grew a pair and came after him. He had enough of this “Will They or Won’t They” game with his ex and he didn’t want to go through with it again.

…I won’t fall head over heels for a guy who’s got nothing to offer except a trail of broken hearts…

Feli felt someone else’s gaze on him and he swayed his hips like he’s the music’s metronome as he turned around to find who was staring at him. His golden eyes met another pair of golden eyes sitting far away from him and yet he knew exactly who it was, the beautiful blue ring around the pupil getting thinner as the pupils dilated before narrowing to pin pricks then darting away from him.

Annoyance quickly turned to anger. Why the fuck did men always do this shit to him?

…I’ve paid to rid my heart of, it’s pain with tears, so I’ve got none to spare…

Well fuck ‘em. If they didn’t want him then Feli would find someone who did. Even if it was only for the night.

So Feli melted off the tendrils of disappointment from his heart and beat his anger down so that only passion remained before slapping it onto his shoulder. He came here for fun and he was going to have some with or without Ludwig Beilschmidt. His fingers carded through his artful mess of auburn hair as his body cried *come and get me if you dare*.

...tonight I’m gonna dance with my heart on my shoulder...watch as the music surrounds me, my heart is it’s metronome…

Other patrons immediately fluttered around him, a few were even humored until Feli settled on Arthur’s younger brother, David. The young man was definitely interested and, well, Feli did say that he had a thing for blond men with colored eyes. Green would have to do.

...can you see my heart freeze over? It gets coldly calculative whenever you’re around…

~.~

The thundering bass of the music welcomed Lars back from the dance floor as the song’s vocals changed from woman to man and he couldn’t help but stare at a brooding Ludwig. His cousin had nestled further into his seat as he nursed another beer. "You're drunk," he accused, sliding into Roderich's seat when they all dispersed into the crowd. He poked at all the empty beer bottles and glasses. "Is that why you aren't dancing?"

"Vhy does everyone vant me to dance," asked Ludwig exasperatedly, his accent thickening with every drink he finished. A perfect indication that the young German was indeed drunk. "I showed up, didn't I?"

"You were practically forced here, Luddy."

"Ja, vell, whatever. Vhat time is it?"

"I don't know, a little after midnight? Why?"

...Tonight I'll take you by the hand and later I'll take you by your heart...
"Vondering." Ludwig rubbed at his eyes sleepily and looked around. He spotted Feli dancing with a blond man and narrowed his eyes when his dance partner had boldly grabbed a hold of the Italian's hips bringing them too close for comfort to his own. Slamming his glass down he stood up from his chair and stumbled into the crowd.

...then I'll make you feel so damn good you'll forget all about that other guy...

"Ve?" Feli felt himself flush when his dance partner slid his hand under his shirt to paw at his stomach, "What are you doing?"

"Dancing with you," murmured David into his ear, leaning lower to nibble Feli's neck.

"I think it's my turn, ja?" Ludwig didn't wait for either man to respond and pulled Feliciano further into the crowd until he found them a spot in the darkest corner. "You little, arschloch," he growled, "Why have you been acting like that?"

...better yet, trust me to know how to handle your heart, I promise to lead it out of the prison it's made for itself...

Feli's eyes widened at the rough treatment but soon darkened and he grinned lazily, "Acting like what, Dr. Beilschmidt?"

"You know what. You've been teasing me all night, ever since the ball with you brushing my legs and then that little show. What were you thinking?!"

...come here, I want you, I need you, can't you see that my heart is dying to dance this song with yours?...

"I was thinking," Feli pressed against his hips against Ludwig's, grin becoming smug when he felt the other's desire against him, "that I wanted to have some fun tonight. Think I deserve it, don't you?" His grin faltered at Ludwig's silence so he pulled away with a sigh, "Of course I think the only person here willing to show me a fun night was that English guy. Think I can find him again?"

Panic gripped Ludwig's heart and he quickly reached out to real Feli back into his space, "No, I didn't like him."

"...So?"

"S-so you can do better."

Feli rose an eyebrow, amusement clear on his face, "That may be true, doctor. Think you could point me in the direction of someone worthy of taking me apart? Hm?" He held Ludwig's eyes and slowly backed into the wall, his lips curling devilishly upward as Ludwig followed mindlessly until he had Feliciano pinned against it as the vocals flitted between the two singers in a duet showing the jilted lover allowing herself to love again.

...Feel the music surrounds us, our hearts are it's metronome...

Reaching up, Feli let his fingertips brush along Ludwig's jaw until the reached his hairline at the base of his neck. He licked his lips and tugged Ludwig down to his level so that he could whisper into his ear, "Of making me writhe with so much pleasure that the only thing I can think of will be their hot body pressing me into the mattress-"

"Oh my god," groaned Ludwig and pressed against the other harder.
"-their lips on my skin, their teeth biting, marking me as theirs if only for the night."

"No, not theirs."

"No?"

"Hell no."

...Watch as the heart grows fonder, it beats faster only when you're around...

Feli was done toying with Ludwig. His pupils blown and irises heavy with lust burned into Ludwig's as he pressed his pelvis just as hard against him, whispering, "Then whose?"

"Mine." Ludwig lost what little restraint he had relied on since he met Feliciano Vargas and pulled him in for a kiss. He forgot everything at that moment when their lips brushed against each other. He forgot that he was miserable at his job, that he was engaged to a she-devil, that his father would probably be disappointed that he was indulging like this. Instead, he pretended that he was single and that he could take what he wanted, when he wanted. Just like the Vargas could. And right now all he wanted was Feliciano.

It was all a blur, the only thing he could remember was getting into a cab with the Italian still on his lips. Their hands explored whatever they could and when they wanted to explore places that were probably indecent in a cab, they settled for tugging and pulling each other's hair. Eventually, they made it to Ludwig's penthouse and onto his bed, clothes tossed aside without care.

Blue eyes widened, what was he doing? Where was he? He shot up from the bed and gagged at the disgusting taste in his mouth, "The hell?" Movement next to him made him freeze. Oh dear god, what had he done.

A gentle knock at his bedroom door was all he got before it was carefully opened. Berwald entered with a tray of food, "Hn, you're aw'ke. Good." Ludwig tried to cover himself up. "What are ya doin'?"

"Huh?" Didn't his brother see it? How could Berwald, a man just as socially inept as he if not more so just stand there unabashed while he was in the...nude. Oh. Ludwig looked down to see that he was wearing a black tank top. Checking under the covers he saw that he was also wearing sweat pants. When did that happen?

"Are ya feel'n ok?" Berwald placed the tray over Ludwig and moved around the bed to take a seat next to him.

"Wait, Feli's-" The words died on Ludwig's tongue when Berwald moved the sheets and shooed away Ludwig's dogs so that he could sit on the bed next to his brother. Berwald reached over to touch Ludwig's head with a frown. "Ow!"

"Hn. Drink, yer tea. Neighb'r said it would help with yer hangov'r."

Ludwig did as he was told and ate a bit of the light breakfast his brother made him. It was staying
down so that was good. After a while of comfortable silence he dared ask, "What happened last night?"

"Ya hit yer head."

"What?" Ludwig squinted his eyes in thought, trying to remember what happened. "I don't remember that. All I remember was Lizzy telling me I should go dance and me actually going after seeing some arschloch dancing with—with Feliciano. We went to a corner and then we..." Ludwig stopped himself and studied Berwald carefully. He knew he wouldn't judge him. His brother never did. "We came back to my place and we...you know."

Berwald didn't react immediately, instead he sighed and looked ahead to keep his brother from seeing him struggle to keep a smile from forming on his face.

"Berwald?"

Still he didn't say anything.

Ludwig sighed, "Teddy?"

"Ya didn't do an'thing with 'im, last night, Luddy. Ya did try an' dance with 'im but ya slipped and fell, hit yer head and blacked out."

"You mean I didn't...we didn't..." Ludwig wasn't sure if the flip his stomach did was because of the hangover or disappointment. He was sure he came home with his coworker. They'd been all over each other and when they arrived at his door, Ludwig had pinned the Italian to the door and gave him a rather aggressive kiss. But if his brother said that he hadn't done anything and he was here with him then did that mean...oh dear merciful lord.

Berwald must've seen the look of horror on his younger brother's face because he quickly added, "Your neighb'rr helped ya get home. He was at th' club too. I got here shortly aft'r he put ya to bed."

Oh, thank god. "Did you and Tino stay the night?" Berwald shook his head. "Just you?" He nodded. "I'm sorry, bruder. I didn't mean to keep you from him."

"S ok. Wanted ta keep an eye on ya. Make sure ya didn't have a concussion."

"I'm feeling fine, you know aside the hangover." Ludwig fiddled with his tea mug, "And you're sure nothing happened at all with...with him, right?"

"Ask yer neighb'r. He w's with ya before I got here. Called me ta let me know."

"I didn't even know I had a neighbor. Jeez, this is so embarrassing." But at least it had been Berwald who stayed with him. Had it been Gilbert, not only would his teasing not help his hangover, but he would never let him live it down that he had a wet dream about Feliciano. And Roderich, well Roderich would've been lecturing him about the dangers of drinking too much and going home with strangers.

Berwald lightly patted Ludwig's leg over the covers and got up, "Gonna head home ta Tino. You goin' to be ok?"

"I should be. Thank you, Bear. I'll see you on Monday."

"Hn."
The first thing Ludwig did was take a long shower. Flashes of what occurred last night kept coming to him, but he eventually pushed them as far back into his mind as he possibly could. It had taken a couple washes but he eventually also got the horrid taste out of his mouth. Around midday, he started to bake some brownies for his kind neighbor. Berwald hadn't given him any particulars other than it was the one who shared the floor with him. There was only one more penthouse on his floor so he felt it safe to assume it was that one.

Johan stared at him from his spot in his cat tree as he packaged the warm brownies into a plastic container. "What? I have to give him something. Mutti in heaven knows what nonsense I said or did while he brought me home." The black cat meowed once before tucking himself into a ball for a nap. "Right."

Ludwig crossed the hallway and brought a hand to knock on the door, freezing when he heard music on the other side. Something about bringing sexy back...Memories of Feliciano dancing shirtless and shaking his hips filled his mind again followed by what clearly had been a figment of his imagination. A pleasurable figment but a figment nevertheless. In that moment, he made a vow never to go to that Den of Iniquity again and to just forget everything he saw that night. Sighing, he followed through and knocked on the door.

The music stopped and he heard movement on the other side, "One second, ladies."

Ladies? Ludwig shook his head. Two in the afternoon and already somebody was getting lucky with not one but two—

The door opened and his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. Standing before him was an auburn haired man wearing nothing but tight black pants. Black leather gloved hands were holding a crop. A tattoo of a sun encasing a V on his pectoral.

Feli cocked his head to the side cutely, "Ve?" He watched as Ludwig's faced reddened slowly, the flush reaching to the tips of his ears. His blue eyes glazed over and his mouth parted in a silent gasp. "Uh...Dr. Beilschmidt? Are you feeling ok? Is your head hurting?"

When he didn't get a response, the Italian reached out and waved his hand in front of Ludwig's face. Nothing. Getting worried, Feli gently tapped his shoulder but again didn't get a response. "Ve...Monika? Your cousin is acting weird!"

Monika peered over Feli's shoulder, "Hmm?" Looking over her cousin she blushed and turned back inside. She fiddled with her camera, "Nien, he's ok. He does that when he's overwhelmed. In, uh, this case I think...I think he's happy to see you."

"He has a funny way of showing it."

She hid her face in embarrassment and giggled nervously, "He's showing it alright."

Feli bit his lip confusion and studied Ludwig's frozen face, his eyes traveled south only to widen at what he found. He smiled, "So he is. Let's take a break so I can get him back to his place. I won't be long." Without waiting for a response, Feli tucked his crop into his back pocket and wrapped an arm around Ludwig's bicep to lead him back to his own apartment.

"Like, do you need a shirt," asked Feliks, opening the door a bit wider so that he and Felicia could see too.

"No, I'm good." Feli turned the silver door knob and let out a happy 've' when it opened. He led the dazed German inside and straight to the kitchen where he sat him on one of his bar stools.
Ludwig had allowed himself to be maneuvered and fussed over still too far lucid to realize that Feliciano was in his apartment, in front of him shirtless and in leather pants. *Tight* leather pants. Wait! The fog in the German's eyes cleared as they finally focused on Feli checking him over as if looking for injury. Ludwig jerked back, "W-what are you doing in my kitchen and why are you shirtless?!"

The Italian took a step back and crossed his arms across his chest, his toned arms flexing and the slight abdominal muscles tightening as he leaned back on the island. He bit back a smirk, "You have a funny way of saying grazie. This is the second time I've brought you home and made sure you're ok. For a Beilschmidt, you don't have very good manners."

"Says the man standing half naked in a stranger's house."

Ludwig watched Feli carefully when he unfolded his arms and smirked openly. Feli stalked up to him slowly, "You didn't seem to mind last night when you were eager to rid me of my clothing."

He reached for a dish towel and wiped his neck, staining the white with flesh colored makeup. "You especially didn't seem to mind pinning me against your door and having your way with my neck."

"I...I did that? No, my Bruder said that nothing happened. I couldn't have done-"

"Nothing happened." Ludwig was about to sigh in relief until Feli continued. "You wanted it to," he whispered, his hand running over the Ludwig's forearm until it came to rest on his wrist. "You tried to get me out of my clothes and while under normal circumstances I wouldn't have minded...it just wasn't right. I couldn't bring myself allow it."

Time seemed to freeze for Ludwig as he let his partner's swords sink in. His heart clenched painfully, "Why not? It's been what you've been after, is it not?"

"It's not." Feli lowered his eyes shyly, "Not like that at least. Not when you're inhibited by alcohol." He smiled again, "Which is why I've decided!" Cupping Ludwig's cheek with his other hand, he ran the pad of his gloved thumb under his jaw, "I'm going to work harder to make you see that I'm serious in my pursuit."

Whiplashed. That's what he was, whiplashed. Ludwig's head was spinning from Feliciano's hands on him, his words, his going in and out of being sexy and being cute, the fact that he was still half naked...

Snapping out of it, Ludwig pulled back, "Make me see what exactly? You say you like me, yet you're dressed like that and doing who knows who--" He frowned when Feli tossed his head back and giggled, though admittedly he had to say that it was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever heard.

"My roommate, Feliks, volunteered me to model for your cousin's new line for men. I didn't have anything else to do and thought it would be fun to pose. She's taking the pictures from the neck down so no one will recognize me."

It didn't sit well with Ludwig that other people would be looking at Feli's chest because, as nice as Monika's designs were, people were really going to be looking at the man modeling them.

"They can look all they want, they'll never be able to touch me." Feli smirked again as Ludwig looked up to meet his eyes with shock. "I'll only allow you to touch me the way others want to."

With roses blossoming once again on his pale cheeks, Ludwig narrowed his eyes, "And what
makes you think I would want to touch you? I won't make the mistake of drinking myself into a stupor so there won't be a next time."

Something flashed behind Feli's eyes, making them darken and Ludwig found himself pressed against his counter, legs parted with the Italian standing between them. The German's wrist and crop once again in Feliciano's hands, "Ve~ is that so? I think you're lying. I think you like me more than you let on and I'm not talking about just lust, though there's that too." He ran the tip of his crop over his lips, "And I think that I'm tired of playing fair with you."

"H-hah?"

Feli watched Ludwig carefully. Taking the moist crop from his lips he ran the tip over Ludwig's, leaving a shiny trail and taking great joy when they parted and his breath came out in slow pants. "I'm going to make you fall in love with me, Dr. Beilschmidt."

"And why would I do that," asked Ludwig curiously, still trying in vain to conceal how much the Italian was flustering him.

The hand holding his wrist brought his hand to ghost over his hip bone and oh how he longed to grip it tight. Much to his delight, he managed to brush a sliver of skin before Feli brought it back to rest on his lap.

His disappointment must have been palpable because Feli's smirk grew smug when he said, "Because when you do, and only then, will I allow you to touch me. Don't worry, it won't be long till you do." He backed away and already Ludwig missed his warmth.

Ludwig wouldn't deny it but he sure as hell wouldn't confirm what his coworker was implying either. Gathering his wits as best as he could, he forced the blush down and his face to go blank, "You sound so sure. How do you know I won't fake it just so I can have you?"

Instead of putting a dent in Feli's confidence the question only seemed to fuel it. Feli picked up the container of brownies, "Ve, silly. I know you aren't faking it." He pulled one out and took a bite, his eyes lighting up at the taste.

"How?"

"Mm, took your pulse while I was talking to you. As much as you try and hide it from me, your body doesn't lie." Feli took another bite of the brownie, "These are really good. Did you make them for me?"

"Uh, ja, I guess so. I made them for my neighbor as a thank you but seeing as though you are my neighbor..."

"Ve~ they're delicious, thank you." Feli put the crop back into his pocket and moved for the door. "I'll see you at work tomorrow."

Ludwig stood up to walk him out, "Ludwig."

"Hm?"

"You can call me Ludwig," muttered Ludwig awkwardly. "I mean I think we're past acquaintanceship."

The Italian froze before turning around with a hopeful smile, "You mean we're friends?!!"
"We'll see." Ludwig immediately regretted his words when the smile disappeared. He found it strange though that Feli didn't pout, his expression was thoughtful instead.

"We will. Oh, and hey Ludwig? Did you make these this morning?"

"Ja..."

"Thought so. You should've called me over."

"Why?"

Feli grinned cheekily as he walked across the hall to his apartment, hips swaying with every step, "I would've licked your beater."
Chapter Summary

Ludwig enjoys Feli’s attempts to woo him more than he lets himself believe. Romulus and Feliciano have a talk in the vineyard about Feli’s future in the family.

Ludwig closed the door behind him, the scene that just transpired replaying itself in his mind. Did that just happen? Very gingerly, he brushed his fingertips over his lips to feel the moist trail Feliciano left behind from the crop, a smile playing at his lips as he turned around and leaned against his door. A part of him wondered if he should be feeling anxious that the Italian was able to read him so well, but another, and this one was overpowering the first, felt thrilled that he wasn't going to have to voice his feelings out loud. But then again…Ludwig thought back to Feli’s words, perhaps he would need to eventually.

He stepped away from the door, no matter. They’d cross that bridge when they came to it. In the meantime, he’d need to thank his siblings for forcing him to go to that club. Oh! He also needed to go to the book shop. Checking the clock on his oven, he let out a sigh of relief, "Gut, it should still be open. First things first though…I need another shower."

The second Feli closed the door behind him, his cousin and Feliks were bombarding him with questions while Monika smiled knowingly at him. Overwhelmed, the Italian gently pushed the duo and walked over to where he discarded his shirt, "I can't believe I just did that."

"Did what," asked Feliks, taking a seat on the white sofa across from his friend. "Like, what happened over there? Was that the guy you tots have a crush on?"

"Si." Feliciano bit his lip and curled into himself on his chair, "I might have taken it too far, though." Feli reached out for his cousin in fear. "What if he hates me? Dio mio, I need to go back and apologize!"

Felicia sat on the chair's armrest, her own honeyed colored eyes wide, "Well, what happened? We can't help if you don't tell us." Monika came to sit next to Feliks in order to hear the Italian out. They listened to him retell what transpired in Ludwig's kitchen and the promise he made.

Running her hand through her blonde pixie hair, Monika began to giggle, "You shouldn't worry. Lud won't hate you."

"He won't?" Feli wiped the tears from his cheeks and looked at the German hopefully, "But he's always telling me not to touch him at work and it's only hugs I'm trying to give him."

"He won't," assured Monika kindly. "We saw how he was at the club and I know my cousin. He isn't as…rigid as he may appear." She blushed and motioned towards the impressive mark on Feli's neck, "And he most certainly wouldn't have done that if he wasn't attracted to you. No matter how drunk he gets, Ludwig doesn't make it a habit of making out with random people."

Felicia nudged her cousin playfully, "He'll come around, Feli. Moni did, didn't cha Tesoro?" She checked her watch and sighed, "Mi dispiace, cugino."
"You have to go?"

"Unfortunately. My mom and Marcello wanted to have an early dinner with Moni and me."

"How long are you here till?"

"Just until after Tino and Berwald's wedding. Actually, I may have to leave after the reception because the guys want to get the show on the road. We still have, like, five more shows before we're done for the season."

Feli's eyes darted to Monika, "Five?"

"It's ok." The German stood up and smiled softly, "I'm going to go with her. Feliks here is going to hold down the fort at the shop, isn't that right, Fe?"

Green eyes widened, "Like, you just called me Fe." Feliks grinned, "That is tots awesome! Of course, I'll hold down the fort!"

Feli watched as Monika smiled and pulled his roommate to the dining table to show him the pictures they'd taken for the catalog. Meanwhile, Felicia pulled her cousin in for a hug, "Everything is going to work out, you'll see." She looked over Feli's shoulder to her girlfriend before whispering, "She told me that he told her that he likes you. He's just too shy to tell you."

"Really?"

"Si~" Felicia pulled at her auburn ponytail to make it higher, "Welp, we've got to head out so we can take care of things before going to my mom's."

"Danke for modeling for me, Feliciano," said Monika as she gathered their things together. Her blue eyes glittered when they met her girlfriend's, "I'm going to go get the car, Liebling. See you downstairs."

"Kk, I'll only be a few more minutes." Felicia kissed Feli's cheeks then Feliks', "I'll see you at the family cabin for Christmas, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

She pouted and placed her small hands on her hips, "Don't you 'I guess' me. We've all waited four years too long to have you back."

"Mi dispiace."

"It's cool. Just be sure you bring that hunky German of yours and we'll call it even. Ciao, boys!"

"Like, have a safe trip," chirped Feliks before his roommate closed the door. He sighed tiredly and started to pick up the wine glasses they'd been drinking from, "Feli, can I say something?"

"Hm?"

"I don't know about this Ludwig guy."

"W-what do you mean?"

Feliks sighed again. "No matter how I say it, it's not going to sound good but I promise that I'm not saying it because I want to hurt you. You're my BFF and that's the last thing I want. But for some reason, I can't help but feel that he may hurt you." He waited for Feli to say something, anything.
"I can see why you say that," said Feli after a while. He laid on their couch and stared up at the ceiling, "But I don't think he'll hurt me." He smiled, "He's like a kitty. He's indifferent but deep down I know he just wants to be cuddled. I want to cuddle with him, Fe. I want to be cuddled by him. Held," He closed his eyes to imagine it, "kissed, and touched. I want him, Feliks. I want him so much it hurts."

Feliks gasped, "Feli, please don't cry!" He abandoned the dishes in the sink and jogged over to the couch to pull his friend into his arms, "Like, I'm so sorry, Fe. I didn't mean to make you upset. Forget I said anything!"

Feli buried his face into Felik's shirt, "It wasn't you. It's just that I haven't felt like this in a very long time and the last time I did...it couldn't work out and it's scary to fall in love again. It's even scarier because I don't even know if it's just lust or if he feels more for me."

Feliks ran soothing circles into the Italian's back, "What isn't to like? If he can't see how, like, awesome you are, then he isn't worth it."

"But I want him to see. I thought...I thought if he saw that I came from money too then he would be less hesitant. If he knew about my PhD, that he wouldn't think of me some idiot."

"He'll see, sweat pea." He grinned when a bubble of a giggle escaped Feli. Deciding to fuel this fire he tickled him softly, "And when he does, you two are tots going to make the cutest couple ever."

"Do you really think so?"

"I, like, know so. And if he does hurt you," a dark look crossed the blonde, "he'll see that there's more to me than sass and fab hair."

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The two men dozed off on the couch, both still worn out from the after party when Feli was awakened by his cell phone. Too sleepy to bother with whoever was calling, the Italian ignored the call and curled into his friend's warmth. Sleep had settled back, only for it to be interrupted by his phone again. Growling in agitation, the Italian reached out to answer, "Pronto...ciao, nonno...si...no...uh-huh...now? I was sleeping...no, I have work tomorrow...I have work all week actually except for next Friday. Can't I see you then?...no?..." Feli rubbed his eyes and sighed, "Yes, I'll go then...yes...ok...I'll see you then. I love you, too. Bye."

Feli made sure that Feliks was comfortable before changing into something suitable to see his grandfather. Dark jeans and a simple white t-shirt with a navy blazer was suitable in his eyes. After making sure that he looked handsome enough, the Italian grabbed his keys and opened the door, only to find Seraph, Bernardo, and Oswaldo standing on the other side dressed identically. He blinked and asked, "Really?"

"Hello to you too, angel," they spoke in unison. Feliciano squinted, hoping to find their distinguishing features such as Seraph's sleepy expression or Bernardo's more nurturing one but no. They had somehow managed to look identical in that as well. To top it all off the trio, had styled their hair to look like bed head in order to mask the direction of their curl.

Sighing, Feli stepped outside, "I don't have time for...whatever it is you're doing. Grandpa wants me to come over."

The three frowned at that, "But we wanted you to forgive us."

"Fine, whatever." Feli stepped through the door and turned around to lock it. "I'll see you guys at
the cabin for Christmas.”

"No, wait!" One of the triplets broke from their act, his voice becoming deeper than the rest and his slight American accent slipping back into place. Oswaldo grabbed his Feli’s forearm, "Do you really mean that? Cause that was kinda a vague response. I really am sorry. I didn't-"

"I said it's fine," snapped Feliciano irritably, yanking his arm back. "I'll see you guys later."

"Fuck, Feli, wait! What do I have to do?"

"Nothing, really. I'm just going to try and get used to the idea that every time I want to just live life for myself, even if it's for a moment, that someone in my family is going to think that I'm turning my back on you guys. Forgive me for wanting to hold on to some normalcy before I have to carry the weight of what it means to be a Vargas for the rest of my life."

Seraph frowned, "Is that what you think? Feliciano, we're here for you. You don't have to bear this cross alone."

"Yeah, man." Bernardo absently played with his belt, "That's what we're here for, you know."

The triplets waited for him to say something, and after a while of silent musing he did. "I have to go to see, nonno," he said tiredly. "If you want to wait for me here you can. Just don't wake up my roommate." Feli slowly walked down the hall towards the elevator leaving his cousins and Ozzie behind.

Bernardo looked sadly at the silver doors that closed behind Feliciano and took out his key, "I'm sorry, Oz. We tried, bro...but I think something isn't right. Even for him...shit like this doesn't get to him." He frowned suddenly remembering something, "Oh, god, you don't think-"

"That he hasn't been taking his medication," finished Seraph wryly, "No, I don't think he has."

Work had never felt as enjoyable as it had over the past few days. Sunday morning had found Ludwig awkwardly making his rounds with his partner. When the he realized that Feli wasn't going to tease him about what happened on Friday, he started to relax and allowed for his partner to set the pace, which was strangely enough, nice. Their coworkers noticed the way they danced around each other even more than usual and his brothers, namely Gilbert, had started a betting pool.

"Dude," said Alfred as he pulled out his burger from a takeout bag, "what are you doing?"

Gilbert smirked, "This, bruder, is the pot for when West and little Feli are going to get together. You want in?"

Alfred made a face, "Now that's just cruel. Why are you guys getting that poor kid's hopes up when you know damn well that Ludwig isn't going to give him the time of day?"

"That's what we said about you and Arthur and look what happened."

"Yeah, but the difference between us and them is that he wasn't engaged, dude. Home wrecking relationships isn't cool."
Roderich looked up from his clipboard, "I wouldn't exactly call it home wrecking when the relationship wasn't even built on emotions let alone attraction. Their marriage is strictly business."

"Jeez, what century are we living in? Who the hell marries for business?"

"You're asking too many questions," snapped Gilbert in annoyance, "Besides, Vargas is good for our little West and if we can get our Vati to see it then the old man will have to cancel that god awful wedding. He isn't heartless you know. Now," he took out his little notebook and flicked it open, "are you in or not?"

Alfred opened his mouth to protest but laughter interrupted his train of thought. The three doctors turned to the window looking out into the hallway and saw Feliciano smiling at Ludwig.

Ludwig, though blushing, didn't smile back until the Italian wheeled their patient out to be discharged. Seeing Ludwig lower his eyes to check out their coworker's cute perky bottom and shake his head fondly made Alfred sigh in resignation. He pulled out his wallet, "Put me down for fifty."

Tuesday, however, all their playful flirting came to a halt, at least on Ludwig's behalf, when a certain Russian sent her fiancé an email demanding his opinion on dishware. Reality doused him like an icy bath as he read through the email again. Guilt began to eat at him while he punched out a response that he thought that the plates with the blue floral designs were nice. He glanced over his laptop to Feliciano and watched as the Italian was writing diligently in his leather bound journal.

Feli looked up and smiled, "Ve~"

Ludwig's heart skipped a beat, but he didn't smile back. Who was he kidding? He should've known better than to get his hopes up. Get Feli’s hopes up. It wasn't fair to either of them.

Feli saw how Ludwig was fighting with himself and his smile slipped from his face, "Are you ok, Ludwig?"

"Ja." Closing his laptop, Ludwig pulled out his stack of paperwork, "I'm fine."

"I'll be back."

"Where are you going?"

Feli grinned and patted his stomach affectionately, "I'm hungry." He giggled at Ludwig's eye roll and tugged off his stethoscope, "I'll be back in jiffy."

"Ja, ja. Just…page me if you get lost again."

"Aww, see? You do care!"

Ludwig buried himself in his documents and tried his best to ignore how hot his cheeks were feeling. Feli came back as soon as he left, a small Tupperware letting out steam from his microwave pasta. Garlic and other herbs reached Ludwig as if it was right under his nose. He blinked and looked to his side, "Feliciano, what did you—"

Waiting patiently to be devoured was a plate of spaghetti and a couple of slices of garlic bread. Next to it was a glass of grape juice and a small note.

I know very well that I'm
Just another guy among the bunch

That I'm just another friend among the rest

But that doesn't change the fact,

That I'm head over heels for you

-Feliciano

Ludwig stared at the note then over to Feliciano who was happily munching on his own, less extravagant lunch. Unbeknownst to him, Feli was watching out of the corner of his eye while feigning interest in a book. He smiled softly when Ludwig let out a shaky sigh as he reached out for his own stationary. When their pagers went off, Ludwig slipped a piece of paper into Feli's hand and hustled over to help Alfred with their patient.

The piece of paper, small as it was, weighed Feliciano's scrubs down but he worked past his curiosity in order to make an incision along the unconscious patient he was helping Tino with in order to drain his lungs of liquid.

"Boy, ya sure have a way with that scalpel," complimented Tino as they wheeled Mr. Rojas to his private room. "Have ya considered a surgeon fellowship for after your residency?"

"No, not really." Feli grabbed one side of the white sheets while his friend grabbed the other so that they could transfer their patient onto the bed. "I really like working General because I get to interact with the patients."

"Just like me, only I prefer working in the pediatric ward. Kids are great to work with, ya know?"

"Si, I can't wait till I get to rotate there."

Tino filled out some details on Mr. Rojas' chart and let the nurses take care of the rest, "About that. Tomorrow, Berwald and Luddy aren't going to be here so I was asked if I wanted to be your mentor for the day."

"Ve?"

"Of course I said yes, but I wanted to make sure you would be ok with that." Tino smiled brightly at Feli, "I know you like working the ER, but would it be ok if you work in pediatrics with me for the day?"

Feliciano smiled back, "I'm a resident, silly. I do what you guys tell me to do."

"Well, then, Dr. Feli. Tomorrow you're working with me in pediatrics."

"Sir, yes sir," saluted the Italian with his left hand making Tino laugh. They parted ways and Feli immediately dug into his pocket to pull out the slip of paper Ludwig left him.

Then you should know as well,

That infatuation can be fickle

That lust can be confused for something more

How do I know that you don't just want,
To make a fool of me?

-Ludwig

Frowning, Feli pulled out his small notepad and scribbled down his response. He attached the note onto one of Ludwig's patient's clip board and went back to the emergency room to help with the incoming stream of injured.

Berwald grabbed the clipboard on Mrs. Drews' door, Ludwig close behind him, "Here, this 's yours." He gave the slip of paper to his brother and entered the room. Ludwig pocketed it and followed, sanitizing his hands before slipping on a pair of blue gloves.

He took the chart from his brother to read over her symptoms: headache, nausea, fatigue. Well, this sounds familiar. "Ma'am, have you been sexually active these past few months?"

"A nurse with large eyebrows and the British accent just asked me that," grumbled Mrs. Drews, "Didn't he write it down?"

"He did. It says no."

"Then clearly I haven't."

"Fair enough. When did the headaches start?"

"I've always gotten headaches ever since I could remember but these have been pretty bad…I think they started a few weeks ago."

"I see." Ludwig checked over her vitals and so far everything seemed fine. Perhaps this was just one of those cases where the patient was overstressed. "I'd like to get some blood work and a urine sample, if that's ok." The red head waved her hand in consent.

With careful hands, Berwald withdrew blood from Mrs. Drews before handing her a plastic cup, "Fill 'er up, please." The woman slowly made her way to the bathroom and came out a few minutes later with her cup. "W'll be back when th' results are ready, ma'am," grumbled Berwald. He reached out and lightly touched his brother's arm, "I'm going t' the bak'ry, tomorrow t' work on the cake."

"That's fine. I'll be there around eight to get everything together."

"Hn."

As soon as his brother left, Ludwig unfolded his new note with adolescent-like excitement at what Feli could've written.

Don't think that I take the matter

Of love very lightly.

There's really only one thing I want from you…

Ludwig flipped it over.

A teaspoon of your love

Would mean the world to me

A teaspoon of your love
"Oh," breathed Ludwig in awe. The German continued his work in a daze. Some of his patients looked at him strangely, never had they seen him smile let alone so openly. It was nice. He was nice, staying a bit longer than usual to make conversation. Thoughts of Natalya's email were cast from his mind, replaced by happier ones of a certain Italian. They didn't send each other little notes after that due to the influx of patients in the ER.

Sometime around four in the morning, Ludwig dragged himself to his office to gather his things so that he could head home. It hadn't been so bad, the strangest thing he saw was another beer bottle shoved into a rectum. Truth be told, he wasn't sure what disturbed him more, the fact that he'd seen that happen enough times to no longer be phased by it or the fact that people who did it were allowed to reproduce. Shrugging, he made his way to his car taking a moment to see if his partner had left as well.

He had.

Too tired to drive his car to the garage, he handed his keys over to the valet and trudged onward towards the elevator. Ludwig could practically hear his bed calling for him. A slip of paper fell out of his jacket pocket when he pulled out his keys and his heart increased its beat when he recognized the stationary as Feli's. Opening it, he read the slightly messy writing:

Give me some sort of sign

Better yet give me a moment of your time

Please give me the opportunity to make you see

That I could do so much good by you, Lud.

He looked across the hall to where the Italian lived and smiled before pulling out a sticky note pad and scribbling his response. Sticking it onto his door, he whispered, "Gut nacht, Feli."

The mid October air was nipping at Feliciano's body as he rocked gently on his large egg shaped chair on his balcony with one foot while the other was planted firmly onto the cushion. His elbow rested on his knee, hinging and unhinging as he brought his cigarette to and from his mouth in between long intervals. He raised his face to the wind, enjoying how it made his hair flutter, "Ve~"

Romulus looked up from his tablet with a grin, "Ah, Feliciano! I'm so glad you were able to make it. You had a safe trip I trust?"
A look of confusion crossed the young Italian's face, "I did….Should I not have?" His amber eyes widened, "Is this why you decided to name me heir? Did someone find out the truth about us?!

"No, no, no! Nothing like that." Romulus rose from his seat to pull his grandson into an affectionate hug. He frowned when it wasn't returned, "Nipote? Are you really that upset that I named you heir? You already knew it was going to be you so it shouldn't have..." He trailed off with a distant look in his eye but it left as fast as it came, "Never mind that. The family is proud to have you as our little prince."

Feliciano furrowed his brow, "Really, nonno? A prince? That's a bit much for appearance sake, don't you think?"

"Nonsense," chirped the older Italian happily. "Come, let's take a walk through the vineyard. It's very fragrant this time of year." The two walked leisurely through the rows of grape vines occasionally reaching out to pluck one to eat. "I remember how your Uncle Paolo used to chase your mother and aunt through these rows of grapes." He chuckled, "Of course, then they'd gang up on the poor boy and then your father and Uncle Octavio had to come to his rescue."

A strange whining sound came from Feli's throat at the mention of his father and Romulus exhaled sadly. He looped his arm through his grandson's and continued, "There's something on your mind."

It wasn't a question but rather a statement and Feli knew that this was his grandfather's way of giving him an opening. "Ve~"

"Don't be shy, Feli. I won't be upset with anything you have to say to me." Romulus led them to a stone bench, "Tell me."

Feli ran a hand through his auburn hair with a sigh, "I don't know if I even want this anymore."

"That's like saying you don't want to be a Vargas. It's in your blood, Feli. It's who you are meant to be."

"I know that you think I am the best for this position, Nonno, but I don't understand how you could think that. I am a coward in the face of violence and I'd much rather paint or cook than do sit downs. But more importantly," he looked at his grandfather sadly, "being heir or prince or whatever would mean that I have to do bad things and I can't do that. I took an oath to save lives... not take." By this time his frustration gave way to tears. "I feel like two sides of me are at odds. One part of me, the Vargas part, wants to make this family proud. Wants to take the noble seat you have but the other...the Feliciano part, wants..."

"What is it," asked Romulus gently. "What do you want, my grandson?"

"I want many things, Nonno. I want to my family to be safe. I want to be able to love who I want without fear of them getting hurt or losing them. And I want to mean something to someone and whether that someone is a patient I saved or-"

"That young Beilschmidt? Ludwig was it?"

"Mhm, but more importantly I don't want to lose sight of who I am. How can I be both without leaning more towards one or the other? How will I ever know which to listen to? My heart or...you know..."

Rubbing his stubbled chin, the older Italian thought about his grandson's concerns. "You make an excellent point, Feli. The only thing I can tell you is that you will know when the time comes. On
the bright side, we are living in a time of peace. There won't be anything that will force you to choose between sides. But, in the event that something does happen, trust your instincts and those of your people."

"Is it hard? To keep up the illusion that we are what people think we are? What if I do end up winning Ludwig's affections? Would I be able to tell him the truth?"

Romulus gave his grandson a loving smack on the back, "To answer the first question, no, not really. Just play the role of Victrola's sun child and no one will suspect a thing. As for Ludwig, well, we'll see."

The grapes tempted both Vargas men as they watched birds swoop down for a few. Smiling, they joined in plucking a couple for themselves. Feli munched on his, "Hey, how did you know about my feelings for Ludwig?"

Romulus let out a hearty chuckle, "Well, it's really not all that surprising that a grandson of mine would fall for one of Wolfgang's children. The man is a real cutie if I do say so myself."

"Dr. Wolfgang?"

"Si~"

Feliciano stared at his grandfather, his mouth parted in a small 'o'. He wasn't completely sure how to take the cheeky grin the man had used to answer his question but decided to ignore it. He didn't really want to think about his grandfather and his love's father that way. Shoving those thoughts far from his mind, he lowered his head sadly, "It doesn't matter. If I take my place... I'll lose him before I even get the chance to have him."

Returning to the conversation at hand, Romulus gently lifted his grandson's face by his chin, "If he is anything like his father, he won't hate you when the time comes to tell him who you really are."

"Right, the mob prince," scoffed Feli, tearing his face from his grandfather and immediately missing his warmth. He forced his mouth away from the pout it was instinctively going to. He wasn't a child damn it! It was so embarrassing to act like this...

"You say that like it's a bad thing, nipote." Romulus pulled him into a hug, "Whether you like it or not, you were born into this life. 'Just like I was,' he thought to himself sadly. "We are all part of something bigger than just us. You know this, don't you?"

"I do..." The younger Italian leaned into his grandfather as silent tears ran down his cheeks. "I had hoped that things had gone a bit different. I had a plan for myself, nonno."

Romulus sighed, "I know. We all have plans when we're young, Feli, dreams that drive us as if they're our sole reason for living. But as I'm sure you've learned during your agoge, sometimes... sometimes things don't go the way we want. You as an astrophysicist and doctor should know that."

Feli closed his eyes at that, subconsciously remembering the patient who had died under his care a few weeks ago. He had barricaded himself in one of the staff's napping rooms and had refused to come out until Ludwig himself came in and coaxed him back to their office. They hadn't said anything but Ludwig had lit a lavender scented candle and handed him a cup of hot chocolate with a single butter cookie. They'd sat in silence with Ludwig tracing soothing circles on top of his hand. Maybe one day, he'd tell him that that moment had sealed his feelings for him. Maybe.

"It doesn't matter though if things don't go according to plan," continued Romulus, "Because we'll
never turn away from you, Feliciano."

"Ve?"

"You and your brothers and your cousins...my grandchildren are the pride of this family and you'll find that we will always stand by your side."

"And you speak on the Family's behalf as well?"

"Things have been going very smoothly, nipote. You needn't fear the other heads. You're friends with their heirs so at least that part of the plan went swimmingly."

"The plan?"

"Feli, look at me." The younger lifted his eyes to meet his grandfather's. "It's perfectly normal to feel fear. The courage and the wisdom to lead? You'll learn soon enough that all that comes when you see that you are not just Feliciano or a Vargas but both." He nudged at the place where Feli's tattoo was hidden behind his shirt, "As long as you wear this, it's who you are," the corners of Romulus's eyes crinkled as he smiled, "You'll understand someday."

Feliciano watched as the smoke he exhaled rose to the heavens and dispersed among the stars. "Ve, what exactly am I supposed to understand?" The heavy chain that held his egg swing made a chiming sound when someone else sat on it. For a moment, he figured it had been Feliks who had on more than one occasion found him outside when he woke up in the middle of the night in order to sneak into his friend's bed. But as soon as a pair of arms snaked around his waist and pulled him into a strong chest did he figure out that this wouldn't be the case tonight.

The young Italian put out his cigarette and let himself drop onto his side, bringing down his captor with him, "I don't usually smoke."

"Just when you've been skipping out on your meds," asked Oswaldo, moving his arms to secure his angel so that he wouldn't roll off the swing. He felt Feli tense in his arms and he softened his gaze, "You know you can't fool me, Angel." A small twitch of the lips from that nickname was all the response he got. Reaching around, the older Italian looked at Feli, "As pretty as the constellations on your lashes look, stars belong in the sky." Oswaldo gently wiped them away, "Why did you stop taking them?"

"I didn't like how they made me feel. Plus, I had been feeling better."

"Had?"

"No, I shouldn't word it like that. I feel better, especially when I'm at work, but sometimes the gloom creeps up on me when I get back. With Feliks working full time with Monika, I'm alone most of the time and I feel lonely. I still sleep next to him sometimes, but it isn't the same."

Oswaldo rolled his Feli over so that they could look at each other, "Not the same to what? What are you comparing it to?"

Reaching out to brush Oswaldo's fringe from his eyes, Feli said, "You know..."

The older Italian closed his eyes and nodded, "I know." They let the wind rock the swing for them, the city singing its lullaby making their eyes heavy, but Ozzie refused to succumb to sleep just yet. "You need to take your medicine, Feli."

Feliciano sighed, "I'd rather not."
"You do know it isn't safe to stop cold turkey, right?"

"And you do know that I'm a doctor, right? I'm not stupid, Oz. I did it slowly and under Zia Marzia's supervision. That last one was interfering with my _me_ time. And I'd rather be at full capacity." Thoughts of Ludwig and the position he'd found himself in a few days ago came to mind. He had wanted, _oh_ how he had wanted, to do more than tease Ludwig the morning after but all he had gotten was a twitch. And it sure as hell hadn't been because he wasn't into it because he _had_. There was no doubt in his mind that it had been the result of his medication. "Besides, as I said I _have_ been feeling a lot better. I'm sure this is just a case of the blues because of what's been going on. Truth be told, I haven't had a relapse in years, you can ask Feliks."

Oswaldo didn't look convinced.

"I _haven't_. My sleeping patterns are nearly the same and the only reason they're irregular is because of work, but I do try to get in at least a ten minute siesta at three o'clock sharp every day. As you can see, I've been eating just fine," he unbuttoned the rest of the buttons on his baby blue shirt to show his flat stomach. Taking a hold of Oswaldo's hand he brought it to his tummy, "Look see? I'm getting chubby from all the pizza and pasta I've been eating."

The older Italian tickled him briefly before tugging the shirt to cover the exposed skin, "You're still pretty adorable."

"Ve, you think so? I wonder if Ludwig thinks I'm cute too."

"Is he Monika's cousin? The Beilschmidt?"

"Si!"

"I'm sure he does."

"Are you and your brothers leaving again?"

"Yeah. Eric has a thing in Sydney and we have a few things we need to check out before the year is over."

"So, we'll see each other for Christmas?"

"Yup." Oswaldo felt his angel shiver and tightened his hold to share body heat, "Hey, Feli?"

"Hm?"

"Are you still mad at me?"

"No."

"Good, I hate it when you're upset with me."

"Why did you say it then?"

"I was still upset about the last time we saw each other and I guess I was just being stupid. I'm sorry."

Feli rolled his eyes, "You can stop apologizing, Ozzie. I'm not upset anymore. Now can we please go to sleep?"

"Ok." Oswaldo allowed Feli to fall asleep knowing that unlike him, he'd have to go back to work
tomorrow. He watched as Feli’s breath evened out before he himself fell asleep. And that’s how his brothers found him later that morning, his arms secured around Feli, chin resting on top of his head. And just as the city’s nightly sounds lulled them to sleep, her morning song roused them from sleep. Well that and Seraph.

The oldest of the quadruplets leaned against the balcony rail with a mug of hot coffee. He stared at his little brother as Bernardo stepped out to join him and said, "How they manage to fall asleep anywhere, I will never know."

Bernardo sipped from his own mug before saying with a shrug, "Eric called. He said that he was going to prep the jet to go visit mom."

"In America?"

"No, she’s at Bergamo at the moment. Dad’s already there." The second oldest stifled a yawn as he looked out into the city, "It’s nice here isn’t?"

"Mhm."

"Lovi’s done good cleaning her up."

"Mhm."

"We should look into getting an apartment here."

"Mhm."

"You miss Naya."

"Mhm."

"Aww. I knew it," chirped Bernardo, playfully nudging his brother in his ribs, "You should call her."

Seraph furrowed his brow in confusion, "What?"

"Well, you just said that you miss Naya, I assumed…"

The older rolled his eyes in annoyance, "Fuck Naya!"

"Yeah, you wish you could fuck her."

"Shut up, Bernard!"

"You shut up!"

"Both of you shut the hell up," muttered Oswaldo, his eyes still closed. "Feli came in late last night and he still has a couple of hours of sleep before having to go back to work." The dark haired Italian nuzzled his face into Feli’s hair and succumbed to unconsciousness when his brothers did as they were told.

Bernardo hummed quietly, "Should we be worried?"

His older sibling sighed, "About what?"

"Nothing, never mind. Come on. Let’s go get our shit together."
The bell chimed at Ludwig's bakery, announcing to everyone that Berwald had arrived.

Emma simply pointed Berwald in the right direction while jotting down orders from the usual breakfast rush. She purposefully ignored Mathias and went straight for her brother who was about to take the train to the Netherlands. It didn't escape her notice that he looked paler than usual and that his friend was sporting yet another bruise. Lars hadn't commented; instead, he gave her a kiss on the forehead before promising to be home before dark. He openly glared at Mathias who simply smiled and cheerfully said, "I'll see you tomorrow, man."

Emma watched her brother flick him off before getting into his car. She turned to Mathias and asked, "What did you do this time?"

"Deny him his smokes yet again," said Mathias proudly.

"Why?"

"Cause you don't like it when he smokes. Figured if I helped him quit or at least not depend on them as much as he does then, you know?" Mathias fiddled with his thigh holster containing various medical emergency supplies shyly, "I figured that you would see that I'm not that bad of a guy and maybe you would…not throw cupcakes at me anymore?" Emma studied the man before her and wondered how it was possible for someone to be so infuriatingly adorable. She allowed him to wait at the counter while she rung up other customers.

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Berwald removed his jacket and tied on a light blue apron he brought with him sporting tiny darker blue paw prints encasing the 'B+T Forever' in a heart. He caught his brother staring at it and blushed, "Tino m'de it for me."

"It's better than the one Gilbert has," said Ludwig with a shrug as he pulled up another stool next to his. "Want to get started?"

"Hm." Berwald took a seat and picked up a tube of buttercream to frost their cake while Ludwig rolled out some light blue fondant. "Remember th' song mom used ta sing?"

"When she used to bake? Ja." Both brothers smiled in memory of their mother. "She always said that the song made everything taste better."

Berwald smiled softly and nodded in agreement, "Do ya think…she would h've been happy? With m' choice in spouse?"
"She would've loved him, bruder."

"Hm." Ludwig pulled out a textured roller to imprint filigree onto the fondant while Berwald iced the rest of the tiers. "How's he?"

"Who?"

With brows furrowed in concentration, Berwald tried to work around his charge's name, "Fliciano."

Ludwig paused, "Um, he's fine, I guess. Why?"

Berwald shrugged, "H' had his first death and h' didn't come t' me like you did."

"I found him in one of the napping rooms and gave him some hot chocolate."

"Did ya hold 'im?"

"N-nein." Ludwig blushed at the thought. Not that it hadn't crossed his mind to do so; he simply didn't want to overstep his boundaries. Though, looking back on it now, he wished he did. The poor man looked so devastated that it had taken more than a few words of encouragement to leave their office. "I…I did hold his hand though." Berwald smiled knowingly. "Hey…bruder?"

"Ja?" He looked over his glasses at Ludwig and waited patiently for him to continue. From the look of things he was gathering his courage to say what he wanted.

Ludwig stopped rolling and met his brother's gaze with a small smile, "He really likes me. Teddy…Can I tell you something?"

"Alw'ys."

The younger let out a happy chuckle, "I like him too." Berwald smiled and allowed his brother to continue. "I just can't believe it's taken me this long to admit it."

"Nev'r been th't good with words."

"Ja." Ludwig's smiled slowly dropped along with his good humor, "Ja…" His brother shot him a confused look and he shook his head, "I want to do something about it, but I probably shouldn't."

"Why?" Berwald frowned at his brother's look of frustration. "Vati? H' won't care s' long yer happy." He reached out and placed a hand on Ludwig's shoulder, "Our family…doesn't need Ivan's ph'remaceutics ta surv'v."

The corners of Ludwig's lips uplifted proudly, "That was good, bruder."

"Ja?"

"Ja. You've come a long way in such a short time." Berwald blushed, feeling very proud of himself in getting out a complicated word that didn't sound as choppy as his usual speech. He nudged at his younger brother to let him know that he hadn't forgotten what they were discussing. "I'm not going to get all sappy over it."

"Too late. I saw ya wr'ting love notes to each oth'r. Wasn't gonna m'ntion 't."

Finally finished icing the cakes, Berwald took out some skin toned fondant and started working it into a body shape to make the cake toppers.
"I kissed him," said Ludwig after cutting off the last bit of excess fondant from the last tier of the cake. "That night he brought me home. I only wish I could remember."

"Kiss 'im again."

Ludwig's eyes widened, "W-what?!"

"Ya know ya want t'."

And want to he did. It was getting harder and harder to deny it, especially now since the Italian had taken to kissing his cheeks when they greeted each other and parted ways. Oh, how he wanted to move his face just so those soft lips would fall on his own. His restraint was really starting to wear thin. "When you met Tino…did you feel so wildly attracted to him that you felt like you were going insane?"

"Still do."

"If I had asked that to Gilbert or Roderich or Vash, they would've laughed, raised an eyebrow, and ask what book I lifted that from. In that order."

Berwald nodded in agreement, now painting the little chibi versions of him and Tino with edible paint, "Lilly wouldn't have."

"It's embarrassing talking about my feelings let alone talking about it with my little sister, Bear."

"Hm."

The cake was finally done a few hours later and the two brothers stood back to admire their handy work. Four tiers alternating from smooth light blue to filigree and little silver pearls served as a pedestal for the two cute grooms sitting on the highest cake. Their little legs dangled off the edge as they clasped hands and looked at each other lovingly. Well, mini-Tino did. Berwald painted mini-him to look as he always did but added a hint of a blush. Anyone who knew him would know what that meant even if the other guests didn't, and he was perfectly fine with that.

Working with Tino had certainly been a breath of fresh air for Feliciano. The man was probably more bubbly than him, and it was clear that the children adored him. That is, until he had to sit them down for a vaccination. And that was precisely what they were doing at the moment, to James of all people.

"The nurses refuse to administer these to him after what happened with Arthur," whispered Tino as he filled the syringe. "Poor boy bit him. He tries to bite me every now and again, but for the most part he doesn't seem to mind when I do it."

Feli's eyes widened and they quickly darted to the boy's room. James sat with a pout knowing what was about to come and it unnerved the young doctor. Biter or not, it made him sad seeing someone so young look so miserable. "May I try?"

Tino glanced at James as if to assess the chances of him biting the Italian. Apparently, they were in his favor because the Tino smiled cheerfully and handed him the syringe, "Sure!" He watched as Feli squirted some hand sanitizer and pulled on a pair of gloves before going over to James.

"Hi there! My name is Dr. Feliciano, how are you feeling?" Feli pulled open the small drawer next to the bed and took out a basket with alcohol pads and bandages. When the boy didn't respond to his cheer, he pouted, "What's wrong, piccolino?"
"I hate those shots," snapped James irritably, already preparing snide remarks to the doctor's insistence that they were for his own good and wondering if he would be able to bite Feliciano on the arm at his current angle. To his surprise, Feli's hand froze just as he was about to rip the alcohol pad open.

"Ok, then."

"Wait, what?"

Feli shrugged, "If you don't want the vaccine, then I guess you don't get it." He placed it back on the metal tray and leaned back to look at the boy. "Whatcha want to do?"

James was beyond confused. No one had ever asked him that before, not even Tino and he was his favorite. The boy narrowed his eyes in suspicion and looked over Feli's shoulder to said man who rose his eyebrows and shook his head, not knowing what Feli was up to. James turned back to Feli, "Can I go home?"

"Ve, you can. But you'll only end up back here again," said Feli nonchalantly as he pulled out his little DS and flipping it on. The little jingle of Kingdom Hearts piqued James interest. "Do you know this game? My friend Dr. Kiku recommended it to me. I love Disney, so being able to play with characters from my childhood is pretty cool."

"I like the flying gummy ship!"

"Yeah?"

"Uh huh, it's really fun but sometimes my ship takes too much damage and I can't always kill the bad guys."

Feli moved to sit right next to James so that the boy could see what he was doing on the screen, "Ve! That's no good. Have you tried boosting its defenses with the parts you collected?"

"Boosting? Is that what those things are for?"

"Si~" The Italian sent a wink over to Tino whose eyes shone with realization at what his coworker was doing. "You see, those little gummy parts help make your ship stronger, faster, or simply add more protection."

"Oh! Like the vitamins my mom makes me take." James looked over to the syringe on the metal tray, "Does...does that make me stronger too?"

Feli paused his game, "Even better. It'll arm your little solider cells with enough power to take care of the bad guys."

"And then I'll be able to see my mom and dad again."

"And then you'll be able to go see your mom and dad again, but you're going to have to be good and let Dr. Tino and the other nurses finish giving these to you." James thought about it before extending his arm with a nod.

Tino marveled at how quickly James warmed up to the Italian. He mentally slapped himself, why hadn't it occurred to him to just explain why the vaccinations helped. All he and the other nurses had ever done was just tell him that he needed it and that was that. Tino stepped aside to allow his co-worker to pass, "Wow."
"It was nothing." Feli took off his gloves and threw them away, "Who’s next?"

They continued to do their rounds, each time, the young doctor made their little patients smile despite whatever ailed them or whatever pain they found themselves in. Tino more often than not found himself heartbroken when he couldn't do much for them aside from upping the amount of morphine, but even then, he had to be careful not to give them too much.

He watched Feli crawl after a toddler who had managed to escape when Matthew tried to take her blood pressure. Biting his lip, Tino tried not to think about his first accident with administering too much morphine. Damn near tore him apart. Their beepers went off simultaneously when the Italian finally managed to pull the little girl from under the bed.

Without thinking twice, Feli handed the child back to her mother and offered a quick apology before following Tino and Matthew into the elevator to answer their summon. When they arrived at the ER, they were immediately swept into the mass of white coats and gradient scrubs. The howls of ambulances drew orderlies to the doors to help ring in gurney after gurney while doctors were shouting orders.

"I need 6 milligrams of morphine over here!"

"Take him to the O.R.!!"

"He isn't going to break. Put more pressure on that, nurse!"

Mathias grabbed Feliciano, "I've got a 7 year old male. His left forearm was caught under debris… the firefighters had to…cut it off in order to get him out. His CO2 levels were stabilized on our way over here but his BP is still at 150/110." The paramedic continued to give Feli details about the child as they tugged on the gurney’s sheets to transfer a dark haired child onto his bed.

As quickly as he could, he started to cut the boy's clothes off to inspect the burns. He looked at his arm sorrowfully, "Was there any way to save it?"

"We have what was left of it. Hopefully you guys can reattach it."

"What's going on out there?"

"There was a fire at the Sacred Heart Orphanage."

"I'll do what I can, here. Grazie, Mathias." The Italian worked diligently to bring the boy's vitals to an appropriate surgery level. 'Merde, merde, merde,' he thought to himself in frustration. "Nurse, I need."

"Kitty," shouted the boy as he shot up from bed. His blue eyes widened in shock from his new surroundings before watering. He let out a pained scream, "I'm burning! My arm is burning!"

Feli jumped into action to soothe the child, "No, sweetheart, you aren't." A nurse rushed in with two syringes. When the child fell back into slumber, the Italian pulled off his gloves, "Is there an O.R. available?"

"Yeah, I'll take him." Arthur moved around to push the portable bed towards the operating room, "Roderich is prepping as we speak."

The wails eventually settled down after hours of work. There had been a few casualties, only five. To be honest and as terrible as it was to say, it could've been worse. A lot worse. Feli sat on the floor outside the operating room with his legs stretched out. Despite the ache in his back, he had
refused to budge until he had news on his patient. It had been a few hours, but finally, Roderich stepped out, his face stone.

Feli scrambled up, "How is he?"

"He'll be in your care for the remainder of his stay," stated Roderich as he removed his surgical cap and handed the younger doctor a chart.

"Ok, but how is he?"

Roderich walked past him, "He'll be up in a few hours. You should be there for when he does." He left without another word and it was days like these when Feli loved and hated his job. They tended to make his stomach leap for joy that a life had been saved but only have it fall back with a heavy thump at what consequences they would have to face for keeping another soul from Death.

Sighing, Feli took the chart. Room 301, pediatrics ward. The rest of the children that were admitted had been far luckier than his. Some minor burns or too much smoke inhalation. Some had needed stitches while others just a hand to hold. The Italian removed his coat upon entering the dark blue room and sat on the chair next to the sleeping boy's bed. At least they'd given him a pretty room with the tiny lights that looked like stars on the ceiling. Not that the boy would pay too much attention to the room’s celestial décor when he woke up. How was he going to take it? Would he be happy to be alive? What about the others…where would they go to now that the orphanage was destroyed? Speaking of…

As quiet as possible, Feli switched on the television and found a news station covering the fire Mathias had told him about. Accident? 'Of course,' he thought bitterly, "some careless bastard had overlooked a gas leak and by circumstance…no wait!'

Squinting at the screen, Feli saw a symbol painted on one of the charred bricks. He quickly copied it into his tiny note book and pocketed it away for later research. Thinking better of it, Feli pulled it back out to snap a picture of the drawing and sent it to his brother, 'This was no accident. Lovino should look into it as soon as possible.'

"H-hello," croaked his patient.

Feli turned off the television, "Hi, little one. How are you feeling?"

For a moment the boy didn't say anything. "I don't feel my hand. I've lost my hand, haven't I?"

It broke Feli's heart to hear him say it so stoically. He reached out to hold the child's hand, "I'm so sorry, piccolino. We did everything we could."

The boy sighed, "Well, at least I'm alive."

"Si~"

"I should've died."

"Ve?!" Feli was panicking. Someone so young...no one should say such things!

"Nobody wanted me when I was whole," continued the dark haired child bitterly, "Nobody will want me now that I'm not."

"That isn't true, little one."
"Alexander."

"Ve?"

"My name is Alexander."

"Alexander, then. I don't want you to worry about any of that. Right now, I just want you to focus on getting better. I'm going to take care of you from now on, ok?"

Alexander nodded and allowed Feli to tuck him in, his sapphire eyes following the man's every movement with sleepy curiosity, "Is everyone else, ok? My kitty? Is...is she ok?"

"I'm not sure, bambino. I'll look into it." Once he was absolutely positive that Alex was as comfortable as he could be, Feli stood back, "I'll be back to check on you later, ok? Is there anything you'd like to watch while I'm away?"

"Do you have the little mermaid?"

Feli smiled sadly, "I don't have it on me, but," he pulled out his iPod and some headphones from his pocket, "I have the soundtrack if you'd like to listen to it." Alexander nodded excitedly and soon found himself dozing off to the opening credits on repeat, not that the Italian blamed him. The score was really relaxing and given what the poor boy had just went through, perhaps it was for the best that he just listened.

He stepped out to check on the other children under his care before going to the break room. There, Elizabeta was crying softly against her husband's shoulder, "They're so young."

"I know, dear," murmured Roderich, pulling her tighter against him on the couch.

"At least, a-at least they're alive, right?"

"Right." Roderich placed a hand over his wife's abdomen, "Please, don't cry. Our little one doesn't like it when you cry and neither do I."

Feli quickly stepped back out to the hall, not wanting to intrude on the couple's private moment. Still, he couldn't help but smile at the good news even when he accidentally bumped into a fellow resident.

"Eli-chan is expecting isn't she," asked Kiku with a soft smile as he straightened Feli up. The small Japanese man tugged on his long sleeves happily, "I figured it out when she started crying in the neonatal ward. Then when she stole my bento box and ate the rice balls and vegetable tempura with peanut butter and mustard."

Feli giggled and the pair made their way to a near empty cafeteria, "But I don't think the others know yet. We should probably keep this a secret."

"I agree."

"Ve, what a day, huh?"

"Hm." They took a seat in the farthest corner of the cafeteria next to a window to overlook the city's skyline. Everybody was going about their business as if nothing had happened. As if they hadn't lost five lives in the past few hours from the emergency haul alone. And they weren't even counting the losses from the other hospitals in the area.
Tino collapsed onto a chair next to their table, "Boy, am I tired. We just finished transferring the last of the severe patients to the other towers." His two companions nodded in sympathy. He ran a hand over his face and tried to rub the sleep from his eyes, "Dr. Beilschmidt is going to have a rough time at the meeting tomorrow."

"Why," asked Kiku, with a head tilt.

"The district is a private one and that orphanage wasn't exactly affluent. I'm afraid that some of the kids are going to be kicked out unless Wolfgang convinces them not to."

Feli narrowed his eyes, "That's terrible! Where exactly do they expect them to go?"

"I don't know, Feli. Right now, the best we can do is pray that he can convince the other heads."

Pulling out his cell phone, Feli sent a text message to his grandfather, "Yeah, I'm sure he'll be just fine."

"What do you mean no? Why the hell not," roared Wolfgang angrily. He'd spent the better half of his morning arguing for the sake of the children. He glared daggers at the sole thorn in his side in hopes that he could intimidate his way, "Give me one good reason, Collins."

Collins glared back, unfazed despite the fact that Wolfgang's glare was known to send their colleagues running for the hills. "How about their insurance doesn't cover it?"

"Don't twist my words, Beilschmidt!" The six others present looked back and forth between the two arguing men. Half silently agreed with Mr. Collins while the other half supported Wolfgang wholeheartedly.

"Signori," cooed a voice thick with Italian accent, "Signori, please. No need for us to be uncivil to one another." Everyone turned to see Romulus entering the meeting with a secretary trailing after him.

The woman sent Wolfgang an apologetic gaze, "Sir, I am so sorry. He insisted and-"

"It's fine, Helga." The anger Wolfgang was feeling drastically lowered to a simmer at the sight of his friend. "You can leave us now."

Romulus shrugged out of his coat and sat on the chair next to the German, "Allora, what's all the fuss about?"

With arms crossed, Collins huffed in annoyance. "Mr. Vargas, this is a private matter that doesn't concern you. You can't just show up at our meetings whenever you damn well please."

"Actually, I can. Don't forget that I own the property your hospitals are built on not to mention that more than half of the donations given to every establishment here come from my company. So, I
ask you again, what seems to be the problem?"

Before any of the others could answer, Wolfgang sat back down and answered for them, "They wish to discharge the children who came in from yesterday's fire. Some of them haven't even fully recovered yet."

"I see." Romulus cocked his head to the side, "And where exactly do you suggest they go, Mr. Collins?"

"I'm sure the city has places for the homeless," muttered the dark haired man offhandedly.

The Italian frowned before smiling, "I know! They can stay at the hospital until I clear one of my homes for them."

"What part of-"

"All expenses paid, of course, by V enterprises. That's what concerns you vultures anyway, right? Money?" Wolfgang bit back a smile as his friend continued, obviously not leaving room for discussion. Not with those hardened caramel colored eyes at least. "I'd say several millions should be more than enough and because I'm a generous man, I'll even let you say that you're doing it out of the kindness of your heart. My daughters are working to clear one of my houses to serve as a temporary house for the little angeli as we speak. Give me three days and you'll continue your business as usual." His gaze softened as it turned to Wolfgang. "Doctor? Does that sound good to you?"

"Ja. I'd say that about covers our agenda for today. Thank you, Mr. Vargas."

"Va bene!"

The meeting was adjourned and the rest of the heads returned to their own hospitals to continue their day, albeit some more sore than others. Romulus reached out for his friend’s arm before they parted for their separate cars, "Wolfie?"

"Ja, Romulus?"

"Would you care to join me for dinner tomorrow?"

Wolfgang pretended to think about it before nodding, "I suppose. I don't have anything better to do."

Ludwig returned the next day to find the hospital quieter than usual in regards to patient flow
which was strange considering it was a Thursday. It had also been disconcerting that he had only caught a glimpse of his cute partner here and there. Feliciano hadn't even bothered showing up for lunch which had been a pity because Ludwig had made a small cake for them to share.

During one of his breaks, he had found his Italian playing with the children in the small play area they had in pediatric ward. It tugged at his heart strings to see him make peals of laughter erupt from the little ones as they all tried their hardest to get his attention. The nurses had commented that he had stayed well past his hours to make sure that they were comfortable. Some even hoped that he specialized in pediatrics by the end of his residence just so that they'd have an angel in their ward. And an angel he was. Ludwig watched Feli sing to the children and admired his person, his face relaxed and so joyful. He even had one little boy on his lap as he sang to them.

Tino gently nudged his side, "Hey Luddy, whatcha doing in my neck of the woods? Looking for your partner?"

"Ja," answered Ludwig bashfully, his eyes not leaving Feliciano. "I've haven't seen him today for our rounds."

"Oh, well he's been up here mostly because most of these patients are under his care."

"So I heard, but I seriously doubt playing with them is part of his job."

"Oh, let him be. He's only trying to keep their minds off of what happened. Feli's been especially good with Alexander. The poor boy had to get his forearm amputated. Then, one of our other children ran away right before an MRI but he found her hiding in one of the supply closets. The Nordic leaned against the door frame, "Held her hand throughout the entire procedure."

"Ja?" Ludwig grinned internally, if he didn't know better, he'd say that Tino was playing wingman. Maybe he'd work his magic on Emma on Mathias's behalf.

"Mhm. Oh! There goes your pager."

The German tore his eyes from Feli to check who was paging him. He sighed and hooked it back onto his hip, "Mrs. Drews' blood work came back. I'm having some trouble figuring out what's wrong with her and I'm hoping these results will shed some light." With one last look at Feliciano, Ludwig took the elevator back to his floor.

Mrs. Drews had been admitted two days ago and based on her symptoms he had assumed that she had been pregnant but her urine sample had come back negative and so had his initial blood samples. To make matters worse, she started to complain about her eyesight.

Ludwig scribbled something into his patient's chart as Feliciano walked by with a black mesh carrier, "Ciao, bello," he chirped tiredly. "What's up?"

"...I'm not sure."

"Let me take a look." Feli handed Gino's carrier to his partner and took Ludwig's stethoscope to check on Mrs. Drews, "Did you get any blood work done?"

"Of course."

"How was it?"

"WBC's were high."
Feli gently held her chin up so that he could look into her eyes with the light, "Yeah?" He glanced over his shoulder to Ludwig expectantly. When he didn't say anymore, Feli elaborated, "What kind?"

Ludwig furrowed his brow, "I just said the white blood cells were…"

"Well, yeah. Of course, those are going to be high, she's sick, silly. I meant what kinds." He brushed his bangs from his eyes and moved to grab the clipboard from Ludwig's hands to look at the results himself but the German held it over his head. "I need to see if her eosinophils are elevated. This looks like parasites to me."

"How would you know? You only looked at her for like three minutes."

Feli grinned cheekily, "Maybe I'm that good."

Amused, Ludwig rose an eyebrow, "Is that so?"

"Mhmm."

"Right, well, elevated eosinophils could also mean allergies. She also has a history of asthma."

"Oh?" Feli glanced at Ludwig's patient before nudging him outside and closing the door behind them, "How about a wager then Dr. Beilschmidt?" He looked up at his partner mischievously and Ludwig will forever deny that that combined with how his last name sounded like warm tea on a chilly day did things to him that shouldn't be allowed to happen in public. "Order a blood smear and a stool sample. I can guarantee that you'll find something there."

Ludwig cleared his throat, "Ok, but if you're wrong then you will stop pestering me about dating you and we'll continue our relationship as platonic co-workers."

"Ve~ and if I win you'll have to go on a date with me."

"Deal." The two men shook hands in agreement and Ludwig stepped aside so that Feli could pick up his cat carrier again. "Are you heading home already?"

"Mhmm. I've been here since midnight."

Alarmed, Ludwig checked his watch, "Feli, it's about to be six! Why did they keep you so late? Who did your schedule for this week? Was it Jessica? It was Jessica, wasn't it? Damn it, all, I've told my father not to let her do our schedules."

The Italian lowered his cat carrier back onto the floor before reaching out and placing the softest of kisses on Ludwig's cheek, just barely touching the corner of his lips. When he pulled back, he smiled at the blush he managed to coax out of his partner, "Ve~ It's nothing like that, Ludwig. I only worked twelve hours today. I just came back with my cat to play with the kids." He picked his cat back up and petted him through the mesh, "Gino here is a certified therapy kitty and I thought it would be good for the kids to play with him."

Well, didn't Ludwig feel like a fool. 'Still, I got a kiss out of it,' thought Ludwig, now running on the bare minimum of will to keep from pushing Feli against the wall. Wager be damned. 'Oh, he was looking at me. What did he ask? Did he ask-quick say something!' Ludwig rubbed the back of his head shyly, "Ah." 'Well aren't I an eloquent man? Why must I always make a fool out of my?'

His inner thoughts were interrupted by a giggle and damn if that wasn't one of the sweetest things he'd ever heard.
"You're cute, Ludwig. I'll see you tomorrow, k?" Feli reached back up to give his partner a goodbye kiss on the cheek before heading out. "Be prepared to go on a date with me tomorrow!"

When the Italian had disappeared from view, Berwald came out of the room next door, "Didn't ya alr'dy give 'er somethin' for parasites?"

Ludwig grinned, "Ja."
Could I Have This Kiss Forever?

Chapter Summary

Berwald's bachelor outing is something that the Country Club will remember for a long time. As a matter of a fact it will go down in their history as the BTT incident, not the bad touch trio but Berwald's Three Terrors....also known as the bad touch trio incident. Feli and Ludwig go on a couple of dates that end in a sweet kiss but not everyone is happy about this...

Chapter Notes

This is my second favorite chapter simply because of the ridiculous nonsense these educated grown men get themselves into. I remember cracking up at the golfing scene when I was writing this because the images of their faces was too much. Also a reminder: Italics in this story indicate flashbacks.

Ivan Braginski played with his little Pinocchio figurine as he overlooked Moscow's skyline from his office. It had snowed earlier that day, not much but enough for him to want to work from home. He felt something slip under his nail and pouted when he realized that a sliver of red paint chipped off from Pinocchio's hat. Pulling his desk drawer open, he plucked out a single jar of Cherry Red and a tiny paint brush.

"There you go, little one," he said happily after adding a dab of red to the missing spot. Ivan stared at the figurine for a moment before cutting a tiny bit of his scarf. With careful hands, he tied it around Pinocchio's neck, "Now you won't be cold either!"

"Still playing with toys, Ivan?"

"He's very special to me, Eduard," muttered Ivan. He raised his violet eyes to his brother-in-law. "Do you need something?"

Eduard pushed his glasses up his face as he rubbed his eyes tiredly, "Yes. Natalya refuses to go to Genovia for the weekend."

"For Berwald's wedding?"

"Indeed."

Ivan sighed before tucking Pinocchio into his breast pocket and stood up, "Well, I guess I must go persuade her then." He calmly made his way to his sister's office, though his demeanor betrayed his true feelings. From his place outside, he could hear Natalya's screams.

"I don't give a shit! I'm not going to their stupid wedding and that's that!" Natasha's muffled response only resulted in glass breaking. "Maybe I would've if that idiot chose different flower
"Honey," reasoned their older sister, "he's been planning his wedding a lot longer than you."

"So what? He isn't a bride, I am!"

"Well, technically..."

"No! *I* m the damn bride and does Ludwig back *me* up? No!"

Ivan winced when something else shattered, "Let's go, Pinocchio. I think it'll be safer for you if you hide behind this." He rearranged his long scarf to hide his figurine behind it and entered his sister's office just as Natalya was about to throw something else at their older sister.

"Big Brother," cried the younger woman happily, all anger disappearing as she dropped her crystal paperweight and ran to him with open arms.

Natasha looked relieved at the young man's appearance, "Hello, Ivan."

"Hello girls." Ivan gently removed his sister's arms from around his waist, "What's going on?"

"Our sister refuses to go to Genovia for Berwald's and Tino's wedding."

"Why is that, Natalya?"

Natalya crossed her arms and glared at her shoes, "I wanted blue peonies but Tino already has them. I emailed Ludwig to make him change his arrangements but he emailed me back saying no."

Ivan cocked his head to the side in confusion, "Ok?"

"No, it's not ok," snapped Natalya, anger once again spiking, "I wanted peonies."

"So, get them."

"I can't now. Everyone will think I'm copying him."

"No one's going to think that, Nat," assured Natasha.

"Who asked you, cow?!"

Ivan's eyes went wide with disapproval. "Natalya! Don't talk to big sister that way." He frowned, "You are going to go their wedding. You have to. They're going to be your family, and you need to show them that you are willing to meet them halfway."

"But I don't want to marry into that idiot family, with their stupid weak beer and bland wurst." The young Russian tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder and looked at her brother sweetly, "I'd much rather stay here with you, Ivan."

"Look, Nat, you need to go make an appearance. It's not good that Victrola's society doesn't know much of you let alone hasn't seen you interact with your fiancé. And it sure isn't going to look good if he's actually partaking in your little arrangement. It was bad enough that you were dating that one Lithuanian."

Natalya scoffed, "I could care less if Ludwig is dating someone else."

There was a knock at the door and Eduard let himself in, "Uh, sorry." He moved to stand next to
his wife who exchanged a worried look with him. "But what if he falls in love?"

"I'd jump over the moon. We'd break off the wedding and—I"

"Nyet," growled Ivan as he paced the room, "that won't happen. Ludwig is a man of honor. Besides, his father knows what will happen if he does break off our agreement." He opened the office door and looked over his shoulder, "Someone needs to go and represent this family. I don't care which one of us goes. Just see that it is done."

"That's not awesome, West!"

Ludwig rolled his eyes from inside his walk-in closet as he shrugged off yet another shirt and hung it back up. It had been a trying morning at the hospital, but it had been worth every runny nose and bloody wound just to see his partner radiate with unbound joy every time their eyes met. It was almost if not just as raw as when he found out that his prognosis had been correct. Feliciano had jumped up in glee and tried to hug him but Ludwig had firmly held him away with a blush; such displays of affection wouldn't be appropriate in front of their patient after all.

That had been yesterday and now he was pulling shirt after shirt against his chest to see which one looked best.

"Are you even listening to me," cried Gilbert, banging against the closet door. "How are you going to miss out on Teddy's Bachelor's day? You were the one who planned it. You're the best man!"

"Leave him alone," said Roderich as he smoothed out his purple and white sweater. "He's already done more than what is required of him, which is more than can be said about you."

"Hey! I was an awesome best man and you know it. And further – what the hell are you wearing, Bear?"

The two older men stared at their brother as he came out of the bathroom in a simple dark blue polo shirt and khaki pants. His hair, like theirs, was left down in a relaxed fashion. Berwald looked at himself then at his brothers, "What?"

"Oh, Gott. See, West? See why you can't skip out on this?"

Growling in agitation, Ludwig finally poked his head out of the closet, fixing the collar of his own dark grey polo shirt, "What now?" He eyed his brother up and down, "I don't see anything wrong with what he's wearing." Stepping out, he zipped up his pants and looked into a mirror. Did he look ok? Would Feli like it better if his hair was gelled back or should he just keep it down…would it matter? He still had those things Monika gave him to give to the guys. Speaking of which… Ludwig pulled out a duffel bag, "I have something for us to wear."

The three brothers eyed their younger warily, remembering that Monika had made something for them.
Ludwig fished out the small boxes and handed them to their respective recipient, "Here, and yes you do have to wear them."

"Jesus, Lud, really?!" They turned to Vash who had dropped his stay-over bag grumpily on the floor. He was dressed in white shorts and a red and white argyle sweater, something no doubt Lilly forced him into. He eyed the contents of the boxes with disdain, "It's bad enough we're going golfing, but now you want us to look like snobby idiots while we're at it?"

Roderich sighed, "Just wear the hat. When it's your turn to get married, we'll do whatever you want and dress however you want."

Vash did as he was told, albeit grumpily, "Psh, I'm not going to get married."

"Well then," started Gilbert, eyeing himself appreciatively in the mirror, "when you decide to pull that stick out of your ass, then we'll make a ceremony of it. Until then, just shut it and bare it with the rest of us." As grouchy as wearing golfing attire made him, he had to admit, the hat completed the look and, well, he'd be lying if he said that he didn't look hot. ’

"Weren't you just giving Ludwig grief about not being somewhere? What was that about? You're not going golfing with us, Lud?"

Ludwig sighed, "Nein."

"It's alright," mumbled Berwald in his brother's defense, "We spent time together on Wednesday. 'Sides, he'll be at th' country club anyway."

"What are you going to do there?"

Gilbert rolled his eyes, "Ja, West, what are you going to be doing today that has you acting…Oh!" A wicked grin began to form on his face when he took note of how red Ludwig's face was turning. "So it's like that then. Well, about damn time." He pulled out his notebook and nodded with satisfaction. Looks like the surgeons are going to get a new radio in the OR after all.

Elegant fingers drummed lightly at the black leather steering wheel while the other hand scrolled down a text message. Feli had been waiting in his car just outside of the country club when he received word from his brother telling him to be careful. When he asked why, Lovino quickly sent him a two page long text stating that it was his first time in public after their grandfather dubbed him as heir and that 'not all the elite bastards can be trusted' as his brother so kindly put it. This had sent a wave of panic through the young Italian but not so much as what he read next:

Antonio did some research on that symbol you sent me and you were right. The fire wasn't an accident. Some asshole was sending us a message. There are only a couple of members of that group in the city, and given their stations, I don't think they did it personally. We've reviewed the tapes and I've sic'ed Cerberus on their sorry ass. I'll contact you when we find out more information. Until then, stay alert and be careful. Also, tell that potato bastard to keep his pervy hands to himself. If anything happens, let me know.

That last bit made Feliciano giggle. He wasn't going to tell his big brother that Ludwig had already marked him as his. Granted, it had been done while Ludwig had been drunk but he hoped that a repeat of it was in their near future. A few familiar Audis caught his eye as the rolled into Victrola's Country Club's driveway and he set his own car into drive to follow, panic replaced with excitement instantly.
Lars and Mathias had only gotten there themselves when the Beilschmidt brothers arrived. They were deciding who was going to going to be on whose team when they heard the purr of another car as it pulled up to the valet. The red curves of the car had them all salivating, more so when they saw the Alfa Romero crest nestled just under the nose of the hood. The valet quickly sprang into action to open the door for their patron, "Ve~ Grazie. Please give me a moment, I need to get something out."

A familiar auburn curl bounced as the driver went around to pluck a picnic basket from the passenger side. Feli smiled up at the Germans and Mathias who were eyeing his car hungrily, "Ciao~"

Gilbert walked closer to the car and ran a gloved hand over the red metal, "Damn Feli, I know you said you had an Alpha Romero but I didn't know you had the 8C Competizione. They only made like five hundred of these."

"You saw it last week at the party," muttered Roderich, having lost interest in the car and now checking his watch to make sure they were still ahead of schedule.

"Yeah, but it was dark and that was the last I saw of it. He's been driving that Vespa of his to work in case you haven't noticed. Why don't you take her out more, Feli?"

Ludwig's stomach tightened when he heard his brother say the Italian's nickname so easily when he himself still struggled to say it. Then again, they had been on friendly terms since day one and he supposed that he shouldn't really be jealous that everyone called him by that name. He caught Feli wink at him as he passed him the picnic basket, warm fingers subtly squeezing his. That's right. He shouldn't be jealous. They weren't the ones going on a date with the man. **He** was.

"He's more of a weekend car," explained Feli as he handed the keys over and showed the valet his membership I.D., "And a bit loud. Not that I mind, I personally love hearing the engine purr like that."

"It looks kind of funny, doesn't it," asked Vash as the group entered the lodge to sign in. Ludwig shot him a look but to his surprise Feli just giggled.

"I suppose it does look strange, but I think that's what makes it beautiful. After all, there is no beauty without strangeness."

Lars raised an eyebrow as his cousins and friend while they loaded the carts with their golf bags, "Aren't they coming with us?"

"Hm? Nah, they're going on a picnic," said Gilbert as he fiddled with his clubs, "Apparently, they're going to meet us for the other activities."

"Well, how the hell are we going to do this?"

"Groups of three?"

"I call Teddy Bear," shouted Mathias, latching on to his soon to be brother-in-law. "Tino said we should bond," he said with a cheeky grin knowing that the mention of his brother would let him get away with just about anything.

Roderich inched closer to his little brother, "Me too."
"Oh, come on," whined Gilbert. "Why are you abandoning me, Roddy? I thought we were a team!"

"Yes, well, you drive like a ruffian."

"It's a golf cart. How much damage can I do with a golf cart?"

Vash snorted, "I'll go with you just to see."

"Nh, I want Lars." Berwald looked to his cousin then at Mathias with a silent plea. If anyone could handle the idiotic blond, it would be Lars. And if he wanted to enjoy his game of golf, he'd need someone to help control him.

"Hon, hon, hon. Look, Tonio, it's our long lost friend." Francis pulled up his own cart next to Gilbert's and hopped off to embrace the albino. "Why did you not say you would be here today, mon ami?"

"I didn't think you'd still be in town," answered Gilbert returning the hug. He pulled Antonio from the cart so that the Spaniard could join in, "What are you two doing here? I'm surprised your man isn't here with you, Toni."

Antonio smiled cheerfully, "Lovi had to go see his grandpa today and he really doesn't like golf. We were actually going to go for a game now."

"You don't say?" Gilbert rubbed his chin thoughtfully and turned to Berwald who shrugged in indifference. "How about you go put your cart back and ride with me? We're two people short and it is an awesome day for the Bad Touch Trio to ride again."

Vash paled then looked to Roderich, both of them rushing for the last seat in Berwald's cart, the younger thrusting his hip to the side to knock off his brunette brother. Francis picked him up easily and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, "C'est magnifique! You're going to have so much fun with us, Roderich."

"Si! It'll be just like our college days," chirped Antonio as he climbed in the back seat in Gilbert's cart. Roderich shuddered at mention of their time in college. That was exactly what he was afraid of.

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Ludwig extended the red, gold, and black plaid blanket on the ground while Feli shrugged out of his jacket. They had driven past the picnic tables to a more secluded area so they could enjoy their lunch in peace. 'And away from prying eyes,' thought Ludwig as he watched Feli carefully set his wicker basket down. His blue eyes widened at the modest yet still delicious looking spread all neatly packed inside. Cherry tomatoes, baby carrots and sugar snaps were placed out first, followed by small containers with strawberries and blueberries. Another was filled with what looked like homemade chips and finally a very large, very mouthwatering, sandwich.

"I figured we could just cut this in half," said the Italian drawing out a knife, "Big brother Francis gave me the idea."

"Francis is your brother?" That was news. He certainly didn't look like any of the Vargas, didn't have their eyes or the hair curl.

Feli nodded as he handed the German his half of the pan bagnat. "My mom adopted him," he said simply and left it at that. He smiled and raised his sandwich in cheers, eyes lighting up when Ludwig made a small noise of pleasure after taking a bite. "I take it that you like it."
Pink dusted Ludwig's pale cheeks as he swallowed, "It's really good."

"Ve~" The couple continued to eat away at their sandwich peacefully, enjoying the distant sounds of clubs hitting golf balls. "I'm sorry about picking today for us to go out," said Feli sadly, "I was just so excited that you were actually going to hold up your end of our bargain."

"Why wouldn't I?" Ludwig frowned. Had he really been that standoffish towards his partner?

"Well… you didn't really like me before."

Ludwig finished off the last bit of his sandwich and took a swig of water. Wiping off his hands, he leaned back on his arms, "It's not that I didn't like you. I… I actually noticed you in med school, too." It was just the fact that he had hastily agreed to marry a complete stranger before he got the chance to say anything. Ludwig closed his eyes; no he couldn't tell him that. It would drive him away and…and he didn't want that. Not when he finally allowed himself to come to terms with his feelings. Not when his being reacted so wonderfully to what was happening with Feliciano. He opened his eyes again to see that Feli had already finished his sandwich as well and was staring at him with his head tilted to the side.

Feli waited patiently for Ludwig to continue, wondering what made him stop to begin with. Why was he suddenly holding back? Ah, it didn't matter. Whatever it was couldn't be as bad as the secrets he was hiding. One day perhaps, he'd tell him. Not today though. No, if he said anything about them now, he'd surely drive him away and he didn't want that. Not now that Ludwig was letting him be so close to him. He noticed a bit of sauce on the corner of the German's mouth and moved forward to clean it.

His heart thumped rapidly in his chest as Feli crawled towards him. Ludwig did a mental rundown of all the possibilities that action could lead to save one. He blinked slowly when he felt a calloused thumb brush the corner of his mouth and he instinctively ran his tongue over the digit to clean the sauce, taking great pleasure at seeing the Italian squirm. Serves him right for teasing him last Saturday.

"It was because you thought I wanted your money, wasn't it," murmured Feliciano, his eyes hooded with content.

It took Ludwig a moment to realize that his companion was referring to his earlier hesitations. He nodded slowly, "It wouldn't have been the first time, and after the fifth person, I just…closed myself off to the prospects of finding someone who would like me for me."

"Ve, it must've been lonely."

"I had my siblings so it wasn't that bad. Berwald and I are actually very close."

Feli nodded and mirrored Ludwig's position, head rolled back to look at the passing clouds, "I can see it. Lovi and I aren't as close as we used to be, but mostly I think that was because of the agoge and his line of work. It doesn't really allow him any personal time to spend with family."

"What does he do? I saw the video thing your grandpa played before introducing you but I didn't really understand much of it."

"It was just my cousins and their achievements. You already know Marcello has his club and his sister is in a band. Bernardo was a boxer, Eric does opera and musicals every, but he wants to try and write his own and direct them. Seraph and Oswaldo do underground rapping, or rather they did. I think now they just do philanthropy here and there with their mom." Feli smiled and glanced
up to his date, "I come from an over achieving family, don't I?"

Ludwig snorted, "This coming from an astrophysics professor-"

"Ex."

"-gone medical doctor. What really made you do that? And don't say Thor!"

Feli giggled happily, "Ok, ok. I'll tell you why if you tell me why you became a doctor. And don't say it was because you wanted to because I can tell that it wasn't exactly your first choice."

"Am I that transparent?"

"No, but I remember how you looked that day after Gross Anatomy. You looked so much more comfortable in a kitchen than the ER. N-not to say that you're a bad doctor or anything! It's just that-uh…ve!" The Italian covered his face with his hands in embarrassment. Here he finally had his date with the man of his dreams and he was ruining it by insulting the guy. Where the hell was his confidence when he need –Feli felt a gentle tug on his wrists. Glancing up, he saw Ludwig smiling at him, and it seriously had to be the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Ludwig lowered their hands but didn't let go, "You don't have to hide. You're right, I do feel more comfortable in a kitchen. My mom loved to bake, you see, and back when I could barely stand let alone walk, she always let me help. Well, as much help as a baby could provide. Berwald and Roderich like to bake too, but I think it stuck with me more so them."

"Why be a doctor then?"

"Honestly? I really wanted to join the military like my brothers and dad did, but I broke my leg the year I wanted to sign up and decided to go to the W.H University while I recuperated. I ended up just staying and went the medical route because I felt that it was what was expected of me. My brothers served in the medical corps and were deployed together usually. When they got back, they just went back to work at Asclepius. Gilbert's the surgeon, Roderich an oncologist, Berwald wants to specialize in infectious disease. Vash …I'm not entirely sure what he wants to do yet, but I'm pretty positive he'll end up like us. Same with Lilly."

"And all because your dad is a doctor?"

"Ja." Ludwig took a bite from a sugar snap before continuing, "I think you know that my ancestor Christopher Beilschmidt founded the first hospital in Genovia and I guess the profession was just something my family settled into. Well, that and military work."

Feli lowered his eyes to their joined hands and nodded, "That makes since, that you guys do what obviously comes naturally.”

"Mhm. My dad carved his niche in the medical district here in Victrola before he became Chief General Surgeon and it's been ours ever since. They offered him another term but he didn't want it. Mostly, it was because he didn't like what he saw so he made sure that the hospitals he owned all treated their patients with respect and provided the best healthcare possible."

"My grandpa told me how he fought tooth and nail to make sure the kids were able to stay until he cleared out one of his homes."

Ludwig smiled, "Ja. He told me how your grandpa put Collins in his place."

"Who?"
"Blane Collins. He's an ass and a thorn in my father's side. Then again, the Collins and Beilschmidts have never really been friends since after Genovia became a country. Well, them and the Godfreys."

Feli lowered his brow in thought, "I see."

"Hn, I guess in the long run, knowing how hard my dad worked to establish what we have, I didn't want to disappoint him by choosing to be a baker." He saw the Italian's face sadden and he tightened his hold on his hand, "But it's ok. He knows I like to bake and he bought me a bakery. I work there on my days off or sometimes during my lunch break."

"Is that where you went those times when I first started working?"

Ludwig blushed, "Ja." He cleared his throat, "What about you? What made you want to be a doctor…was it really that Russian you were talking about at the ball?"

"Si~"

"Oh."

Ludwig let go of Feli's hand to sulk, making the auburn-haired man smile, "But that was only because he reminded me of how much I wanted to help people. My mom always told me that my hands were made for healing where my brother's were made for..." he drifted off before shaking his head. "There isn't some cool back story to me wanting to be a doctor other than I truly want to help people. The selfish reason though is because I want to mean something to someone and I know I do to everyone I save, even if it's only for a few minutes."

"And…what about that time at the clinic?" Feli furrowed his brow in confusion and Ludwig elaborated, "I'm not so sure, but Mathias apparently took a patient to you at the clinic and he saw you save him or something. Alfred wouldn't stop fanboying over you after I told him that my dad hired you."

"Save…Oh! He probably means that one time he brought a patient that had been shot. Ve~ It wasn't anything special. He was losing too much blood and we were all out of his type. The clinic is always the low man in the totem pole when it comes to blood donations so we were out of O. I'm a universal donor so one thing lead to another and I made Mathias hook me up to this makeshift blood pump I made out of catheter tubing, a few syringes, and some test tubes. He lived of course, or so I was told, I passed out after a while."

Ludwig knew he was probably going to catch flies in his mouth but he couldn't bring himself to care. Feli, cute little Feli, was amazing! And somehow, whatever angel was watching over him, felt compelled to drop him in his path. 'I bet it was my mutti,' he thought to himself. He shook his head and leaned against a tree with his arms crossed comfortably across his chest, "So what do you like to do when you're not busy saving lives, looking for thunder gods, and singing to orphans?"

"And not trying to seduce you?"

"Making me snacks, teasing the hell out of me, and writing me poetry is your way of seduction?"

"Is it working?"

Ludwig's lip twitched upward, "Maybe…"

~.~
"You're cheating!" A group of gentlemen next to them sent Gilbert and his posse, as he took to calling them, a glare for messing up their put, but he paid them no mind. The albino was busy glaring at Roderich who was smirking in triumph.

"No, Gilbert, I am simply better at this game than you are," said Roderich smoothly as he twirled his golf club in his hand while he waited for Berwald to hit his ball. "And do try to keep your voice down; you'll ruin our little brother's swing. Better yet, don't speak at all."

Gilbert crossed his arms childishly and grumbled. So far they've been through seventeen holes out of the eighteen that it would take to conclude their game. That had taken four hours. Four hours of insistent grumbling and whining that Roderich was messing him up on purpose. Why he would think that he'd do that, Roderich had no idea. Thanks to that little stunt Vash pulled when they got there, he'd been stuck in Gilbert's group.

Finally, Berwald swung his club and sent his ball soaring closer to the hole, "Hn." The little hum of approval was all that the tall German gave before handing his club to Mathias who had taken to carry Berwald's clubs to and from the cart.

"Tch, I could've done that," grumbled Gilbert as he slid into the cart.

Antonio chuckled, "Of course you could've. You're simply letting your brother win because it's his last day as a bachelor."

"Yeah, that's why," said Lars with a smirk. He slid into the cart and put it into drive not missing the growl his cousin sent his way.

The atmosphere in their small black cart instantly intensified as Gilbert slowly followed after Berwald's dark blue. The younger Beilschmidt was riding shotgun in order to go over their score cards while Lars drove. A quick jerk of a taunt was all it took to rile Gilbert up even further. "Alright, that's it," he hissed before a maniacal smirk materialized onto his face, "Buckle up boys."

He fiddled with his iPod on the cart's dock before settling on a song, "This is going to be so awesome."

Roderich tensed when he heard the other two members of the BTT group do as their leader said, "Gilbert, what on earth –Heilige Scheiße!" The brunette dug his nails into the tan leather seat of the cart with one hand and grabbed onto his hat with the other. His violet eyes widened behind his glasses, his words coming out in German, "Slow down you damn lunatic!"

"Never! Kesesesese~"

Vash and Mathias paused their conversation and exchanged glances when they heard a pathetic sounding growl of a cart being pushed to its limit. Over the screams and insane laughter, they could also hear Johnny Rivers belting out the words to Secret Agent Man. The sound got louder as Gilbert's cart flew off the small hill, landing with a bounce and a skid. Foot not releasing the pedal, ruby eyes practically glowed with mischief and adrenaline. Vash felt his eye twitch, "Oh, for the love of…"

Lars came to a stop and looked behind to see what all the commotion was about. And despite how fast they were going, time seemed to slow down enough for them to see Gilbert flicking him off, and Antonio and Francis making ridiculous faces in their direction. Roderich's white face and bulging eyes begged for help but just as the brief moment of slow motion came, it went away, taking with it the cackles and screams of its passengers.

There was a moment of silence before Berwald motioned for Lars to continue after them.
Gilbert never felt more alive than at that moment he was speeding well over the acceptable speed limit. The strip narrowed as it became a dirt path that ran parallel to the pond. Grinning, the albino shouted over to his passengers, "Told you that was going to be awes –"

"Look out you idiot," cried his little brother pointing at a swan waddling with her ducklings in tow. Gilbert gave a startled yelp and jerked the wheel to the left. All four men, two well respected doctors and two who were known for their association with the Vargas, cried out in horror as their abused cart went soaring into the pond, Johnny Rivers' song playing the last of its notes in the background.

It was silent save for the sound of people playing golf and partaking in other activities. The four men remained frozen in the same state they were in when they fell in, jaws dropped, eyes wide, hair disheveled underneath their hats. Antonio and Francis were hugging their golf clubs tightly.

And that's how Lars and his passengers found them as they drove slowly by to look at them. Vash rolled his eyes and muttered 'idiots' while Mathias simply stared with a huge grin, "I freaking love this family!"

Meanwhile, Berwald got out and assessed the damage; it wasn't too bad. They could certainly pull it out seeing as it wasn't that deep. As a matter of a fact, the water probably only went up to their waist. Still. He covered his face and hunched his shoulders.

Roderich immediately panicked, "Look what you did, Gibert! You've ruined –" He was interrupted by a boisterous laugh. "…Bear?"

"G-Gott, ya should've seen y'r faces," said Berwald jovially. He pulled out his phone and took a picture to send to Tino and Ludwig. Shaking his head, he took his seat again and motioned for Lars to drive on to the last hole. "See ya, lat'r." They drove away, leaving the four idiots to attempt and salvage the cart.

Another half an hour later, Berwald received a reply from Ludwig which was nothing more than an annoyed emoticon with the word ‘dummkopfs’ and ‘wunderbar.’ The last bit was an answer to his question in regards to his younger brother's date. Speaking of, Berwald folded his arms and feigned interest in Vash's form while Lars and Mathias talked about Emil.

The young Beilschmidt tried to concentrate in getting his ball close to the hole, but as soon as he heard that Emil and Lilly were planning on going their separate ways after Tino's own bachelor's party, he accidentally put more force into his swing than he meant to. Ah well. Who was it going to hurt?

~.~

Ludwig hadn't lied about his date going wonderfully. Not at all, and that surprised him less than he thought it should've. Not to mention that it was actually a lot easier to talk to Feli than he thought it would. In the few hours they've spent together, he learned that Feli enjoyed painting and reading various genres ranging from sophisticated ancient poetry to the Sunday comic. He loved all animals, especially cats. And his taste in music ranged from the classics to rap, though the last part was mostly due to his cousins' influence.

As for Feli, he learned that Ludwig loved dogs and enjoyed to work out frequently. He even confessed, albeit shyly, that he liked to read romance novels. They shared similar taste in music, only Ludwig surprisingly enjoyed metal as well, especially Rammstein, something that he had used to bond with his brother's fiancé. Oh, and most importantly, he learned that Ludwig had a huge crush on him, not that he didn't already know that. Still, it was nice to hear it from the man.
himself.

Neither thought to question how great this outing had turned out. Ludwig found himself comfortable enough with the Italian to share anything, and as for Feli, well, when wasn’t he comfortable?

"Ve, grazie for today, Ludwig," chirped Feli as he packed away the rest of the stuff back into his basket. "It was well worth waiting."

"W-we don't have to stop." Ludwig helped fold the blanket before tucking it under his arm, "We can go out again if you want."

Feli rose an eyebrow and teasingly said, "I don't know…I don't think it's very nice to use our patients for our bets."

"No bets."

"You want to go out on more dates with me?"

Ludwig coughed in embarrassment, "I…I don't see why not. Today was actually pretty fun and I did enjoy spending this time with you outside of work."

"Ve~" Feli looked pensive for a moment before strutting slowly up to the German, "Did you mean what you said? Do you really like me, Ludwig? Because I really like you and I would love for us to continue seeing each other. However, I am looking for something more than just two friends going on outings."

"M-more?" It probably wasn't healthy having blushed so much in one day let alone for his heart rate to elevate as it had today, but at the moment, Ludwig couldn't bring himself to care. The intense emotion radiating from Feli's beautiful honey colored eyes was enough to want to endure anything his body threw at him. But could he give what Feli wanted? He wanted to. God how he wanted to but…

"I want you to be my boyfriend," stated Feli bluntly, the raw adoration not wavering. "And I want you to want me to be your boyfriend too."

Ludwig licked his lips anxiously as he dug his brain for a rational reason why to say no. At the moment, none came to mind though he was sure there were plenty. Despite the nagging feeling that he shouldn’t, he did something that he’d been wanting to do for weeks now. Dropping the blanket, he gently pulled Feli closer to him and lowered his head. He wanted their first kiss to be perfect and right now he couldn't think of anything better. Not to mention it would convey his feelings better than he ever could with words.

A buzz came from their cart, interrupting what would've been the best moment of his life. With an annoyed growl and an apologetic smile, Ludwig excused himself to answer his cell. Feli's heart was all but jumping for joy in its little chamber, 'Luddy was going to kiss me! And he's not drunk this time.' It was funny, a part of him had been tense. Alert for any danger that his brother had warned him about, but nothing had happened. As a matter of fact, today had been everything he had hoped for. Still…the day was young and danger could be lurking around every –Something caught his attention from the corner of his eye. It was small and no doubt hard given the speed it was falling and more importantly, it was headed in his direction. 'So Lovino had been right,' he thought angrily, 'Someone wants to hurt me.'

Taking advantage that Ludwig's back was turned from him, he pulled out his custom butterfly net
and held it upside down like a bat. With careful calculations, he swung hard, sending whatever had been sent to hurt him, hopefully, back to whence it came. He'd be damned if they tried anything funny with his precious Ludwig present.

Ludwig ended his call and turned with a smile, "Sorry about that. It was my sister, she wanted to know if --what are you doing?"

"People are jealous of me and are attacking me with golfballs, so I sent one back in retaliation."

Blue eyes widened at the serious tone before settling with fondness for the man as he chuckled, "You're adorable."

Feli perked right up, "Say that again and let me record it!:

"Never."

"But I want that to be my ring tone. Who knows when you'll say that again."

Fighting back a grin, Ludwig shrugged and made his way back to their cart, "Not my problem. Now quit your sulking, we should get going. My brothers are probably already done with their game."

"Ve..."

~=~

Clothes wet and filthy, phone and iPod in need of drying, Roderich glared daggers at his older brother as they finally managed to drag the cart onto the path, "I hope you're pleased with yourself. How the hell are we going to explain this to Vati when he sees the fees for damages on the bill?"

"Oh, quit your bitching," groaned Gilbert as he helped tug it further onto land. "It's not like you helped pulling it out of the water."

"It's not like I put it there to begin with!"

Francis wiped at his forehead, "Let's not argue, mes amis. See? We got it out."

The trio of friends high fived themselves as Roderich continued to huff. A 'thunk' sound interrupted their celebration and the group watched a familiar blue golf ball roll off the roof of the cart and bounce its way into the water...followed by the cart.

Gilbert and his companions watched the cart sink further in until only the roof was visible, "Huh."

Giving a quick look around his surroundings to make sure no one was looking, he picked up his bag of clubs and tugged Roderich's arm, "Let's go, men. Retreat!"

The rest of the day's activities occurred without other disasters, much to everybody's relief. Ludwig and Feli left together, Roderich had insisted that he take his younger brother's car because he would 'skin himself an albino' if he had to be stuck in a car with him back to the mansion. Ludwig didn't want to ask questions, but he already figured that it had something to do with the mishap and the hefty tip Antonio slipped into the manager's pocket.

"Ve," cooed Feli happily as they exited the elevator of their building. They stopped outside of Ludwig's apartment, "I had a good time today, Ludwig."

Ludwig smiled, "Me too."
"Hm."

"What?"

"You have a really pretty smile, did you know? I love it~"

Ludwig sputtered a thanks as his face pinkened, his smile only growing as he looked away.

Feli cocked his head to the side, "Well, I'll let you rest. I'm sure you're going to be extra busy tomorrow." He leaned up and kissed the German's pale cheeks before making his way to his own apartment.

"Uh, wait!"

"Hm?"

"I-I... I was wondering, if you're not busy that is," Ludwig rubbed the back of his neck nervously. This was just like when he daydreamed about asking him out... what if he said no? No, he wouldn't say that, the guy was practically in love with him. There was no way –

"Ludwig?"

Ludwig bumped against the door in surprise to find that Feli had walked up to him again and was eyeing him affectionately. "Right. I was wondering if you'd like to go with me to my brother's wedding... as my-uh-date."

Feli grinned, "Sure! But, I have to work at midnight and I won't be out till tomorrow afternoon, so, I'm afraid I'll miss out on the actual ceremony. But if it's ok, I'll go with you for the reception."

Relief never felt so good. "That sounds perfect. I'm going to be at my family's estate but I can come back and get you if you want."

"Well, I think Felicia is going with Monika. I can get a ride with them and meet you there." The Italian's expression became playful, "Then I can come back home with you!"

Was... was that an invitation to something more? Ludwig chewed on his lip, "Th-that sounds good."

"Ve~ I'm glad. Good night, Bello."

"Gut nacht, Feli."

"Why is a Beilschmidt even going on this mission with me?" Tino Väinämöinen glared at his commanding officer. "It's bad enough that I was drafted in the middle of my residency, but now I have to drag along a Beilschmidt brat with me? What are they doing in the middle of a war anyway? Couldn't their daddy keep them out of it?"
Captain Victor Cawely looked up from his maps, "He requested to go with you."

"He's not even a soldier!"

"And that's where you're wrong, kid. Do you really think a son of Major Wolfgang Beilschmidt wouldn't have military training? Just because they went to a fancy medical school — "

"I went to medical school," hissed Tino. His fingers were itching to shoot something but he kept his cool.

The captain ignored the interruption and continued, "—doesn't mean that they don't know how to fight. Besides, it's only a recon mission."

"Which is precisely why I should take as few people as possi — what's this?" Tino took an envelope from Victor. It was sealed with golden wax, a sun pressed into it, "You know very well that this is going to be that kind of mission," he said quietly. "He shouldn't be involved."

"This is precisely why he should be involved. Orders from the King himself."

"I see."

Tino's eyes shot open, his hand instinctively dove under his pillow in fright, "What! What's going on?" He blinked rapidly, "Lukas? Emil? Mathias? What are ya doing jumping on my bed?! It's only," he looked at his clock, "nine." His three brothers exchanged amused smiles and counted silently until their brother realized it. One. Two… Tino gasped, "Holy Martin Luther, it's nine!"

"Did you seriously forget you were getting married, Tino," asked Emil as he settled down in his brother's spot. He was already dressed in his tux and had no reason to freak out. Dressing the groom was Lukas' and Mathias' job anyway. "Wake me up, when you're ready to go."

"Oh, no you don't," hissed Lukas, dragging their baby brother by his ear. "We still have a lot to do and you're going to help us do it."

Tino grinned broadly as Mathias pulled out his suit. "I'm getting married!"

"I'm getting marr'ed," sighed Berwald happily. Around him in his room, Ludwig was zipping about like a bee. He was barking orders into his walkie-talkie while Roderich made a last minute alteration to Vash's pants. Gilbert was curling Lilly's hair while she texted her sister-in-law who was on her way with Matthew to pick up Tino's bouquet.

Wolfgang knocked once before entering, "How's it going, kinder?"

"Fine," they all said in unison.

"That's good. And how are you, Berwald?" The Beilschmidt patriarch placed both hands on his son's shoulders and squeezed gently, "Are you excited?"

Berwald smiled again, "Ja, Vati. Very."
"I'm glad." Wolfgang pulled out a box and handed it over, "Your mother wanted me to give you this today."

"T'day?"

"Well, on your wedding day." The other Beilschmidts paused what they were doing to crowd around him in curiosity as their brother carefully opened it. Inside was a small glass cross with thin blue and golden threads blown inside. "She made it for you and hoped you would wear it when you took your vows," he explained softly.

"...’s beautiful." Berwald gave it to his dad and let him tie it around his neck, the black looking beautiful against his cream colored suit, 'Danke, mutti. I wish ya could be here with me.' Berwald removed his glasses to rub his eyes in an effort to wipe away his tears before his family could see. He wasn't fast enough for his father.

Wolfgang knelt before him and gently took his son's hands away from his face, "Son, today is going to be the happiest day of your life. Your mutti wouldn't want you to cry. I don't want you to cry." As an afterthought, he added, "Unless they're happy tears. In which case, Luddy, you’d best carry extra tissues for your brother."

"Yes, sir," said Ludwig as he dug around his travel bag for a packet of tissues.

The patriarch shook his head fondly and turned back to Berwald. "You have no idea how proud I am, son. You have found in Tino what Gilbert has found with Matthew and what Roderich has found with Elizabeta. What I hope your brother and sister will find in their future spouse." Vash grumbled something about him not getting married and went back to put on some pants. Wolfgang ignored him and continued, "I know that there are still some that will look down on you for your choice in partner, but I want you to keep your head held high. They can only wish to find love as you all have, for nothing validates a person more than earning the love of someone else. To be depended on, to do your share to kindle that love, and make sure that the flame burns strong well into your next life."

Wolfgang's eyes cleared from its love induced haze as he pulled away memories that felt like they had taken place a lifetime ago. He was well aware that his children were staring at him in awe. Clearing his throat, he patted Berwald's knee, "Let's get going, ja?"

They all climbed into their respective cars, in Berwald's case, Ludwig's second car that was only to be used on special occasions such as today. The two brothers drove in silence, well, Berwald was silent. Ludwig was still making last minute commands via his Bluetooth to his poor subordinates. The groom stared out of the window, hand absentmindedly playing with his pendant.

Soldiers were coming into the tent at a steady pace. This could either mean that they were good and were winning the battle or…Berwald shook his head. He shouldn't think the worst. A tap on his shoulder got his attention and he was met face to face with his scowling boyfriend. He grinned, "What's up?"

Tino's glare didn't waver, "Why did you request to come with me? It's bad enough your dad didn't—" He was silenced by a pair of lips and it only took him a moment to realize that Berwald was shutting him up. He pressed back hungrily before remembering himself. "Nh, wait, Bear. We can't. I'm still pissed at you."

Berwald sighed, "Why?"

"You know why! You can't come with me."
"Ya don't have rank to tell me what I can and can't do."

Tino's eyebrows rose to hide behind his fringe, mouth parting. Crossing his arms, he flexed knowing that the perks of his sleeveless uniform would show off his muscles in a matter he hoped was intimidation. He wasn't as tall or as muscular his boyfriend, but he had a hidden strength that even Berwald found intimidating. Tino pulled out his pistol and aimed it at Berwald. He said, "No, I can't pull rank over you, but I can shoot you."

It was Berwald's turn to raise his eyebrows, only he did it in amusement, "Are ya gonna shoot me, Tino?"

"If it means you'll be away from my mission, yes."

"Why?"

"My team may have been dismantled but I can control myself. I-I don't need them!...I won't-I won't mess up," offered Tino weakly, his brown eyes not meeting Berwald's blue.

Noticing this, Berwald gently put a hand on Tino's and made him lower the gun before taking him into his makeshift office. He removed Tino's white hat as he pulled his boyfriend into his lap, "I know ya won't. I don't care what Va—"

"You should care," snapped Tino with a deadly gleam in his eye, "He's my boss, remember? He's the reason why I'm even a doctor. Without him I wouldn't have..."

"I know."

Tino sighed and snuggled into Berwald's chest, "Do you even know why you're here? How you're here, even though I begged you to stay at base camp with your brothers?"

"Cause I asked nicely?"

"No. It's 'cause my boss out-ranks everyone here and he wanted you to keep an eye on me."

Berwald frowned, "I don't understand. Are you happy I'm here or not?"

"I'm not. This is too dangerous for a civilian."

The frown intensified, "Are ya saying that 'cause of my blue blood? Tino, I am a soldier and a doctor before I'm some prissy—"

Tino silenced him with a kiss, hoping to soothe his ruffled feathers. "That's not what I meant," he whispered as he pulled back. He kept their foreheads pressed together before moving to take out his contact lenses. Violet eyes looked into blue, "Ya know what I mean. What I am and my mission? If anyone in my group dies...it never happened. Do you understand?"

Berwald ran a hand through Tino's hair, lowering it until he could cup his round cheek, "I don't care. I'd rather die by your side than cower here. We're going to marry each other someday, and I want to make sure my wife stays safe." He grinned as the man in his lap slapped his chest.

"We're here, Teddy," said Ludwig, interrupting his brother's musing. Berwald took a deep breath and opened the door to go inside the church.
Tino arrived shortly afterward with his brothers, Elizabeta, and Matthew in tow. He fiddled with his own suit before the Hungarian gently took his hands in hers, "You're going to be fine, sweetie. Just keep your eyes on your man and everything will go by quickly."

Tino smiled nervously, "I know, I'm just being silly."

Elizabeta kissed his cheeks and took Matthew's arm so that they could enter the church. Emil followed with Mathias. Lukas gave his brother one last glance for any imperfections. He only found one, "I think you should take off your contacts."

"Y-ya think so?" Tino brought a self-conscious hand to his cheek bone, "But…they're …I wear contacts for a reason."

"Not for a medical reason."

"I don't do that anymore. My eyes…they represent a part of me that shouldn't be at my wedding."

Lukas shrugged, "It's your choice, but Berwald's opinion won't change. He fell in love with you. Accepts you. All of you. Even that part. I think he'll like knowing that he's marrying the real you."

"This is the real me, Lu." Tino looked at the mirror in the hallway. "I know. I'll take them off for the ceremony and wear them at the reception."

"That'll work. And I think it'll be symbolic too. All unions between the two families occur like this after all." Lukas took out a contact case and let his brother put in the brown contacts inside before tucking it into his pocket. "Father would've wanted it like this."

"I know. No shame in who I am, right?"

"Right."

The two were last to walk the aisle and Tino tried his best not to pay attention to anyone aside from his husband to be. He felt Lukas give his arm a squeeze of encouragement. The whispers from ignorant socialites weren't helping his nerves, but by the time his brother handed him over to Berwald, he could care less. Let them think he was wearing contacts. The love of his life knew better and that was just fine with him.

Together they waited patiently for the ceremony to get to the part where they got to say their ‘I do’s.’ Berwald looked into Tino's violet eyes, secretly delighted that his groom had decided to take off his contacts. He squeezed his hand gently before letting his mind wander.

_There was absolutely no contact allowed with any of the other bases. That had been the rule that had been emphasized the most when Berwald was allowed to follow Tino. But if that were true, then who the hell was important enough to bypass that rule and have correspondence delivered to him? Berwald stared at the sealed envelope in confusion. He opened it._

_Ah, he was._

_Rolling his eyes, Berwald read what was inside. It wasn't a terribly long letter. As a matter of a fact, all it said was :The moon provides light to those lost in the dark even when the sun is nowhere to be seen._

_He knew what that meant and he felt honored. Honored knowing that he was the moon that was meant to keep Tino from straying off his path. Though, he also knew that Tino wouldn't succumb to the bloodlust that sometimes happened to soldiers, especially ones of Tino's breed._
Still, as he rode next to his silent boyfriend, he couldn't help but feel that it was his duty to always stay by his side even if it meant that he had to die trying. Tino ran a finger over his sniper rifle, "I want ya to stay behind me, ok?"

Berwald rolled his eyes, "Fine. But if they start shooting at me, I'll shoot back."

Tino's eyes narrowed, "If they start shooting at ya, they're going to wish they turned their guns on themselves by the time I'm through with them."

"Do you, Berwald Beilschmidt," said the priest, drawing Berwald's attention back to the present, "accept Tino Väinämöinen as your lawfully wedded husband? To love and honor him. To protect and cherish, for richer or poorer, till death do you part?"

Berwald's face didn't change but his eyes shined brightly with adoration for the amazing man before him, "I do."

"And do you, Tino Väinämöinen, accept Berwald Beilschmidt as your lawfully wedded husband? To love and honor him. To protect and cherish, for richer or poorer, till death do you part?"

Tears prickled at Tino's eyes but he didn't pull his hands away to wipe them. Instead, he grinned and nodded, "I do!"

The priest smiled at the young couple, "Well then, by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you two husband and —" Tino didn't wait to hear him finish. He jumped into Berwald's arms and kissed himeagerly, all the while whispering sweet nothings in between kisses. Everyone clapped for them as the pair made their way out.

They watched them get into Ludwig's Porche and promised to see them at the reception later. Elizabeta rubbed circles into Ludwig's back, "Don't worry, honey. One day you're going to be that lucky."

Ludwig smiled as he thought to his partner, "I think I may already be."

~.~

At the reception, Tino and Berwald were all but attached at the hip as they greeted their guests. Berwald seemed at ease but his husband could tell that he was still a little self-conscious of his speech. Tino ran his hands up and down the German's arm to soothe him. Together they made their way back to their table to hear Ludwig give his speech. In the ballroom's lighting, Tino could see the tip of Berwald's scar and his grip on his hand tightened a fraction.

There he was. The last of the fucking Versocci and he was his for the killing. A smirk made its way onto Tino's face as he focused in on his target. He followed the man's every movement until he finally stood near the window, peering out with impatience for his client.

"Poor bastard," murmured Tino, "don't cha know that they're probably dead too?" At least he hoped so. He didn't want to have to deal with the paperwork for that failing. Not to mention, they already had someone to pin all —...the fuck?! Tino's heart stopped when he saw another man held at gun point, his face bloody and upper armor ripped from his body, "Teddy Bear!"

Versocci looked startled at the intrusion but after reading the sign they were now pressing against the window for Tino, he looked as smug as ever. Fuck, fuck, fuck! This was precisely why he didn't want Berwald here. Now, he had two choices. Either take out the target as ordered and there would be one less bastard in the world of crime, or surrender and save the only man able to calm his demons and make him feel like he was more than... Tino sighed and got up from his position.
with arms raised in surrender. Despite the lack of his scope, his near hawk like vision allowed him to see Versocci send him a wink.

With weapons confiscated, Tino was thrown unceremoniously into the elegant room, "Berwald! Are ya...what have you done to him!" His eyes narrowed, angry tears threatening to spill as he took in the broken sight of his lover. Berwald's chest was covered with lashes, his face looked even more swollen and bloody than it had a few minutes earlier. The moon that had been tattooed onto his hip looked raw as if they had tried to dig it out while the tribal-like Eagle on his ribs remained untouched.

"Ciao, Signore Tino," greeted Romero Versocci calmly. "Come stai ?"

Berwald squeezed back before releasing Tino's hand to clap for his brother's speech. It had actually been rather nice, a bit lengthy and awkward, but nice nevertheless. Certainly showed that Ludwig held him in high esteem and would always be there for him, just like his husband would be. He played with his wedding band before standing up to follow after Tino to the dance floor for their first dance as a wedded couple. The beginning notes of Beauty and The Beast played as they glided across the dance floor while Felicia's feminine gruff sang the verses of their song.

To many, the song was a bit juvenile, but the story had always been a personal favorite of Tino's, and after listening to all the potential songs for their first dance, the couple decided on this one. The lyrics described their relationship a lot better than anyone could ever imagine.

They had met in high school and Tino could barely stand him, thinking that he was just as stuck up as Roderich and as obnoxious as Gilbert. But as he got to know him in college, he realized that he had it all wrong. They dated briefly until they were drafted into the military and sent to opposite bases. However, they kept in contact and managed to stay friends until they met again in med school. There, they immediately picked up where they left off. That is, until Tino was drafted again. Only this time, he had to go for other reasons aside from his civic duty. Imagine his surprise when he found out that Berwald and his brothers had volunteered their medical services at his station. Imagine his annoyance when Berwald followed him to his secret mission. Imagine his fear when they were caught by the enemy and he nearly lost the love of his life.

The sound of a warning siren and helicopters could be heard from deep within the room Tino and Berwald had been tossed into. He held his dying lover protectively as heavy gun fire and screams echoed through the halls. Who was that? As far as Tino knew, his men were dead and no one was coming for them.

"Where are they," growled someone in Italian, the voice very familiar to Tino, "Take me to them! And I swear to god, if anything is damaged, I will do to you what you've done to them tenfold."

"Fratello, let him lead us," said another. "We need to get them out before this place blows."

"You heard him, swine, take us to them."

Tino's grip on Berwald tightened as the door blew open and three men barged in, one of them dragging Versocci. Gold eyes widened behind their masks at the state of Berwald. The middle man in black motioned for his comrades to get them out as he shoved the Italian against the wall, "Looks like you're shit out of luck, bastardo. I have three minutes before I have to get going and well," his eyes darkened with merciless joy, "I can do a lot of damage in three minutes. Don't worry, you'll be dead soon, so you won't have to worry about scaring people with your deformities."

Tino allowed one of the men to carry Berwald as the other carried him, his legs too weak to be
able to walk. As they made their way outside, he heard, with his own sadistic pleasure, Versocci scream in agony. Their saviors carefully slid them into their seat on a black Airhawk, though from his seat, he could clearly see the Sun stamped onto its ceiling. He turned to one of the men with wide eyes, "You?"

One of them paused in his effort to assess Berwald's injuries. Though he hadn't removed his mask, he could clearly recognize the eyes and to what family they belonged to. "You are part of our family, and despite what anyone says, we never leave one of ours behind. Especially not at the hands of that fucking bastardo."

Berwald's eyes shot open in panic, "Nh, T-t-t-t, Nh!"

Tino was at his side instantly, "Shh, Teddy, don't strain yourself. We're safe now. Everything will be fine. He looked to the men cleaning what they could, "Right?"

The Italian sighed and removed his mask, running a gloved hand through his black hair, "What the hell did they do to his larynx?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what the hell did they do to his vocal folds? They've been damaged."

"What?! No, th-they…how did they do that? He has no neck injury! And I know they didn't hit his head. I checked him."

"You must've missed something."

"I didn't! Why? What's wrong?"

Cerberus shook his head, "We're going to have to wait till we get to our base. My uncle is there, and if there's anyone who'll be able to save his voice, it'll be him." He glanced over his shoulder and saw his brother running towards the helicopter.

"Get us in the air," he shouted to their pilot as he positioned himself to shoot out the door at the bomb he dropped to set off the chain.

Tino waited outside the operating room. They've been in there for ten hours now almost going on eleven, and no one had come out to tell him how it was going. He lifted his face from where he had buried it in his arms to see a pair of dark blue eyes stare down at him stoically, "D-Dr. Beilschmidt, sir!" He scrambled to stand up but the older man placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and took a seat on the floor next to him.

"I want you to know that I am not upset with you, son," he said gravely.

"But you should be, sir. It was my fault. I should've forced him to stay behind or –"

Wolfgang snorted, "Do you honestly think that you could keep a man who insists that he has Viking blood running through his veins from doing what he wants? I have another son who was trying to come along but thank god his leg was broken. I don't know what I was thinking allowing them into the military to begin with."

Tino watched Wolfgang rub his face in exhaustion before pulling out two envelopes from his pocket. "I have these for you. One is your honorable discharge from the service. And the other is from Him." Tino took them and eyed the one with a sun questioningly. "Don't worry. He would've given it to you himself but he was needed elsewhere. He wants you to see him as soon as possible.
though. That’s a letter of recommendation to any hospital of your choice."

"No one is going to want me anymore. Not with all the blood on my hands," mumbled Tino miserably.

“What if I were to say that I wanted you?"

"Sir?"

"Asclepius would be a wonderful home for you. Not to mention, my son would be delighted to have you working by his side."

"But –"

Wolfgang stood up, "My son will need you now more than ever, Tino. He may be the moon to your night, but you are his sun. Don’t forget that." The German stood to walk away.

"Aren’t you going to wait for the surgeon?"

"Dr. Blaze is an old friend of Romulus's son. I trust he knows what he’s doing. I’ll see you both in Victrola."

Cerberus gave a nod to Wolfgang as they walked past each other before he stopped in front of Tino, "Hey."

"Hi," mumbled Tino as he read through the documents he was given.

"Aren’t you curious as to which head I am?"

Tino shrugged, "Not really. Cerberus is still Cerberus no matter which head you’re talking to."

The Italian smiled, "Yeah, I guess that's one way of looking at it." He sighed when Tino didn’t respond, "Listen...I'm sorry for what we asked you to do."

"It's fine. These things happen." Violet eyes looked up to caramel, "I'm just happy you guys came for us."

"Like my brother said, man, we’re family even if we’re not blood. What you guys did for us all those years ago...what you guys do for us now, we never forget. I was told to tell you that if you want to leave this life behind, it's more than ok. We will always be there to support you no matter what, ok?"

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

"Be happy, Tino. That's all we want from you now."

The light over the operating room dinged as it turned green, signifying that surgery was over. Tino accepted Cerberus' help as he limped over to where Dr. Blaze walked out. He blinked his violet eyes a few times before settling on his nephew and the blond, "I trust you're Tino?"

"Yeah. How is he?"

Drew removed his surgical cap and smiled, "He'll live. His vocals were scratched by something he drank. I think whoever did this made him drink something that had glass and they went through the epiglottis and part of the esophagus. He was lucky none of it made it to his trachea. Anyway, we got everything out and I managed to fix the larynx. With proper recovery and a good speech
"therapist, he'll be fine. Only…"

"Only what?"

"Well, I was looking at the x-rays and he did have some head trauma. Nothing that required surgery, but I think that it might impact his speech and hearing. We won't know the extent of the damage until both he and his voice are recovered."

Tino gripped his papers tightly, "But other than that he'll live right?"

Drew nodded, "He'll live."

In the high of his joy, Berwald could only see Tino and vice versa. Their song had ended long ago but now they kept dancing as other couples danced around them. From the look on Tino's face, Berwald knew he was reliving past memories. He gently cupped his face and pressed a kiss to his forehead, "I love ya."

"I love you too, Bear."

"Stop thinkin' too much." He extended his neck and the scar from one of the lashings he got stood out against his pale skin, "'sides, ya were th' one who said my scars are sexy."

Tino giggled and pressed his face into Berwald's chest, "You are always sexy." He sent a glare to one of the socialites who had tried to steal Berwald from him during their college years before smirking smugly, "And you're all mine."

"Only yers," agreed Berwald, holding him tightly.

Feliciano bounced in his seat next to Ludwig, "They're so cute together." He'd been watching the couple dance for a while as he waited for his date to finish his meal. Around him, he could hear whispers of the same thing and people longing to have something close to what the two men had. A girl came up to him shyly, and already, he figured what she wanted. Smiling apologetically he shook his head, "Mi dispiace, but I'm here with someone." He watched her eyebrows furrow with disappointment before Lars came by to sweep her off her feet. He sent him a wink and Feli grinned. Somehow, they had managed to work out a system; he shot them down and Lars or one of their friends came by and picked up the pieces.

Ludwig rolled his eyes at his cousin's antics, "You really shouldn't be helping him."

"Ve, why not?"

"He's going to get used to it and then he'll want to take you out every Friday night so you can be his wingman."

"How about you and me dance? That way the girls will see that I'm taken and will leave me alone."

Ludwig thought about it for a second. More than half of the people here knew he was engaged to Natalya and would likely talk. But then again—He looked at Feli's pleading eyes.

Oh, what the hell. It's not like Natalya would give two shits about him dating someone else. After all, she was the one to take advantage of their agreement first. Sighing, Ludwig stood up and offered his hand to the eager Italian.

The song changed to something akin to a sensual slow dance and Ludwig ignored the way Elizabeta muffled her excited squeal and tried to focus on not stepping on Feliciano's feet.
Over and over I look in your eyes. You were all I desired, you have captured me…

Adoring golden eyes came into his field of vision and carried his own eyes back with them so that they wouldn't stare at the floor, "Sorry, I just didn't want to step on you."

"You’re doing great!"

…I want to hold you, I want to be close to you. I never want to let go…

Ludwig had accepted that he was never good with words, it was a curse really, but as he listened to the lyrics of the song, he wished he could claim them as his own to portray his feelings to the Italian in his arms. How could someone just burrow his way into his life like this and not realize what he's done? And he let him! Why did he let him? Now, he was stuck with all these feelings of warmth and dare he say it, joy. He didn't want to let go of any of it, and that posed a problem.

Glancing over Feli's head, he saw his dad laughing at something Romulus said. Or maybe not; his dad and Feli's grandpa seemed to get along great. And he certainly liked Feli enough if dinners with the family were anything to go by. Always asking questions about the Italian and making comments about how he found him interesting, though that was to be expected from a descendant of Romulus. The latter also being the center of some of his father's praises much to Elizabeth's glee. If they didn't know better, they'd say he had a crush on the Vargas patriarch. Ludwig shook his head. Bah! What nonsense. Still…

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if he accepted to be Feli's boyfriend.

…I've dreamed of this night. Now you're here by my side, you are next to me…

Feli sighed contentedly. This was it. This was what he wanted, to be this close to Ludwig and not be pushed away. The dark clouds that had been hanging over his head had been cast far from his being, and he had this feeling to thank for that. After all, how could he be gloomy when he had Ludwig in his arms, or rather he was in Ludwig's arms. Either way, he was happy. But how long would it last this time? Would he allow him to love him the way he'd been dying to do since he first laid eyes on him? God, he hoped so.

Thoughts to his brother's message returned and he briefly wondered if there were any enemies amongst the guests. There definitely had been at the club, or at least children of the enemy, else his cousins wouldn't have sung that song in warning. And if that were the case, was it really wise to pursue a romantic relationship with Ludwig? Was it worth putting him in danger? What would he say if he found out what his family did for a living? He let out a quiet 've' as Ludwig twirled him before pulling him back into his chest, he could feel his heart beat against his chest and he smiled. One shouldn't shy away from what they want out of fear.

If it meant being happy and making Ludwig happy, he would man up and keep them both safe.

…I want to hold you, to touch you and taste you and make you want no one but me. I wish that this kiss could never end…

"I really like you."

Ludwig chuckled, "You don't say."

"No, seriously. I like you. I like you to the point where playing this game is going to end up making me crazy."
"Game?"

"Si!" Feli pressed himself against Ludwig, "I can’t stop thinking about you. You're constantly in my dreams and fantasies, and I can't take it anymore. I don't like being teased with something I desperately want, only to awaken and not have it. Please, Ludwig."

"Please what?"

…could I hold you close beside me? Could I hold you for all time? Could I-Could I have this kiss forever?...

"Please let me show you that I could do so much good by you. I know I can. I know I can be silly sometimes and that I'm far from perfect, but if you give me a chance, I promise to always do my best to make you smile and laugh, like I did yesterday." Feli looked at him pleadingly, knowing that he was making himself look complete fool for begging. But at this point, if he didn't do anything to make the embers burst into a flame, it would probably die before it got a chance to live.

Ludwig knew he could get out of his partner's grip if he really wanted to. But there was something in his voice, his gaze, hell his soul that was pinning him down. Was this…was this how it felt like to be wanted by someone? If it did, then damn did he want to say yes! Pull Feliciano close to him and tell him that he wanted that too. That he wanted for him to show him what happiness could be like.

'But what about Natalya,' his brain asked him.

'To hell with her and her business,' said his heart. 'Business deals are cold and unfeeling and dime a dozen. But this…this right here is raw and very much real. This won't happen again. Do it!

'But-

'No buts!'

'But you're not good enough,' muttered the dark part of his heart. 'You're not good enough for this honest soul. Look at him. Look at how he's baring his entire being for you, and you're in here talking to yourself. He's innocent and smart and kind. You're just a robot who does whatever you're told. You're not brave enough to be who you want. Why should you get a chance with him?'

"Why are you crying?!"

Was he crying? He hadn't realized. Ludwig brought a hand to see for himself, but Feli beat him to it, quickly wiping away at the German's tears, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean –I'm sorry!"

Ludwig's inner demons were chased away with every gentle touch Feli placed on his cheek. He put a hand over the Italian’s and pressed his cheek against it, "I don't deserve you. I'm sorry…I can't."

He gently pushed himself away from his dance partner and quickly walked to the bathroom, Feli hot on his heels. Grateful that no one else was inside with them, Ludwig turned on one of the sinks and splashed some water on his face in hopes to cool his head.

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why do you say you don't deserve me," demanded the Italian as he sat on the marble counter, ignoring the puddle his black slacks were soaking up. The song was still playing through the speakers in the bathroom.
Ludwig wiped his hands on a towel and sat it aside with a sigh. He collected his thoughts before saying, "So far, you like what you see, but you haven't seen me at my worse. As a matter of a fact, I'm pretty sure that you'll hate me when –"

"Never," cried Feli as he scooted closer to him, "I could never hate you."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do." Feli took Ludwig's large hands in his smaller ones and looked at him determinedly, "I could never hate you. No matter what you did or what you do, I will never hate you. You can't love someone if you are only willing to see their good qualities and be there for them when they are on top of the world. It's when you accept them after seeing them at their worst and still be willing to help them after they've crashed and burned that you can truly love another."

Hope started to rise within his chest, pushing its way past the demons, "Do you truly mean that?"

"I do."

"... I've never been in a real relationship and I'll probably treat you badly."

Feli kissed his knuckles and shook his head, "I don't care. There will be plenty of time for you to learn, so I'll forgive anything silly you do."

"And you know that I don't know how to express myself very well…"

"We'll figure something out," said Feli with a grin, knowing where Ludwig was going with all of this.

I don't want any night to go by, without you by my side. I just want all my days spent being next to you lived for just loving you…

'Mein Gott,' thought Ludwig as he cupped Feli's cheek to make him look at him, desperately trying to make him understand that he felt exactly what the song was saying. No more. He wasn't going to deny himself anything anymore. Ludwig closed his eyes and licked his lips, "Ok."

"Ve?"

"Ok," he repeated, though this time more to himself. Inside, his heart was leaping for joy and his brain, who was slowly beginning to get with the program, offered its own smile. "Ok, let's try it."

"So you'll be my boyfriend?"

Ludwig nodded with a grin, "Ja. I'll be yours and you'll be mine." He stepped in between Feli's legs, letting them wrap themselves around his thighs as he rubbed his nose along the Italian's before pressing a kiss onto it. Enjoying how that felt, he kissed his forehead before moving to his cheeks.

"Ve~" Feli leaned his head back to look up at Ludwig and already the German knew what he wanted. Smiling, he continued to place butterfly kisses on his face until he finally stopped at his mouth. Loving honeyed eyes met hooded cerulean as Feli wrapped his arms around Ludwig's shoulders. "Kiss me," he whispered.

He didn't need to be told twice, and ever so slowly, they began to move against each other's lips, taking all their time to fully enjoy their first real kiss. At that moment, something in Ludwig clicked. Feli's lips were warm, soft, and pliable, and everything he imagined them to be. And
somehow, they were magic too because everything bad in his life seemed to melt from existence. He moaned softly against Feli's mouth when the Italian reached around and weaved his fingers into his hair to pull him closer.

Parting his lips, Feli slid his tongue out to gently coax Ludwig's mouth open. He'd been craving Ludwig's taste ever since he kissed him that night. From underneath his fingertips, Feli could feel Ludwig's pulse quicken with excitement.

Ludwig inhaled sharply through his nose and brought his hands to Feli's hips. He needed this. He wanted this. And now that he had accepted that fact, Ludwig wasn't going to let go.

...Could I-could I have this kiss forever?

But all good things had to come to an end. They were still at a wedding and Ludwig was still his brother's best man. Reluctantly, he pulled away but not before placing one last peck on his lover's lips. "Come on, liebling. We need to go make sure they cut the cake evenly."

Feli grinned happily and hopped off the counter, "Ve~ for someone who says that he isn't good at romance, you sure know how to give one hell of a kiss." He giggled at Ludwig's blush and eagerly took the German's hand as they made their way back to the reception, both blind to everything but the warm feeling they had ignited.

They didn't see the tiny head of a wooden Pinocchio doll roll out from under one of the stalls.

Chapter End Notes

Woah, Ludwig! Already busting out the pet names and everything ;D
Chapter Summary

Ludwig and Feliciano are enjoying their time together in their freshly minted relationship while the rest of the world appears to be plotting to tear them apart. Feli is also falling in love with Alexander and worries what will happen when someone adopts the sweet boy. He also get's a taste of acting as a proxy to his grandfather. And of Ludwig after such a boring meeting ;)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~Mid-November~

Meadow green eyes stared out the window impatiently for their guests to arrive. Daniel had been waiting since three in the afternoon for Feliciano to arrive and hopefully coax Alex out from under the bed. His friend had sought seclusion there after some of the other orphans teased him about his arm. Alex had only been there a week after his two week stay at the hospital, and even though he had one of the nicest rooms there, nothing seemed to perk him up as much as Feli's daily visits.

Daniel huffed a bit at that. He was Alex's best friend; he was the one who should be making him happy. Then again, he shouldn't be complaining. It didn't matter who made the boy smile as long as he did. A familiar black car pulled into the driveway of the old Victorian house that the Vargas had so generously converted into a temporary location for Sacred Heart Orphanage, and Daniel jumped from his spot on the couch.

He startled his little brother as he ran to go open the door for Feliciano, "Sorry, Sammy," he called over his shoulder before greeting, "Hi, Feli. Hi, Ludwig."

"Ciao, bambino," chirped Feliciano, letting go of Ludwig's hand to ruffle Daniel's short light brown hair, "How are you doing today?"

"I'm ok. It's Alex that I'm worried about." He closed the door and tugged on Feli's hand to lead him upstairs.

Concern instantly replaced the cheer in Feli's eyes, "Why? What's wrong with him? Hold on, Danny, let me go sign in first." He went to the first floor library that was being currently used as an office.

Ludwig crouched down to greet Sam, "Hallo."

Sammy stopped drawing and looked up, a grin stretching on his small face, "Luddy!" He jumped up and wrapped his stubby arms around the German's neck, "Whatcha doin' here?"

Embarrassed, though really he shouldn't be seeing as though Sam greeted him in this matter every time he visited them with Feli, Ludwig gently tugged at Sam's arms in an effort to make him release. When he couldn't, Ludwig simply stood up with him, "I'm here with Dr. Fe –"

"Your boyfriend," interrupted Sam with a knowing smirk.
"I-uh…er, yes, Feli."

The toddler nodded and pointed down to his drawing, "I made a ladybug."

"It's very nice." Ludwig bent down and picked up the picture to get a better look, "What's her name?"

"Moose!"

Ludwig chuckled, "That sounds like a good name."

Feli watched the interaction between Ludwig and Sam as he walked back out with a name tag for both of them and felt his heart swoon. Contrary to everyone's belief, Ludwig positively adored children and always acted completely different with them than he did with teenagers and adults. He tore his eyes away when he felt a tug on his sweater.

"Come on," droned Daniel. He grabbed the Feli's hand again and pulled him upstairs to where he, Alex, and his brother were sharing a room. Ludwig followed, curious to see why Daniel was being more insistent than usual.

Feli walked to what had once had been his room and gently knocked before opening the door. He'd managed to convince his mother to change the interior entirely to fit Alex's taste. The walls were now painted various hues of blue to mimic water and had various sea creatures scattered around all four walls. The full sized bed was shaped like a rowboat and was even attached to a harbor-like deck that had a little staircase so that he could climb on easily. Across the bed was a small desk neatly organized with various school supplies. A treasure chest was nestled next to a clam chair and it was filled with the toys that Feliciano himself had purchased so that Alex could play with his friends. And last but not least was the ceiling. His mother had been very adamant about keeping the ceiling as it was and Feli agreed with her wholeheartedly. It was very much like the ceiling at the hospital but prettier. There were actual constellations and every now and again the lights would flicker as if a shooting star were passing by.

He spotted two legs from under the boat-like bed and motioned for Ludwig to entertain Daniel and Sam on the other end of the room. Setting his box aside, Feli crawled under the bed as well, "Bambino?"

Alex held his plastic prosthetic over his chest while his good arm was draped over his eyes. His little body trembled with sadness but he whispered his greeting anyway.

"What's wrong, little one?"

"Th-they told me no one would adopt me because I'm broken," mumbled Alex without removing his arm. His lips drooped downward in a sad pout but he continued, "They said that no one would love me because of my arm and that nobody likes damaged kids. Then when we were playing, they said I should be the bad guy because I looked like a pirate."

Feli swallowed a lump of anger, "Who did?"

"The other kids."

Pity, Feli couldn't do much about that. Had it been some adult then he definitely would've given him a piece of his mind. Shaking his head, he rolled onto his back and stared at the belly of the boat, "Did you know that in the original story, Peter Pan actually hurt the lost boys when they grew up?"
"Huh?"

"Mhm. He would hurt them because they weren't kids anymore. Some people believe that Captain Hook was a lost boy once and that he was the one that got away."

Alex pulled away his arm to look at his doctor, "But his hand…"

"Was the price he paid for besting Peter Pan."

"Isn't he a bad guy though?"

"Because he's a pirate? I don't think so. Not all pirates are bad; sometimes they pretend to be."

"Like Captain Jack Sparrow?"

Feli chuckled, "Yes, just like Sparrow. Maybe it's good for the other pirates to think that he was bad. That way he could walk amongst them without making them suspicious."

"So, it's ok to be a pirate?"

"As long as you're good person at heart, it's ok to be whatever you want to be," Feli reached out and gently squeezed the boy's hand, "so long as that person is someone you decided. No else can tell you who or what you are, Alex. No one has that right."

Alex sniffed and fiddled with his plastic hand, "D-do you think that someone will want to adopt me one day?"

Feli nodded though something made his heart clench painfully at the thought of someone taking the little one next to him away from him, "I think that whoever adopts you will be the luckiest person in the world. You're very special, Alex. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. And if you ever feel sad again, don't hesitate in calling me. Day or night, I'll answer, va bene?"

Wiggling his way out from under his bed, Alex tilted his head in confusion and stared at Feli before remembering what 'Va bene meant'. He nodded eagerly and responded back, "Ba bene!"

The act, so simple and innocent, shot an arrow through the Italian's heart. He quickly brushed it away; there was no way he could even think about entertaining the notion of fatherhood at this point in life. He was only twenty-six and barely three weeks into his relationship with Ludwig. Not to mention, there might be a plot transpiring against his family. Mentally shaking his head, no there was absolutely no way he'd even—Alex smiled and hugged Kitty, who had turned out to be a bumble bee plushie, to his chest with his good arm.

Unable to help himself, Feliciano plucked Alexander from the ground as he shot up and spun him around, gaining a fit of giggles from the boy. Ludwig turned around from where he was helping Sam and Daniel build a block tower and watched the two giggle amongst themselves, a smile playing at his own lips. 'Feli would make a good father someday,' he thought to himself. Sure, he'd been told this several times already by their colleagues but to actually witness the proof before his eyes made him feel content. Perhaps one day, he and Feli—Ludwig stopped himself before he could complete the thought. 'Nein, I shouldn't allow myself to entertain fantasies about a family with Feliciano. Who knows how long we're even going to…'

Ludwig murdered that thought without hesitation as well. He wasn't going to let his brain dictate what he could and couldn't do. Even if it meant having to break up with the angel of a man he was dating in the future, he was going to be happy for the short while he did have with him. And who knows; maybe his brothers were right and his father would let him break the engagement to
Natalya and let him be happy with Feli. He turned his attention back to the tower just as Daniel helped Sam place the last one on top, making it tumble onto the him, much to the children's delight.

Feliciano sat Alex on his bed and pulled out his box to show the boy his new prosthetic, "This one is going to be a bit more comfortable to wear."

Alex wrinkled his nose, "But it looks just like the one I have on now…"

"True, but this one is more flexible so you can use it when you're playing, and it won't hurt if you accidentally bump into someone. Here, let me show you how to put it on." Feli carefully removed the other and slipped his custom made one onto the boy's arm. "Ve, see? This one fits much better!"

"It does, Thank you!"

"My pleasure~ Now, how are you doing with the pain?"

"It hurts every now and again, but Megan gives me the stuff you prescribed. It helps me sleep."

Feli made note of it in a chart that he brought with him, "Good. And there's no phantom pain?"

"Sometimes, but Daniel helps with that. He made me a mirror box like how Dr. Elizabeta said and I stick my arm in the hole and it helps." Alex shifted in his bed and looked over Feli's shoulder at his friend who was now putting the blocks away while Sam was pulling on his outside shoes. "Can we go play outside?"

The Italian followed Alex's gaze and nodded when he saw that Ludwig was helping the toddler with his shoes, "Ok. I think Matron Megan won't mind."

The two doctors stayed outside to play with the trio for the rest of the afternoon. Playing tag and hide-and-seek and whatever else the boys wanted to play. Across the street, a limo was parked, the men inside watching Ludwig and Feliciano play with the children. The blond sitting across from Romulus huffed in annoyance, "Why is that every time you invite me out, we end up spying on our children."

When his friend didn't respond, Wolfgang huffed louder and crossed his arms over his chest, "I'm beginning to think that this isn't an attempt to…to make up for lost time."

Romulus tore his eyes from his grandson and looked at his friend in surprise. "You-Wolfie! Of course it is, amico. I was just curious to see how my grandson was doing."

"And a simple phone call couldn't suffice?"

"He's always busy. You keep him busy."

"Well, he is my employee and a doctor, Romu, and a very good one at that. I see a bright future for his career."

"You shouldn't encourage him, Wolfgang."

"Why not? I don't see why he can't do both."

"Because he'll only end up neglecting one or the other, and both are precious to him, so you can only imagine the turmoil Feliciano will go through. My grandson has already gone through enough heartache to last him more than one lifetime." Settling back down in his seat, Romulus hit a button to let the driver know to drive on. He took one last look out the window as the limo started to move and saw Feli pounce on Ludwig's back, the German grinning as Daniel and Sam grabbed his legs.
and Alex tickled his sides. "But I suppose with the right person by his side, he could be invincible."

Wolfgang reached over and placed a hand on Romulus' knee, "Just like his grandfather."

"Oh, you flirt," chirped Romulus, the corners of his eyes crinkling with mirth. "And what are you in the mood for today?"

"Italian."

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The day came to an end when it was time for the children to be put to bed. Feli waved Megan away and insisted on helping Alex learn how to bathe on his own while being mindful of his prosthesis. Alexander stared at Feli as his doctor lifted him from the tub to help dry him off, "Hey, Feli?"

"Yes, bambino?" Feliciano draped a towel over his small charge and carried him to his room where Ludwig was tucking Sam into his shared bed with a snoring Daniel.

"W-what if the other kids make fun of me again?"

"I don't think they will. I've spoken to Megan about addressing the issue with them, but if it does happen again, please don't be afraid to call me. I'll always be there to talk with you or just listen if you need me." The Italian pulled out a night shirt for the boy and helped him put it on. Feliciano smiled and pulled the covers over him, "Remember, Dr. Elizabeta will be by two times a week now for your physical therapy instead of the usual three."

"Does that mean I won't be seeing you again?" Alex hugged his bee close to him and averted his eyes so the doctor wouldn't see the disappointment in them.

"Would you like to?" A faint nod was all he was given. "Then, of course you'll see me again. I'll talk to Michelle and see what we can do. Now go to sleep, angelo. You have school tomorrow."

Ludwig rubbed Feli's back as the Italian stood up, "Gut nacht, Alex."

"Good night, Ludwig," murmured Alex drowsily.

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Light grey eyes watched as the two men left the house hand in hand, the shorter of the two reaching up to kiss the other's cheek. Dimitri Petrov played with his lighter, opening and closing the silver case calmly, "So, the rumors are true then. A Vargas has caught our mistress' fiancé's interest." He frowned and reached for his cell phone, "Boss? Da…I'm tailing them as we speak. It's a Vargas, sir…Um, sorry, I'm not very familiar with this one. I know of his brother and the infamous hell hound they own…yes it's known as Cerberus…no, I don't know why it's called that or if it really is a dog…only rumors, sir…Of, course, boss. I'll have information within twenty-four hours…Good bye, sir."

Dimitri switched off his phone and smirked, "Drive, Igor. We need to find us a mouse."

His driver raised an eyebrow and looked at the blond Russian via the rear view mirror, "Don't you mean a rat, sir?"

"No," murmured Dimitri as he looked through some pictures of a smiling brunette and a blond man engaged in what seemed a date, "I mean a mouse."
Ivan glared at his cell phone with disdain. He hated phone calls that ruined his mood, not that his mood had been very pleasant to begin with. His trip out of the country had proven disheartening, and worst of all, his figurine was broken. Not to mention, it was both snowing and raining, and the darken sky did very little to lighten his humor.

"Brother, are you ok," asked Natasha as she carefully glued Pinocchio's head back on. She glanced at him over her thin glasses, "You seem troubled."

Leaning forward, Ivan rested his chin on his fists, "Am I a bad man, big sister?"

"Of course not."

"Then why do people insist on making a fool out of me? What have I done to deserve such betrayal?" Natasha let the figurine rest on its stand and removed her glasses, "What are you talking about? What happened?"

"I found out how little people think of us and our company, Nat." Ivan motioned for his sister to come closer and pulled her in for a hug, "But I'm not going to let that get me down. You'll see; I'm going to lift our mother's company from the ground."

Running her fingers through her brother's soft hair, Natasha smiled, "And how are you going to do that, baby brother?"

He brushed his hand over his sister's and held it tight, "Whatever I have to."

"I know! I'll send over the C.C.P over to Wolfgang and see how he likes it."

"Ivan," said Natasha carefully, "Brother, have you considered taking us public? It would--"

"No."

"But--"

"I said no, Nat. If that was something mother wanted for this place, then she would've said so in her will. No, just trust me, ok? Mark my words, big sis, give me a month maybe two, but this company will rise to its former glory and all of our partners who left us will be begging for our forgiveness."

Somewhere in the streets of Victrola, a brunette with bright blue eyes gave a yelp as he was shoved mercilessly into a black car. He shivered with fear as he took in Dimitri's cold face, "W-what do you want with me?"
"I think you know, comrade," purred the Russian. He pulled out a few pictures and tossed them onto the man's lap. Heaving a sigh when the brunette didn't speak, he pulled out a knife, "The boss asked me not to ruin your face, given your relationship to his family. But he said I have free range with the rest of your body. Let's not give me a reason to add scars to your back. Speak."

"I-I don't know anything."

"Both you and I know that's not true, boy." Dimitri pulled the brunette closer to his face and hissed, "Now tell me," he pushed the pictures again forward, "what do you know about the Vargas?"

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Lovino was probably the busiest man in Victrola given the responsibilities he held, and that didn't give him much time for sleeping much less getting to do it in the comfort of his own home. So on the evenings when he did get a chance to get rest, he would drive straight home, toss his keys to the valet, and head straight for his condo. It was pretty great when Antonio was there to greet him with dinner and wine. Though he would never admit it, going home to the Spaniard was probably Lovino's favorite thing in the world. Especially when his boyfriend would prepare a bath for them and they'd make love in the hot water.

Such a night was tonight. Lovi had had a particularly trying day what with Cerberus not reporting back to him with answers on the fire and a few new gangs sprouting throughout the city like weeds. He'd paid them all visits with Marcello and a handful of men to instill Vargas authority, and a few hadn't taken well to his presence.

They did by the time he was through with them.

To top it all, there was the shroud of mystery the damn symbol Feliciano had sent him. The Acidanthera flower was beginning to irritate him. True, his sources had confirmed seeing the flower painted in shady places and sure they may have given him rumors, but it wasn't enough to make a move. The only thing he knew for certain was that it was a subgroup to something bigger, and that was the part that was really bothering him.

Antonio had led him to their bed after their bath, not bothering with dressing either of them, and continued to press kisses against his flesh. With every brush of lips, Lovi felt his worries melt away until he was once again reduced to a pleasured mess. How the Spaniard was capable of doing that to him never ceased to amaze him, though he supposed that it was part of why he loved him. That and the way Antonio would hold him after they've made love, despite his half-hearted protests, and not let go even after he fell asleep. But sometimes his boyfriend's love wasn't enough to keep the shadows from tainting his dreams.

Lovi groaned miserably in his sleep and rolled away from Antonio's arms, suddenly finding himself too hot. Cold sweat clung to his furrowed brow as he gritted his teeth anxiously.

"Lovi," cried Antonio, giving his lover one last hard shake, "Tomate, wake up!" With a gasp, the Italian shot up from his bed and accidentally head-butted Antonio on the nose. Sweat matted his hair down on his temple and made his skin shine under the pale moonlight. Lovino reached over to his nightstand to grab his glass of water but instead of drinking it, he let it fall onto his face. Antonio ignored the mess and pulled Lovi close, "What happened? What did you dream about?"

Lovi wiped his face with the back of his arm and focused on calming his heart, "My dad." He felt
his boyfriend's hold on him tighten. "No, it wasn't...it wasn't about that day. He was," Lovi stopped himself and pulled away enough to look at Antonio. His emerald eyes were shining with concern, his brow furrowed with worry. The lines that usually crinkled with laughter were smooth as if he were bracing himself for whatever horror he was about to hear. There was no way that Antonio was someone he should be wary about. He'd never betray him; the idiot loved him too much and he'd proven his undying loyalty time and time again.

Exhaling through his nose, Lovino twisted around so that he could wrap his legs around the Spaniard's hips while still being seated on his lap. "My dad warned me. He said not to trust anyone and that nothing was what it seemed."

Antonio straightened his spine and pulled Lovi even closer, "Who do you think he was talking about? A spy within the family?"

"No," said the Italian with a shake of his head, "But I do think it's someone close to the family. Maybe an ally."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Make a list of the families allied to the Vargas. Every single one, even the ones made in the olden days. We'll need to check their status and then figure out who would have reason to betray us."

"I think you're going to have to ask your uncle for the ones made in the olden days. I don't have access to that part of your history."

"No, let's wait on that part then. I don't want him to tell the old man yet; this could all just be bullshit. I mean it was just a dream."

"Or it could not. We still don't know which family that symbol belongs to. It wasn't in the file your grandpa gave regarding that Russian cocaine cartel."

"Yeah, and those bastards are taking their sweet ass time getting back to me..." Lovi made a move to untangle himself to get his phone but Antonio didn't let him. Instead, the Spaniard let himself fall back and brought Lovi with him and then reached for the cell himself. "Tch, I could've just gotten it myself, idiot."

"True, but that would've required that I let go and I don't want to let go of you, my love~"

Blushing in spite of himself, Lovino scrolled through his contacts until he found who he was looking for, "Whatever, just shut up while I'm on the phone, ok?"

"Who are you calling?"

"Cerberus."

"Do...do you think they're~"

"Nope. They may be little shits sometimes but they'll sooner peel off their tattoos with a fucking rusty potato peeler and throw themselves in acid before betraying the family."
Olympia Hotels. There were only ten in existence, and each was strategically placed throughout the world to provide refuge to any member of the Vargas family. It didn't matter if they were related through marriage or blood or simply by association; if they had the mark, they were granted sanctuary, free of charge, and all of the services were at their disposal. Not to mention, with their special soundproof room and easy to clean surfaces, it served as a perfect interrogation room for Romulus' personal hound.

Eric sat cross-legged in a plush white chair in the dining hall of the hotel, his foot gently tapping to a beat only he could hear. Pushing up his glasses, he put away his cell phone. Lovino had called asking to speak to one of his brothers, preferably Seraph, but he told him that they were busy at the moment. With the promise of having them call as soon as they were available, he hung up and was now waiting for his meal to arrive.

A boy walked up to him shyly with a notepad, "Um, sir?"

"Hm?" Eric turned around from his own journal and smiled, "Oh, hello there~"

"I-uh, I saw you at the theater tonight. You were great."

"Thank you. I'm glad you liked it; it's not every day I meet a fan so young!"

The boy blushed, "My parents like the Phantom of The Opera a lot so it grew on me too. I hope to be the Phantom one day, just like you."

"I'm sure you'll be a wonderful Phantom."

"M-may I have your autograph, please?"

"Oh, uh…sure." Eric took the pad and pulled out his own pen with special ink for such purposes. Scrawling out his alias, he added a few words of encouragement before handing over the notebook again.

"Thank you!" The young boy hugged his book to his chest and tilted his head to the side, "Where are your brothers?"

"Brothers?"

"Yeah, the ones that look like each other?"

Defensive walls sprouted around him as he regarded the child suspiciously. Only Bernardo had gone with him to the opera, Oswaldo and Seraph had business to take care of. And the only thing he had allowed to be published about this tour was about him, not his brothers. He saw how the boy's eyes darted to the waiter who had his bowl of pasta ready and was now stirring something in his wine glass. Tearing his gaze away, Eric licked his lips nervously and regarded the boy again, "Only one came with me and he's out shopping."

"Shopping?"

"Si~ He loves to buy clothes for himself. Oh, look, my dinner has arrived."

The boy nodded, "I understand. Well, have a great evening and thanks again for the autograph."

"Uh-huh." Eric eyed his food and wine after thanking the waiter. He waited to be left alone before dipping his index finger into the red liquid. When nothing happened, he discreetly dipped the rest of his fingers and waited. His pinky nail started to turn blue, "Damn." Eric pushed his glasses up
the bridge of his nose and stood up, taking the wine glass with him.

His waiter came back with a look of concern, "Sir, is everything alright?"

"Oh, yes. I just had a sudden headache. Is it ok if I just take my wine with me to my room?"

"Of course, sir. Would you like us to send room service?"

"That won't be necessary." Eric pushed his glasses up again and calmly walked away, his pace quickening as soon as he left the dining hall and waited for the elevator to open up. As soon as the silver doors opened, he ran inside and used his key to open the retina scan that would take him to the level he and his brothers were staying on.

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"You know they say that taking something apart is easier than piecing it back together," said Oswaldo offhandedly as he picked through his instruments, lining them up in the order they were to be used. "Like to think that I've mastered the art of both."

Next to him, Seraph had his leg propped against the wall he was leaning on, arms crossed with a towel in hand. He'd been watching Bernardo swing his powerful fists for the past hour, carefully monitoring his aggression. They were beginning to reach their peak and their subject had yet to crack. He turned to his sibling, "Hm?"

"Nothing, just musing about how I got to put together one of the most beautiful minds in existence is all."

"Hm."

"Ya sure you ain't going to talk, Tyler," grunted Bernardo as he wiped the sweat from his brow. His black shirt was soaked through with his perspiration and his face sprinkled with droplets of blood. "We don't exactly have all night but," he stepped back and jumped on the balls of his feet like he used to in the ring, "we'll be more than happy to prolong your suffering."

Tyler struggled against the duct-tape securing him in his chair and spat at the Italian, "Fuck you! You can take your weak Guido ass back to Ital-Gah!"

Bernardo backed up to stare at his younger sibling just as Oswaldo lifted a knife from Tyler's thigh, "Don't you fucking bad mouth our pedigree, you piece of shit." The Italian's lips thinned into a tight line and he jerked his head to his brother, "Move, it's my turn."

Realizing that there was no room for debate, Bernardo shrugged and took the towel from Seraph, the older quadruplet shifting his gaze to watch Oswaldo work. Lately, he hadn't gotten the chance to get his handiwork in and was saddled with the cleanup. And so far, things had been fine. They caught their guy and they got them to spill the beans, but this time was different; whoever hired Tyler must've paid him enough to buy his loyalty. That or he was just really stupid.

Oswaldo dragged his little tray over and removed his jacket till he was only in his black undershirt and pulled on his gloves. He eyed his brother's work appreciatively, "Thank you for tenderizing him for me, Ber."

"No problem, Ozzie." Bernardo also took a sip of water from his bottle and mimicked Seraph's position against the wall. He grinned at Tyler, "You really should just tell me who hired you, man. Hell, you should've told Seraph."
"I said I ain't talking," growled the brunette, though fear was starting to creep into his voice as he eyed all the silver tools on the tray. "You know, you three are pretty famous on the streets. People talk, you know? They say Cerberus works its prey mentally and physically until they break," he spat in Seraph's direction, "But you guys ain't shit!"

"Yeah, I'll admit today we did things a bit differently. You see, under normal circumstances, I tend to go first, break you down mentally, but big brother over there was kind enough to let me switch roles with him this once."

"Aren't I the lucky one."

"You are. People hear our name, Cerberus, and think that all we do is destroy, but really that's just a name that conveys our abilities as a whole. Individually, we are our own entities. Me? I'm a whisper. A shadow that'll grip your mind and toy with it till I get what I want. Bernardo? He's the water that'll quench your thirst till you're nothing more than a drowning man being mangled by his rapids. And my big brother Seraph? He's the worst. He's the fire that'll engulf you and peel your skin layer by layer till your secrets are naked and bare."

Oswaldo roughly yanked back Tyler's head by his hair, forcing the man to meet his eyes, "But that doesn't mean I'll go easy on you. You hurt a lot of little kids that night, man. Killed a few even." He caught Tyler's broken nose in between his index and middle finger, "My angel was very upset, near tears, actually," he squeezed making the man whimper in pain, "And when someone upsets him to that extent, I tend to lose it. If you're lucky, maybe my brothers can convince me to stop. But really there is only one person who has that kind of power over me, and unfortunately for you, he's not here."

The Italian let go of Tyler's nose just as tears were starting to roll down his cheek. He picked up a cigar clipper, "So you see, I think it's in your best interest for me not to get too excited here and just tell us what we need to know. Who hired you?"

When Tyler didn't say anything, he moved the clipper to the ring finger and squeezed, "There's no use in protecting them. Anyone willing to harm children isn't above killing their own. Who hired you and why did they want you to burn the orphanage down?" Again, he repeated the bloody action until he had to move to the other hand.

"No, wait," sobbed the brunette, "I'll talk. The group's name is Acidan-something."

Seraph nodded, "Acidanthera. We know that already." He moved away from the wall and moved to stand behind Oswaldo, "We want to know who's in it and who is pulling the strings."

"I can't tell you that, man. They'll kill me!"

"We'll kill you if you don't."

"That's not fair!"

Oswaldo clicked his tongue, "Life's not fair though, right? Bet you weren't thinking how burning down the orphanage would be your first step closer to my knife." He set the cigar clipper down and took a small knife, bringing it to his jaw line, "And I bet that you weren't concerned about the suffering of those children when you and your buddy took that money to burn down their home."

Tyler chuckled dryly, "A-and what does a Vargas know about suffering?" He rolled his head back, eyes moving to the ceiling, "Fucking privileged brats playing thug like some wannabe gangsters." His eyes lowered back to the Italian's, "Just like your whore mom."
Glass shattered and the three identical men turned around to see Eric standing by the door. Their brother had dropped his glass of wine and was gaping at Tyler, "What did you just say about my mother?" With narrowed eyes, he all but ran to their enclosed balcony, shoving Oswaldo out of the way and wrapped his hands around Tyler's throat. "Want to run that by me again," he growled as he pressed his thumbs against Tyler's windpipe.

"Ooh," cooed Bernardo in amusement, "you've done it now, man. You've just angered the deadliest mama's boy that ever existed." He shook his head in mock sympathy and wiped the rest of the blood from his body before putting an arm around Eric, "Don't worry baby brother, Ozzie will take care of it." He gently tugged Eric away from the enclosed balcony and led him back inside.

Oswaldo placed his knife back on the tray and grabbed his needles, "What do we know about suffering? I'd say plenty."

"So what," groaned Tyler through his coughs, "you get excommunicated from your family for a couple of years? Think not having a silver spoon in your mouth counts as suffering?" He gave a toothy smile, well what was left of his teeth, "Do you think that gives you the right to do this to me?"

"No. It's the fact that it was hired scum like you that took the lives of more than half of my blood relatives." Oswaldo shoved the needles down on Tyler's thighs, "It's the fact that people like you are the reason why my younger cousins and angel are fatherless." He hooked up wires to the needles, "It's because of opportunistic parasites like your bosses that there are children who lost their lives before their time." He clipped the wires to a machine, "Why a boy is going to live the rest of his life with a fake arm." Bringing his finger to the red button on the machine, he clenched his jaw, "Why my future King tried to take his life twice to escape the nightmares men like you inflicted onto his young mind."

Oswaldo pressed down on the button and watched as Tyler's broken body began to spasm violently. After ten seconds he switched it back off, "Give me names."

A few aftershocks made Tyler shiver in pain, "I-I can't."

"Wrong answer."

Bernardo stepped out of the bathroom to find that Eric stopped pacing and was now picking up the spilt wine with a pipette, "Whatcha doing, sweet baboo?" He noticed that his brother had headphones on and he playfully swiped at them to take one of the buds out from his ear, "Hey."

"Hey," muttered Eric as he squeezed the liquid he gathered into a vile.

"Leave it there, man. I'll take care of it. Why don't you go to your room? This is going to take a while and I know you don't like hearing the screams let alone actually watching us work." The dark haired Italian grinned, "Not to mention, that one concierge was totally hitting on you. Why don't you go down there and see if you can tap that?" A shrill scream from Tyler made the younger quadruplet jump and Bernardo narrowed his eyes at Seraph who quickly closed the door separating the balcony from the bedroom part of their room.

Turning back to Eric he tugged at his arm, "Come on, I'll take you back to your room and we'll order some-"

"Someone tried to kill me, Ber."

"…What?"
"Poison. They tried to poison me," cried Eric showing his fingernail to his brother and motioned to the wine, "It has arsenic. A deadly dose. They fucking put this shit in my wine! Who knows if they put some in my food but I saw them mix it in my wine." Eric sat down on the bed and buried his face in his hands, "Christ, they even used a kid to distract me. A kid!"

Bernardo closed his eyes and counted to ten. Fifteen. Twenty-five, fifty, sixty. A soft hand enclosed itself around his fists. He opened his eyes again and saw concern on his brother's face. Reworking his hand so he could lace his fingers through Eric's, he knelt down and checked his face and nails, "Who was it? You said you saw?"

"It was a waiter. I think… I think we may all have ingested some from the room service, and tonight… I think they were trying to finish us off."

"Why?"

"Because you guys used the secret elevator tonight." Eric ran a hand nervously through his hair and motioned towards Tyler, "Whoever hired him knows you have him and doesn't want grandpa to know what you guys are going to get out of--"

"FUCKING SHIT," growled Oswaldo.

Bernardo shoved Eric off the bed and hovered over him when the glass door shattered. Seraph was quickly assembling a sniper rifle while his younger sibling checked Tyler for a pulse. He cursed in anger again before kicking his machine, "Oh, what the fuck am I doing checking for a pulse?! His fucking brains are all over the god damned place!"

"What happened," asked Bernardo, not moving from his shielding stance.

"The hell you think happened?! The-some fucking fucker-Fuck!" Oswaldo threw his tray off to the side and grabbed his laptop before locking himself in the bathroom.

Seraph pulled on a pair of surgical gloves and dug through what was left of Tyler's head, his fingers grasping at the bullet. He brought it to the light, "Hey, Eric, can you make out that writing?"

Eric pushed his brother off of him and took Seraph's wrist to bring the bullet closer. Past the bloody remains, he could make the shape of a flower, "Yeah, it looks like the sword Lovi sent you guys."

"Thought so."

"Did you manage to get anything out of him," asked Bernardo as he went through his own contacts to call in the sweepers in the area.

"Yeah, but we need to get the hell out of dodge before calling it in. They're still out there."

"They're in here too."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Bernardo pushed Eric's hand up, "someone tried to poison him and maybe us."

"And you're barely telling me why?!"

"Look, let's get this shit cleaned up. Corgi is in the area and he's on his way. We can't trust our personnel so we're taking his jet back home."
"Time?"

"Forty minutes."

"Let's move. Eric, go get your stuff and come back in here. Bernardo, you get our shit together. I'll take care of the tools. Where's Ozzie?"

"Bathroom."

"The hell's he doing in there?"

"You saw him. He's not in any position to do anything; he needs to calm his ass down."

Seraph peeled off his clothes and stuffed them in a black bag, "Fine. But we do need to send out an alert at least. Text everyone."

"Right."

~One Week Later~

December 4, 2013

Dear Diary,

I know I have not kept up with you, but between work and the bakery and Feli, I simply do not have time anymore. Feliciano has just stepped out again to take a call and I figured I could get in a few lines. Last weekend was our first month anniversary and we went out for dinner at I Piccolini. It was an oxymoron I think because Feli said that it meant the little ones but the servings they gave were more than generous, especially with the wine. I won't lie, Diary, I haven't felt this happy in… well ever since my mother was still alive. I was going to tell him as such and even went ahead and got him a bracelet since I know he likes wearing them, but when the time came for me to say anything, my stomach started to hurt. Roderich warned me not to eat before confessing because of my anxiety but I was a dummkopf and didn't listen. He gave me the strangest look when I quickly excused myself to the bathroom and when I came back he was eyeing my food and drink suspiciously. Isn't that odd? We didn't even finish eating because he insisted that we take a walk through Frigga Village.

Anyway, it turned out to be for the best, the walk soothed my nerves and we walked hand in hand-gah! Look at me, writing away like some lovesick child when I'm a grown man! A lovesick man but a man nevertheless…oh, who am I kidding? Somehow, the little pasta loving idiot, and I say that with the utmost affection, has me wrapped around his finger. And the worst part is that I don't even try to hide it, at least not when we're in private.

It's funny, diary, how we work…It's so easy. Like everything we do, it's as if we've always been together. I'm not sure if I should be worried about this and what that will mean when the time comes for me to break up with him and marry Natalya. Actually, I'm not so sure if I even want to marry her anymore. Sure at first it was an impending doom, but now…I feel like I have a choice in the matter. Gilbert tells me that I've always had a choice…

Ludwig flipped to the front of his journal where he had a picture of Feli and him dancing at the wedding. Elizabeta had snapped it after they came back from the bathroom and he must say, his sister-in-law's eye for candid moments never ceased to amaze him. Smiling, he turned back to his
journal entry: But never till now have I had a worthwhile reason to choose.

Ludwig leaned back in his leather chair to stretch. Aside from his sudden desire to record his thoughts in his leather journal, he'd also been working on his part of the lecture both he and Feli had to present to the rest of the residents and attending physicians and so far everything was coming along great. Of course, Feliciano had already finished his section the week it had been assigned because he hated doing boring stuff when he could be hanging out with Ludwig, or so he said. Kiku vouched for him so he supposed that he could cut his boyfriend some slack.

Ha! Boyfriend.

Biting back a grin, Ludwig buried his face into his hands in glee. He had a boyfriend!

Tired blue eyes peeked up from behind his hands and glanced over to Feli's empty chair. Ludwig felt his heart clench painfully as if it were reacting to the emptiness. Lately, he'd been noticing that every time the Italian would part from him, regardless if it was only for a moment or the night, that he'd feel like a lifetime would pass by before he got to see him again. Of course, Ludwig confided this in Emma, and his cousin had smiled knowingly, asking what he thought it meant. Unsure, he had decided to not answer and continue putting the finishing touches on his apple cake.

The feeling kept nagging him to give it a name but it always went away as soon as he saw Feli's sweet smile, and he did spend a good part of his time with his boyfriend, Ludwig pushed it to the back of his mind. He looked back at the clock and frowned, "Now that I think about it, Feli's gone an awful long time. Did I miss a page? Maybe I should go look for him." Just as Ludwig was about to stand up and do just that, the door opened and Feliciano entered with a troubled look on his face. "Feli? What's wrong? Did something happen? Was it a patient?"

Feli shook his head and smiled, "No, it was Oswaldo. He was having some personal issues and wanted my help."

"Is he ok?" Ludwig pushed his chair away from the desk and allowed Feli to sit on his lap.

The Italian curled into his boyfriend's warmth and nodded, "Ozzie's fine now. Sometimes he loses his temper and needs to vent. It's the same when I feel sad, I call him and he helps me through it."

Ludwig brought his hands to Feli's shoulders and gently pushed him away, "Sad?" Panic rose within him. Was he not an adequate boyfriend? Did he do something wrong? Oh, god! He screwed up, didn't he?

Seeing the turmoil in his boyfriend's eyes, Feli kissed his nose, "No, it's not how you're thinking. I haven't been sad for a while now. And especially not since you agreed to be my boyfriend; you're wonderful!"

"I am?" Ludwig blushed but still smiled in relief.

"Ve~ of course! You're so sweet to me and you give me the best hugs and kisses. I love—uh, heh, I love it when you hold me close like this."

Ludwig swallowed thickly, his heartbeat escalating at the words Feli had almost said. A bit disappointed that it didn't pan out, he pushed it aside. "I...I really like having you close, strangely enough."

Feli grinned cheekily and bounced in his lap, "Bet you didn't think you'd actually like having me as a boyfriend, huh?"
"Honestly, I don't know how I lasted as long as I did without you."

"Ve?"

Ludwig pursed his lip in thought, "How do I put it…it's like you shined light on a part of me that even I didn't know existed." Nodding, he mentally patted himself on the back. He looked at Feli and reddened at the intense look he was giving him.

"Do you really feel that way, Luddy?"

"Ja. I wouldn't have said it if I didn't—" Feli brought their mouths together and fumbled in his lap until he was straddling him. Ludwig brought his hand to rest on his waist while another reached down to pull on the lever that allowed his chair to lean back.

The Italian let his hands rest lightly on Ludwig's shoulders as he reclined against him. Deft fingers played with the buttons of Ludwig's shirt, slowly popping them open. Feli sighed into the kiss, their tongues falling into a lazy dance. When he had enough buttons undone, he slid the shirt from Ludwig's shoulders and pulled away to press kisses along his jaw and down his throat. Feli paid special attention to his boyfriend's pulse point, brushing over it before gently sucking.

Ludwig's exposed his neck some more with a pleased hum, his own hands working to untuck Feli's scrubs shirt so he could touch the skin underneath. That was another thing he loved about Feliciano, his skin was always soft and warm under his fingers. He often wondered if he tasted as good as he felt, specifically his hips. The German groaned softly when Feli bit down on his shoulder and subconsciously pressed against his boyfriend. Feli responded with another bite and ground back.

"Feli…"

"Hm?"

"I want to kiss you too."

The Italian pulled away and tilted his head, "Aren't you kissing me already?"

"I-uh, I want to kiss you somewhere else."

"You can kiss me wherever you want. Do you want me to take off my shirt?"

Nodding, Ludwig sat them back up and cleared his desk, "Sit on here."

"Okie dokie!"

Feli pulled his shirt off and dropped it off to the side with a grin, "Now what?"

"Now, you just enjoy," murmured Ludwig as he took in his lover's torso. It was as beautiful as he remembered. He stood and kissed Feliciano again and mimicked the actions the Italian had done with him. As he moved further down his chest, he noticed scars along his ribs and stomach, some fainter than others. How he missed these before was beyond him until he realized that Monika must've put makeup over them. He glanced up in silent question but Feli had his eyes closed in bliss.

'I'll ask him later,' thought Ludwig to himself as he pressed a kiss to those as well. He gently pushed Feli down so that he could access his hip bones, 'Handcrafted by angels themselves.' Feli's breath came out in pants by the time Ludwig finally dove in for a taste. Unfortunately, that's also
when the door swung open.

"Hey, West, you've seen—" Gilbert froze at the sight of his brother hovering over the man he'd been looking for, his tongue stuck in mid-lick. He closed the door and leaned against it with wicked grin, "Guess that answers my question."

Feli tilted his head back so he could look at Gilbert upside down and grinned, "Ve~ What's up, Gil~"

"Nothing much. I just got out of surgery a little while ago and—"

Remembering himself, Ludwig threw his body over Feli to shield his torso from his brother's eyes, "Gilbert, get out!"

"You know that doesn't look any better." He ducked when his younger brother through a book at his head. "Right, anyway, my old man's looking for you, Feli."

Feliciano's smile wavered, "For what?"

"Hell if I know. He just said to tell you to meet him as soon as you got the message. Don't worry, he didn't sound mad, probably going to give you your mid-term evaluation or some shit like that." He watched as Feli fell off the desk in his struggle to get up.

Ludwig immediately went around to help him, "Are you ok, liebling?"

"Ve, I'm fine~"

"Here, don't forget your shirt and um, don't…don't tell—"

"I know I'm silly sometimes, Luddy, but I'm not stupid," said Feli with a giggle as he tugged his shirt back on. "I'll be back, kk? Ciao, guys."

The two Germans watched Feli scurry out the door, tripping on his feet as he made his way to the elevator. Ludwig glared at his brother, "I hate you sometimes."

Gilbert grinned wider, "Kesesese~ you know you love me." At the glare he received, he rolled his eyes, "Oh, come on! You act like you're not going to get some as soon as you two get home."

Ludwig blushed and looked away, making Gilbert's smug expression fall, "Wait, you mean…"

"Nein, we haven't."

"Oh, my poor baby bruder," gasped Gilbert as he rushed to sit in Feli's chair, "Why?"

"I don't- It's not any of your business!"

"Is it 'cause the only action you've ever gotten has come from your hand?"

"Bruder!"

"Hey, there's no shame in it. Hell, that's probably a lot more than what Vash will ever get."

Ludwig sighed, "That's different."

"Do you, uh… do you know how at least?"

"I'm a doctor, of course I know how!"
"Is it your cute little Italian?"

"No… it's just that, well, he's a virgin too... sort of."

"Sort of?"

"He's had a boyfriend before and they fooled around but apparently, well… you know." Ludwig cleared his throat and said quietly, "He wasn't on the receiving end..."

Gilbert cackled, "So what's the problem? Just let him teach you. Screwing each other—"

"I don't want to screw him. I—," Ludwig cut himself short and blushed, "I… I want to… make love to him and I don't know… I guess I could just ask him, but I don't want to look foolish or too naive or something like that."

"Feli doesn't have a mean bone in his body. He's not gonna—"

"I just don't want to hurt him." Leaning back in his chair, Ludwig tried to hide how much pinker his face got by looking down at his charts. He shyly added, "Plus, I want to make it special."

Gilbert's expression softened, "You really like him, don't you?"

"Ja."

"Look, you know how it works. Just let it happen when the time is right and trust me you'll know. Do you want some pointers?" Gilbert waited for his little brother to think about it and smiled when Ludwig nodded. "Alright, here's what you gotta do…"

~.~

Feli rubbed his arm nervously before knocking on Wolfgang's office door. A simple 'come in' was all he heard before taking a breath and doing so, "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Glancing up from feeding Gilbird from his palm, Wolfgang smiled, "Go ahead and take a seat. I was just giving this little one his lunch." Feli hesitantly took his seat and watched the older man continue to feed his son's canary. "You're probably wondering why I called you in. Don't worry, your performance has been rather impeccable. Berwald didn't have a negative thing to say except… well, he is rather upset that you don't rely on him as heavily as Ludwig did his first year as resident."

"I'll try and see him more."

"Please do, it means a lot to him to be able to help his students." Wolfgang pulled his hand away and let Gilbird perch himself on his shoulder, "And speaking of Ludwig, I've noticed that he's been acting different lately."

Feliciano stiffened, "Different, sir?"

"Ja. My son seems happier, don't you think so?"

"I… yes, he does."

"Why do you think that is?" Feli tried not to show how nervous he was, but it was rather hard when your boyfriend's dad was staring you down so critically. To his surprise, Wolfgang laughed cheerfully, "Never mind. It doesn't matter why as long as he's happy. Though I do suspect that it's the arrangement; I always knew that he'd see it my way. I'm glad he finally warmed up to it, makes
things go so much more smoothly."

"Ve?"

"The partnership I've established. I was hoping that a relationship between the families would help the transaction go smoothly. True, it's a little old fashioned but nothing strengthens bonds between two families than a bond between two people from those families who love each other."

Feli nodded carefully, "I agree, sir."

"Gut because speaking of that, your grandfather has asked me to take you with me to a business meeting tomorrow."

"A business meeting? Like hospital related or…"

"He'd like for you to represent him is what I meant to say. He has other things on his plate and your mother and aunt are helping at the orphanage." Wolfgang's cerulean eyes shone knowingly, "Romulus asked me to mentor you as a personal favor."

"In business," said Feli flatly.

"I think we both know why he wants you there."

Rubbing his face tiredly, the Italian slouched in his chair, "He told you?"

"What he could."

"Isn't that dangerous? For you?"

"They're not brave enough to do get their hands dirty, let alone in front of witnesses," he said with a smirk and Feli was instantly reminded of Gilbert. "So, I'll see you tomorrow?"

He stood up and reached out to shake Wolfgang's hand, "Yes, sir." He walked out of the office and headed back to his office. Gilbert had left already so he locked the door behind him and crawled back into Ludwig's lap, "Hey."

"What did my father want," asked Ludwig, one hand running along Feli's leg.

"I think he knows. He gave us his blessing."

"…What?"

Nuzzling his face into his boyfriend's neck, Feli smiled sweetly, "Si~ he said that it doesn't matter as long as you're happy. Apparently, he had been counting on us dating. He said something to do with a partnership and a relationship strengthening a bond between two families and business deals."

Ludwig stilled his hand, grateful that Feli wasn't able to see his face as he was positive horror was scrawled all over it. Licking his lips anxiously, he willed his heart to calm down. His father couldn't have said anything about his engagement…Feli wouldn't be so affectionate if he did. Oh, god…he was about to look up. Quick, do something! Ludwig continued to run his hand up and down, "B-business?"

Feli shrugged and nestled back, "Mhm, but I suppose it shouldn't surprise me. It certainly explains why my grandfather has been hanging out with your dad more. And why I have to go to a meeting with him tomorrow."
"Tomorrow? But I thought you were going to come over and help me paint my living room?"

"I still am. I'll come over after the meeting. Honestly, I think it's just so that I get some experience in handling stuff like that when my grandfather retires."

Tugging Feli back so they could look at each other, Ludwig smoothed back his boyfriend's hair, "You sound sad."

"I'm not, tesoro. Just a little tired is all."

"Too tired to pick up where we were before my idiot brother interrupted?"

"Ve, I'm never too tired for that~"

The next morning, Feliks took the liberty of dressing his best friend up for the meeting and made sure that he ate a hearty breakfast. "Like, you need every carb you can get to put up with those white collars," he said over his cup of coffee.

"Grazie, Fe," said Feliciano as he wrapped a scarf around his neck, "I won't be back till later. I'm going to Luddy's afterwards." He watched as Feliks gave him a Cheshire grin and he blushed, "We may come back here when we're done."

"Say no more. Like, I'm going to go out with Toris anyway. Oh, and thanks again for that ointment for him."

"How is he?"

"The bruises are starting to fade so that's, like, good, right?"

"How did he get those anyway?"

"I don't know, something about slipping at his apartment. He can be a real klutz sometimes. Anyway, have fun, broski."

"You too, Fe." He gave his roommate a quick kiss on the cheek before heading over to the tower where the meeting was going to be held at. Unsurprisingly, his family seal was set in a mosaic on the floors. "Well, no wonder Collins and Godfrey hate us. Is there anything we don't own?"

Wolfgang walked up next to him and chuckled, "I can assure you that those two's hatred stems from other things than the Vargas' wealth. Though, there is that too, I suppose." The two men entered the elevator and hit the button that would take them to the highest floor. "Listen, before we go in, you need to know that I do have some support so we won't be alone."

Giving a weak chuckle, Feli fiddled with the strap of his leather bag, "You make it sound like we're going to battle." When Wolfgang's expression didn't change, his grip tightened, "Dio mio, we really are, aren't we?"

"This is the first time they're meeting you in a professional setting, and first impressions are everything. You need to enforce your authority now or they'll walk all over you. Don't be afraid to toss your name— no, don't look at me like that. You have every right to throw its weight on them. It'll piss them off so much."

Feli stared ahead, the gears turning in his mind, "Sir? Here, am I your employee and you my boss?"

"I would like to think that there, we are equals."
"Ve, if it's alright with you then, I would like to try a different approach with them. I don't think that they'll buy that I'm indifferent to your relationship with my family given that they've seen that I get along great with yours."

"What do you suggest then?"

"Well, do you trust me, sir?"

Wolfgang thought about it for a moment before smiling, "If Romulus has placed his trust in you, I shall do the same."

The elevator stopped with a ding and the doors opened to let them out, but Feli reached out before Wolfgang got out, "Sir, I can't stress enough that how I might behave is not a reflection of my feelings towards your kindness nor is it a reflection of my family."

"Don't you worry," said Wolfgang patting the Italian on the shoulder, "I've been around your grandfather long enough to know that sometimes to come out on top, you need to do the unexpected. Now let's get going, ja?"

The others were already there and apparently in the middle of distributing breakfast among each other. Feli took a breath and quickly ran over the list of men attending the meeting that he had poured over last night in effort to memorize the name with the face. Knowing who people were always seemed to flatter them, and to this set of people, flattery was the equivalent to putting them on a pedestal. The higher the person thought they were in the eyes of someone with power, the more desperate they clung to their pedestal. Adopting an air that reflected his mob blood, he made eye contact with each man who introduced themselves to him, analyzing their intent as by the pressure they shook his hand.

Tilting his head to the side, he gave an almost flirtatious smile to the rest of them, "Buongiorno, I'm sure you all know who I am." He pulled off his black peacoat and hung it behind his seat to the right of Wolfgang.

While some were in awe of his sudden appearance, others were not so much. Collins took in his attire with disdain. A crisp white shirt rolled up to his forearms paired with a slim navy vest waistcoat and a monochrome tie, black slacks tailored to accentuate his slim legs, and comfortable black loafers. His hair was more or less left alone in its usual fashion instead of gelled back like most of the older gentlemen present. Long story short, Feli looked like he walked off the runway while the rest were still trying to rub the sleep from their eyes. This did not please Collins nor Godfrey at all for one reason or another, not that Feliciano cared for their opinion. The latter sneering at the young Vargas, "Why are you here?"

"Grandpa was unable to make it I'm afraid. I'm here as his proxy," said Feli with a shrug. "Shall we start? I have plans for the afternoon and my date doesn't like it when I'm tardy."

Collins glared at Wolfgang, "Really, Beilschmidt? Your boyfriend isn't able to make it and you bring this pup instead? You know that unless they are direct administrators or hold shares in the companies that own the hospitals, people cannot just show up as they please. Are you so worried about today's vote that you had to bring your little lap dog to—"

"First of all," interrupted Feli, his eyes hardening, "I am no one's lap dog. Not Doctor Beilschmidt's and certainly not my grandfather's. And second, my family's name is on the checks that go to your charities as well as the ones that are on some of your payrolls. Isn't that right, Mr. Evans?" Leaning back, he gave them a cheerful smile and a wink at the young administrator that was currently running the research hospital V Enterprises owned. "As successor to my family's corporate empire,
I'd like to see first hand how my money is being utilized and by whom. Now," Feli pulled out a leather portfolio with some of his notes, "if we could get down to business, I've noticed a lot of concerns from patients that circulate between the hospitals in our district, and I've made a list of suggestions that I hope you are all open to--"

Collins shifted his weight, "So, this is what we've come to? A bratty doctor, who's still wet behind the ears, is going to tell us seasoned veterans how to conduct our business. Don't forget, boy, that you're still nothing but a resident. The low man on the totem pole."

"Nothing but a...but sir, if you truly felt that way, why do you continue to send me correspondence to go work at your hospital?"

"No I--"

"I have copies in my email if you'd like to see," Feli pulled out his tablet and hooked it up to the table to display the email so that everyone could read it. "I was really flattered that you thought so highly of me as to try to persuade me against working for the James Godfrey Hospital or, well, any other hospital."

Godfrey regarded Collins carefully over his glasses, "You told him that we were the second highest sued hospital in the nation? What the hell is wrong with you!!"

"Me? You're the one who--"

"Gentlemen," growled Wolfgang irritably, "we all have a busy work day ahead of us and hospitals in need to be managed. Let us put aside our petty differences and get to this meeting over with. Please continue Doctor Vargas."

"Of course. As I was saying..."

The meeting continued on, the tension higher than normal but nothing unbearable. Most of his suggestions were placed into a vote and some even got passed. When the time came to take a short lunch break, he forced himself not to run for the door. This took a lot more self-restraint than he had because he felt if he stayed put any longer, his anxiety would show through in form of tremors that were threatening to making his legs tremble.

Feliciano turned on the water and splashed some onto his face. "Ve," he breathed, as he looked into the mirror. His reflection didn't show the turmoil he was feeling. Sure, he was glad that he had done something productive, but he still wasn't any closer in achieving his real goal. Checking his vest pocket, he sighed in relief to find that the small plastic tube still nestled there. In it were microscopic bugs that he was supposed to plant on Collins and Godfrey. Lovino had given it to him for espionage purposes but the trick was how to get them on them. "I should go into the meeting room while everyone's out getting lunch."

Just as he walked out, he ran into the two men he was thinking about. The younger of the two huffed in annoyance, "We were just discussing you, Vargas."

"Oh? And here I thought only your son enjoyed gossiping, Mr. Collins."

"We know what you were trying to do with that little stunt of yours," added Godfrey as Feli was walking away, "It didn't work by the way. You're going to need more than cheap tricks to turn us against one another."

The Italian turned around and clasped his hands behind his back, "Interesting. I didn't know you two were such good friends. Though, I can't say that I'm surprised. Weren't both of your families
the ones who ganged up on my ancestor and murdered his reputation in Genovia?"

He smiled politely. "Your bond rivals the one between the Beilschmidt and Vargas families. Is that why you two have matching tattoos underneath your wedding bands?" His smile broadened as the two became flustered. "It's rather sweet actually. My family does the same thing with their friends...or soul mates. Are you two soul mates?"

Godfrey's face turned an unhealthy shade of red while Collin's turned green, the former sputtering out, "W-what on earth are you going on about?! We're not~"

Feli reached out and grabbed their wrists to inspect their hands, "But you must have gotten something. Why else are your ring fingers so swollen? Maybe it wasn't wise to get them there." He rose his eyes to meet theirs, "Or perhaps you just don't want people to see what you have under your rings. If you didn't get a tattoo to commemorate your friendship, then what did you get?"

"Young man, you have no sense of boundaries, do you?" Godfrey ripped his wrist from the Italian's grip and stared at him with a leveled gaze, "Let me warn you now, you should watch yourself. Just because you're a Vargas doesn't mean you are entitled to do whatever you want."

"I could say the same to you, sir." Feli released Collins' wrist as well, "However, you and I are in different positions, aren't we? Yes, I am a Vargas, but don't think for a second that I utilized that fact to get where I am. Unlike you and your families, I and mine can say that we've more than earned our status." The Italian backed up and grinned, "Ve, let's get back, si~ I still have a date and I'd very much like to get the meeting over with."

Everyone was a bit more serious when they came back to the meeting room mostly because there were still two very serious points to discuss, one which regarded the distribution of donated organs. A new list of potential candidates for the clinical trials regarding the newest treatment for destroying cancer cells was passed around for their consideration, and finally the meeting was adjourned with the plans of meeting again next week. Feli prayed that he wouldn't have to come back.

He packed up his things, watching in amusement as most scurried out the room muttering things as if the hospitals they managed would burn to the ground if they stayed a minute longer. Feli turned his gaze to Collins and Godfrey and wondered if what his brother had told him was true. Well, he supposed only time would tell. He wondered if the bugs he placed on them would give them more answers than the guy his cousins interrogated. And if they didn't, he wondered if they would have to take them in for questioning. That is if they were guilty at all; maybe they really did get friendship tats and he was making a fuss out of nothing.

Wolfgang patted Feli's shoulder and offered a nod, "You did good today. Did you do what you were supposed to?"

"Si~" The two men walked out as Feli told him quietly about the bugs. Just as they reached the ground level, Feli heard someone calling him and turned to see Mr. Evans jogging after them.

"D-Dr. Vargas," said the young man a little shyly as he extended his hand to shake with Feli, "I was hoping to catch you before you lift, sir."

Feliciano shook it and smiled, "Ciao. It's Kevin, right?"

"I-it is, sir."

"You don't have to be so formal with me. I'm not your boss yet."
Kevin smiled back, "Right, um, I just wanted to say that it is an honor to finally meet you. Your grandfather speaks very highly of you, sir. As does your aunt."

"Grazie, I've heard good things about you, too. It's impressive for someone your age to manage our research facilities."

"I'm just really good at my job, Dr. Vargas." Kevin shifted his bag over his shoulder, "Um, does this mean you'll be working with us now?"

"You mean at the research? No, I'm afraid not. I like where I am right now and," Feli trailed off as he saw Kevin tug at his sleeves to hide the bandages that were beginning to peek through. "But I would love to take a proper tour of the place. Perhaps you could show me around some time?"

"I-uh, it would be my honor, sir." Kevin's black eyes widened as Feli took his forearm and ran two fingers along it, "S-sir?"

Placing a gentle kiss on the bandage, Feli met his eyes, "I look forward in working with you, Mr. Evans. Have a wonderful day."

He and Wolfgang watched as Kevin nodded and scampered off to his car, the latter turning to his young resident with a raised eyebrow, "I thought you have a boyfriend."

"I do, sir, but I recognize that look and those nervous habits better than I'd like to admit. I just wanted him to know that someone cares about what's underneath those bandages. I saw them and a paternal instinct awoke within me."

"Paternal? He's probably the same age you are if not a little bit older."

"True, but people who do that usually do so because they are seeing the world through the eyes of a lost child in need of someone to guide them back to the light. Sometimes, their shadows can be cleared with a simple act of kindness."

"You really are something special, aren't you, Feliciano." He patted him on the head and told him to have fun on his date before they parted ways.

Pleased that he was finally free of his duties for the day, Feli drove back home. There was a bit of traffic but nothing much to his displeasure; he kept checking his watch to make sure that he'd still make it to Ludwig's before his boyfriend started painting without him. As he continued his drive, Feli thought back to Collins' and Godfrey's hands and how swollen their fingers were, only to have his musings interrupted by his cell.

Figuring it must be Ludwig; the Italian connected the call to his Bluetooth and purred into it, "Ciao, bello. I know I'm running a little late but I'll be over soon. I'll make it up to you I promise. Maybe we can take a shower together after we're done?"

It was silent on the other end before a smooth voice returned, "I guess we're never too old to bathe together. Do you want me to give you a bubble beard like when we were kids?"

"Ozzie?" Feli grinned when the other chuckled into the phone, "Sorry, I thought you were Ludwig."

"You two are showering together?"

The younger Italian ignored Oswaldo's tone and nodded, "Si~ it's really fun."
"I'm sure it is."

"What's up?"

"I wanted to see if you were doing anything today, but it seems like you are."

"You're in town?"

"Only for a few hours while our jet gets a refuel. We just got back from the U.S and-" Feli interrupted him, "Oh, hey, why didn't you tell me the first time you guys were in Victrola? I had to hear it from nonno and by the time I tried finding you guys, you'd already left."

"Didn't Lovi tell you? We were poisoned while in Shanghai."

No, his brother had not told him. Feli gripped his steering wheel tightly, "With what?"

"Arsenic, but we had some stuff to hold us out until we got to the states." Oswaldo yawned quietly, "Hey, listen, the guys are telling me to hang up. I'll call you again later, ok?"

Before he let Ozzie hang up, Feli remembered the hands, "Wait! Did you know I went to my first meeting today with the other hospital administrators?"

"No. Did…were they there? Did you get the bugs on them?"

Feliciano rolled his eyes, "I did, could you please call Lovino to activate them? I would but knowing him he'll talk my ear off and I really need to get to Ludwig's. Also, those two had swollen fingers like that picture you showed me, but it doesn't fit with the healing time frame."

"Do you think it was a brand?"

"It would make more sense given their position. Brands are more common with people higher up the food chain, right?"

"Aw, look at you. Already sounding like a don," teased Oswaldo, "but yeah, that sounds right." Feli heard him speak to his brother over the phone before addressing him again, "We're going to go ahead and tell my dad about this. We're going to meet up with him in Italy for some files Lovino wants from the archives. I'll see you in a few weeks. Stay safe."

"Ve~ you too."

"I lo-…Ti amo."

Feli smiled, "Ti volgio bene, Ozzie." He hung up and quickly tossed his keys to the valet as soon as he pulled up to his building, not wanting to waste any more time.

Ludwig finished drying the last of the utensils he used to bake an apple cake and looked at the clock in his kitchen. It was well past three and Feli had yet to call. He knew that those meetings tended to last long, but this was ridiculous. Feli was supposed to be back a few hours ago at the
latest. Flushing in embarrassment, Ludwig shoved his whisk into its assigned drawer, "I'm being stupid. He's probably just—"

The deep jingle of his doorbell cut through whatever excuse he was making for his tardy boyfriend. Shaking his head, he removed his apron and went to peek through the small hole on the door. Sure enough, Feli was standing outside fiddling with his tie and shirt. He opened the door to let him in, "You should've texted me to me know it would run late."

"Mi dispiace," said Feli sadly, "I wanted to, but me being there already annoyed the others…I didn't want to push my luck by fiddling with my phone too."

Ludwig took his boyfriend's bag and coat and set it in his closet, "What happened?"

"Let's just say that I now know what high school must've been like. It was really cliquish and I was surprised they didn't bring out the rulers to smack me. Your dad told me to throw my weight around and so I did, albeit subtly or as subtly as one can do such things. In all honesty, it just pissed them off."

"Well, that explains why my father is always cranky after coming from one. Did you bring any clothes to paint in?"

Feli tugged off his vest, tie, and shirt and dropped them onto the barstool, "No, but I think I'll be fine in my undershirt. Oh! I think I also left behind a pair of shorts here."

Folding the Italian's clothes, Ludwig nodded, "Ja, it's in my bedroom. Here, I'll get them for you. Can you start pouring the paint into the pans?"

"Si~" When Ludwig came back with a pair of yellow cotton shorts, Feli already set out their paint brushes, rollers, and paint. Feli thanked him and tore off his pants to slip on the shorts, "Do you have an idea of how you want it?"

"Well, I really like how this looks." Ludwig handed over a picture he found in one of the home décor magazines Roderich had let him have. He'd been meaning to paint his boring white walls ever since he moved in but never really found the motivation to do so. When Feliciano painted his own with Feliks, Ludwig decided to follow suit. It didn't hurt that he had secretly loved seeing the concentrated furrow in his lover's brow when he held a paintbrush.

Feli looked at the picture then at the three walls and nodded, "Ok. How about we paint the right and the bit of the front walls this pretty grey since it's lighter and the light will bounce off of it. Then the wall on the left can be the royal blue."

"That sounds great. Oh and I've taped the trim because I want to leave that white. Is that ok?"

Leaning up on his toes, Feli kissed Ludwig's cheek, "If that's what you want, sure!"

The duo took on opposite walls, each listening to the other about how their day had been. Ludwig had spent the morning taking his furniture to his room and taping the trim along with setting down plastic tarps to protect his hardwood floors. Afterwards, he baked an apple cake for them to eat as a snack when they were through.

By the time they finished, the sun was already beginning to set, casting a lovely glow over their work. They sat on the floor, with their backs pressed against the cart they used to put the paint trays on to watch the Victrola skyline and its citizens return home. A strong sense of accomplishment filled their bellies as they entwined their fingers. Both were quiet, each musing about how perfect their dynamic was. Sure, Feli had tripped once or twice and accidentally gotten paint on his face,
but nothing damaging had occurred. Other than his clumsy nature, he had actually done a good job working alongside Ludwig. Not that it surprised him. They were partners after all.

Even at work, Ludwig liked how Feli would do what he told him without hesitation. He even liked when the Italian took charge and gave his own orders that he would follow through. Running his thumb over Feli's knuckles, Ludwig smiled, "We did good, ja?"

"Si, we did," cooed the Italian. "Do you like it?"

"I do."

"Ve~ I'm glad."

When Feli lifted his head from Ludwig's shoulder to look at him adoringly, the German suppressed a sigh. The Italian looked so adorable with a lock of auburn hair falling over his eye and brushing his cheek. That streak of blue paint on his chin only added to the allure and Ludwig suddenly felt the need to kiss him. Licking his lips shyly, he let his eyes fall to his boyfriend's mouth, "Feli…"

"Hm?"

"C-can I kiss you?"

Feli's eyes only grew warmer as he nodded, "You don't have to keep asking me, Luddy. You can kiss me whenever and wherever you want. I am yours."

"Mine," echoed the German in a whisper as he gently pulled Feli onto his lap so his boyfriend could straddle him. He lightly nipped at Feli's throat and ran his hands down Feli's back before slipping under his shirt and running them back up slowly.

Gasping in delight, Feli nodded, "Yours. Only yours, for as long as you want me."

"I think...I think you've made a mistake in telling me that."

"Why?"

"Because now that I know that, I don't want to let you go."

Feli wrapped his arms around Ludwig's neck, "Then don't." He felt Ludwig's heart race against his chest as he pulled him in for a kiss and oh how he never tired of kissing the man. He never tired of how Ludwig always tasted like what he had baked, in this case apples and cinnamon. Sliding his tongue along his lover's, he silently coaxed it deeper into his mouth before closing his lips around it.

Blue eyes shot open before nearly rolling back from both the feeling and the little slurping sounds Feli was making as he gently sucked on his tongue. His brain felt like it was short circuiting and rerouting the flow of blood to a single direction. Ludwig pulled a hand out from under Feli's shirt and tangled itself in his auburn locks, pressing their mouths almost violently against each other and thrusting his pelvis upwards.

Moaning in response, Feli tugged at the Ludwig's shirt but neither was quite ready to release each other to pull it off. They let out a shriek of surprise when something cold and wet fell onto their heads and ran down their faces. Simultaneously looking up, they were met with a pair of unimpressed blue eyes. Ludwig was first to react, "Johan!"

Curse his luck! Perhaps he was reading into the mood wrong and today wasn't the day to take his
relationship to the next level. Ludwig silently brooded over that fact and continued to glare at his cat.

Feli however wasn't willing to throw in the towel yet. He tugged on Ludwig's shirt to get his attention, "Ve, why don't we go get cleaned up?"

Ludwig stopped his staring match with Johan and turned to Feli with a sigh, "My shower isn't working at the moment. Someone is going to come over tomorrow to fix it."

"Then, let's go to my place."

The German allowed his boyfriend to tug him up, but he dug his heals in slightly as he regarded the mess on the floor, "You go ahead, I'm going to get some of my things. I'll be over in a few minutes."

Disappointment was evident in Feli’s eyes but the Italian quickly perked up, "Okie dokie, I'll just leave my door unlocked." He reached up and pecked Ludwig's cheek before getting his things out of the closet. "Don't make me wait too long," he threw mischievously over his shoulder.

Ludwig was left frozen in place; unspoken promises in that simple phrase made him giddy with both excitement and nerves. They were finally going to get closer, and while that had been something he'd been thinking about – yearning for really – he couldn't help but feel anxious about it. Call it stage fright if you will; Gilbert told him that it was normal for everyone except him because he was awesome.

Rolling his eyes at his brother's arrogance, Ludwig quickly went to his room to put together a small bag of clothes to change into. He hesitated in reaching for the toiletries bag his eldest brother had given him with a wink but decided to pack that too in case he and Feli really were going to do it. Turning to his pets, he wished them good night before flicking off the lights. Ludwig tried not to look at the mess on the floor as he walked past it lest he try and clean it up. Locking the door behind him, he quickly padded barefoot over to Feli's.

To his surprise, the lights were set to their lowest setting, making the white and lavender petal trail Feli must have created reflect golden. Ludwig smiled to himself and followed the petals until they took him to Feli's room. Soft golden light shyly beckoned him to open the door. This time it was his turn to be disappointed, though it conflicted with the desire to skip the shower and jump on his boyfriend.

Feli, freshly showered, was standing with his back to him. His foot was absently stroking his calf as he checked his phone. Ludwig followed the lazy strokes, letting his eyes wander up his slender legs, the rest covered by a long sleeved dress shirt that he recognized as one of his. How he had gotten his hands on it didn't matter at the moment. Ludwig was too enchanted by the sight in front of him to care.

Feli turned around and grinned, "Luddy! The bathroom's over there." Blushing sheepishly, he lowered his eyes, "Sorry I took one before you, but I wanted to get some things ready before…." 

Gulping, Ludwig nodded in understanding. Feli sauntered up to him, the shirt falling at his shoulder, "Go take a shower, amore mio. I won't go anywhere." Ludwig nodded again and went to go do that. He probably should be embarrassed at the fact that he fumbled once or twice with the buttons in the shower, dropped the soap a few times, and got some shampoo in his eye. But really, he wasn't. The image of Feliciano, his Feliciano, in his clothes was too much. The Italian still had some of the marks on his skin from yesterday's make out session and the way he'd worked him over with that kiss just a few moments ago…
Ludwig made sure he'd gotten rid of all the paint before turning off the shower. "Ok, Beilschmidt," he said to himself as he dried off, "Don't freak out. He's just as inexperienced as you."

'But he's got plenty experience the other way around,' countered his mind, 'And everybody knows Italians are the best lovers. It's in their blood.'

"That's ridiculous. There's no way *that* could be wired into their biological makeup." Ludwig hung the towel on a rack and tugged on a pair of boxers and a simple black muscle shirt, unsure if it would've been too bold of him to just walk out in a towel. Running a nervous hand through his hair, he sighed, "Nein, what's ridiculous is that I'm talking to myself while Feli's out there and waiting."

He brushed his teeth quickly and tried to remember everything his brother told him before putting his things away, "I can do this."

Ludwig shyly peeked out of the bathroom and found that Feli was sitting on the bed on his knees. Both night stands were covered with tiny candles giving off an intimate glow that promised that this was going to be the best night of their lives. Feli blushed slightly as he rose on his knees, revealing that the shirt he had on was the only thing he was wearing. His hands were barely visible from the length of the sleeves as he extended his arms out, "Ve~"

Ludwig did his best to not to run over. He didn't, after all, want to ruin the romantic mood his boyfriend so obviously wanted. Though, to be honest, this was a million times better than just doing it in the shower or on the floor like he planned earlier. Just as he was only a breath away from his boyfriend, Feli backed away coyly until Ludwig was forced to crawl onto the bed.

"Caught you," whispered Ludwig into his ear as he hovered over him. He raised himself on one arm so that he could play with Feli's curl knowing that he loved it when he gently tugged on it.

"What should I do to my little fox, hm?"

Feli bit his lip to keep his whimpers in, "Make him yours."

"I thought he already was?"

"Well, yes in mind and spirit but now…"

Ludwig bit back a grin and continued to play dumb, "Now what, liebling?" While he waited for Feli to gather his courage to say what he wanted, he continued to gently tug and stroke his hair. In the background, he heard music softly playing. Nothing lyrical but the song seemed strangely familiar.

Tugging his boyfriend's hand away from his curl, Feli held it over his heart, "Do…do you know this song?" At the shake of the German's head, the Italian smiled. "I heard Antonio singing it once in Spanish, and I liked it so I found the music to it…thought it would be nice."

"What is it?"

Feli slipped away from under Ludwig and knelt again, encouraging his lover to sit up too. His golden eyes glowed happily in the candlelight as he trailed his knuckles along Ludwig's cheek, "You're a song, written by the hands of god." He smiled when Ludwig's breath hitched and his eyes widened, "Don't get me wrong 'cause this might sound to you a bit odd…"

"But you hold the place where all my thoughts go hiding," continued Feli softly, his fingers lightly trailing down Ludwig's neck, they stopped suddenly, "Right under your clothes is where I'll find them." He tugged the German's shirt over his head and Ludwig quickly let it fall on to the floor, too mesmerized by his boyfriend's voice to fret over folding it. Closing his eyes, he gave into Feli's
coos to get him to lie down as fingers trailed over his smooth cool skin. The Italian was committing every inch of Ludwig's pale skin to memory, from the light freckles on his shoulders to the cute blond treasure trail that started at his naval and dove under the band of Ludwig's boxers.

(*)

His touch was quickly replaced by openedmouthed kisses as he nipped at his German's flesh. He brushed over Ludwig's chest, tongue flicking against his nipple and earning a gasp before continuing down to lick the ridges of his abs.

"Feli," groaned Ludwig in approval.

"Hm?"

"Please, keep singing."

"Ve~" The Italian nuzzled his head against his lover's stomach, "Underneath your clothes there's an endless story." He tugged on the black boxers, looking up for permission. At the shy nod, Feli slowly pulled them down, "There's the man I chose, there's my territory, and all the things I deserve for being such a good boy~"

Ludwig raised his hips to let Feli take them all the way off before pulling him down, pressing their bodies as close as they could to each other and kissing him deeply. It was thorough and unhesitating, and the warmth was steadily becoming a hot coil in their bellies. Feli sighed into Ludwig’s neck as his boyfriend nibbled along shoulders and tugged off the white shirt. Flipping them over so he was back on top, he mumbled against Feli's tattoo, "I want to give you everything, liebling. Everything you could ever want."

Feli watched as Ludwig worked his way down his body pausing every now and again for staking another claim on a patch of skin he'd somehow managed to miss the first time.

Through heavy lidded eyes, Ludwig watched his lover's reactions as he lifted one of his slender legs by the heel. Moving his head, he brushed over his ankle before kissing his way to his inner calf, behind the knee, thigh, all while marveling at how incredibly smooth he was. He caught how Feli's skin glistened with perspiration in the candlelight, his chest rising and lowering shallowly from the attention he was getting. The flat plain of his stomach, etched with modest muscles of his own, quivered minutely in anticipation.

And then there they were, those glorious hips lightly thrusting upward into the air with want. Licking his lips again, Ludwig gently let his lover rest his leg beside him as he nestled himself between them. His heart was already racing in excitement of finally being able to properly taste what he'd been craving since he saw them.

Ludwig groaned as the skin all but melted under his tongue. He brought his hand to the small of Feli's back as the Italian arched against his mouth.

Feli let out a whine, "Luddy, please..."

Everything Ludwig was doing to him was driving Feliciano mad with desire, though part of him was worried that he'd question the scars on his inner thighs. He was pleased that Ludwig hadn't mentioned them. The last thing he wanted to do was explain how he got them and the ones on his stomach. Gasping, Feli grasped at his white cotton sheets when Ludwig gave a particularly hard bite on his hip, only to soothe the ache away with the flat of his tongue.

Ludwig's attention drifted to Feli himself, standing almost achingly with need, and who was he to
deny his boyfriend anything he desired?

"Ludwig," cried Feli suddenly as warmth engulfed him.

The sound of his name being said with such pleasure made the German look up as he gently grazed his teeth along Feliciano. Feli stared back, his eyes practically glowing like embers, mouth parted in heavy pants. The Italian gave a shy thrust against Ludwig's mouth, whimpering as he did. Ludwig nodded and relaxed his lips to let Feli set a pace for them while he dipped his tongue into the slit before running it along his length. Unconsciously, Ludwig began to thrust into the bed in an effort to soothe his own arousal that was only getting worse with the noises his love was making above him.

Feli closed his eyes, letting his head hit the pillows again. He lowered a hand to run his fingers through Ludwig's soft locks, "Y-you're perfect, Ludwig," he murmured in between moans in Italian, "and beautiful." He continued his praises knowing that Ludwig knew enough terms of endearment to understand what he was saying. The Italian swallowed harshly when his love gripped his hips down and furiously bobbed his head up and down, hollowing out his cheeks every time he came back up. Spreading his legs more, Feli entangled his fingers in his lover's hair.

Feliciano became a slave under his ministrations or perhaps it was he who became the slave. Ludwig didn't know anymore but he couldn't bring himself to care. His boyfriend's moans and gasps were more than enough to convince him to serve as long as his master was Feli. Hell, he'd sell his soul if it meant being with his lover, but he didn't own his soul. He'd stupidly allowed his father to give it away when all he wanted was for someone to love and cherish it as Feli so clearly did. Well, he still had everything else to give.

Growling around Feli, Ludwig pulled away, much to the Italian's distress, but he wanted to feel the other instead of the cool sheets he'd been rutting against, "W-wait, liebling.

"I want–"

"I know, but I think I know something you'll like even more." He smiled when Feli finally stopped bucking into the air and looked up at him with curious eyes. Blushing, Ludwig moved to stand and retrieve his bag but Feli wrapped his legs around him. Ludwig brushed his boyfriend's bangs away from his face and kissed his forehead, "I'll be right back, Feli. I'm going to go get some things we'll need."

"You mean lube and condoms?" Ludwig's blush darkened as he stammered a 'yes' making the Italian giggle, "Ve- you don't have to go for that. I have some on the nightstand." He pointed to his left where there was a dark shallow tin basin with a few petals and small glass bowls floating in water. Beside it were a couple of foil packages eagerly waiting to be used.

Ludwig felt Feli loosen his legs to let him reach out and retrieve one of the bowls. He dipped his fingers in and was pleased to discover that the water had warmed the gel as he coated his fingers with a generous amount before setting the bowl aside. Leaning back on his knees, Ludwig gently folded Feli's legs against the Italian's chest, "I—I um..."

"Would you like me to do it," Feli asked gently.

"N-nien. I want to."

Feli nodded and Ludwig slowly traced a circle to help his lover relax before gently sliding his finger in. He watched for any sign of discomfort as he carefully worked him open, rubbing his thigh soothingly and praising him in German just as Feli had praised him earlier. A deep groan
escaped the Italian and he bucked against Ludwig's fingers. Realizing that he'd found his lover's spot, Ludwig gently massaged it before pulling out and reaching for the condom. As much as he'd love to stretch this longer, he knew that Feli wouldn't last, not that he was doing any better. He rolled on the condom clumsily, accidentally dropping it a few times.

Warm fingers enclosed around the German's pale hand as Feli took a few breaths to calm himself down, "Relax, love. You're doing so well, I love how hard you're working to be good for me. My beautiful Luddy~"

Relief flowed throughout his body as the words escaped Feli's mouth. His Feli. His.

Ludwig aligned himself in front of Feliciano before slowly joining their bodies with a bright flush high on his cheeks and lips parted, gasping a little as he carefully watched Feli’s face for discomfort as he sunk all the way in. He waited for a moment for his lover to adjust to him but Feli was already fidgeting for more.

Letting his weight rest on his arms, Ludwig began to move in and out, focusing on not releasing yet. He wanted this to last as long as he could, but with the way Feli’s tight heat felt clenching and unclenching around him, massaging him in the sweetest way possible, it was too much. Still, he angled his thrusts to where he knew Feli would…

"Dio Mio!"

Grinning, Ludwig kept aiming at that spot. A rhythm fell into place and soon they were panting against each other’s mouths. Feli wrapped his legs around his hips to grind against him, desperate for release. Ludwig reached behind his lover, pulling him impossibly closer to him. He hadn't realized how much he'd wanted this. Needed this. And not because he was driven by lust but because this was it. This was the answer to what was bothering him the past few days. No, not the sex. The underlying energy that was flowing between them, binding them the same way their bodies were binding with one another. And in their union, during their chorus of moans and gasps, the extent of what they were doing hit Ludwig, making him pause his thrusts. He looked down at his lover's flushed face and by now he thought that he would've pulled out in horror. Feel guilty. Feel…some sort of negative emotion, but none of that came. Instead, he felt his chest swell with warmth at the sight of Feli's rapidly heaving chest. At his beautiful eyes that glittered with pleasure, at his bruised lips, the cute flush on his face. Ludwig’s eyes followed almost reverently as Feli licked his lips before asking, "Are you ok, amore?"

Ludwig gave him a soft smile, "I am; I just can't believe we're actually doing this."

"Would you like to stop?"

"Nein!" Ludwig blushed at how loudly he responded and cleared his throat before repeating himself softer. He ran his nose along his lover's jaw, dipping down to nibble on Feli's neck, "Why do you like me?"

Feli watched as Ludwig's face fell at his silence before reaching out to soothe it, "I love you."

"Wh-You...love me? Really?"

"Of course, I do, how could I not?"

"But why?"

"I can't answer that, silly. If I do, then that would force me to quantify it, and to quantify it is to place a limit on something that is infinite."
Ludwig blinked once before smiling. "Ok, well then can you give me some reasons for said love? Just a few."

"Ve, okie dokie." The Italian ran his hands through Ludwig's hair, brushing his fringe back and out of his eyes, "Well, I love the way your eyes soften when you look at me. I love how you make my brain all mushy and I get flustered to a point that I act goofy. And even though I know my goofy annoys you, sometimes it's worth it because you get this cute little crease on your brow when you frown." Feli giggled and smoothed out the crease that was beginning to form with a kiss, "like right now."

"Feli…"

"I also love how your voice, despite it being so rough, tells me the sweetest of things. And your hands as big as they are, are so caring and make the most beautiful things, from nursing someone back to health to making me feel safer than I've felt in years."

He traced his fingers along Ludwig's spine, "I'm happy," he confessed shyly. "I'm happy that you're here with me, tesoro." Looking at him through his lashes he added, "I've liked you for so long…I never thought, that you'd actually want to be here with me like this."

Feli giggled and ran his thumb across Ludwig's lower lip, "You're so beautiful, Ludwig."

Too happy to bother with forcing his blush down, he slowly picked up where he left off, making his lover gasp and claw at his back.

So that is what it was. Love! Finally, Ludwig had a name for what he was feeling!

He picked up his pace and lost all his rhythm until he was simply moving desperately against Feliciano. It was nearing the end, both were already so close. He inched his hand towards Feli’s and laced their fingers together and pressed his forehead against Feli’s, wanting desperately to kiss him but only managing to pant against his mouth. It wasn't until Feli managed to pull his head back to kiss him properly himself, biting down on Ludwig’s lip, that Ludwig finally reached his peak.

Ludwig came with a loud moan, emptying himself within his lover. The feeling of warm lust inside, combined with how beautiful Ludwig looked when coming, had Feli tightening around his love. Head tossed back and fingers desperately clinging to the others, he came as well, enjoying how Ludwig was still slowly moving in and out so that they could both ride out their pleasure.

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Looking into Feli’s eyes, Ludwig tried to echo the sentiment Feli had told him. The words were there on the tip of his tongue, if only he could push them out, "Liebling, I–"

"Shh," cooed Feli, placing a finger on his lips with a warm smile. "You don't have to say it back if you're not ready, tesoro. I just," he blushed slightly, "I just thought you should know."

Ludwig kissed those fingers gratefully, hoping that the tender way he did would convey his feelings better than he could express, before carefully slipping out. His eyebrows rose to his fringe when he rolled off the condom, "Uh…"

"It broke, didn't it?"

"Sorry."

"Ve, it's ok. I kind of like feeling you still inside me," teased Feli with a cheeky grin. He looked
onto his belly and groaned, "But I did make a mess, didn't I?"

"I can go get something to clean us up."

"There should be some wipes in the drawer right here." Feli let out a small grunt when Ludwig accidentally let his weight fall on him as the German reached out to get the bag of wipes.

"Sorry."

"It's ok~"

Ludwig shook his head fondly and cleaned him up, tossing the soiled wipes into the small waste basket under the nightstand before settling next to Feli in the bed. The Italian separated the thinnest blanket from his comforter and draped it over their lower regions and reached under his pillow for a small remote. He turned off his stereo, blew out the candles before turning the remote to his ceiling. Feli smiled at his boyfriend and clicked, the white ceiling turning milky until it became the color of the night sky.

"Is that..."

"Outer space," offered Feli as he curled against the German's chest, "Mhm. It's a live feed of what's going on up there. Isn't it pretty?"

The German stared at the ceiling in awe, his arm coming up to hold Feli closer to him, "How are you getting the feed?"

Feliciano traced circles along Ludwig's skin quietly before speaking up, "I...my dad. He was a astrophysicist and," he swallowed thickly forcing back tears.

"Liebling, are you ok?" Ludwig panicked at the sight of his love crying and immediately felt guilty, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean—if it's a sore subject for you—"

"No, no, it's not that." The Italian wiped his tears and laughed breathlessly, "I...He's the real reason why I got a doctorate in that field; I used Thor as an example in my thesis, but my dad believed that all of that was possible...only he died before he got a chance to prove it. He was very smart and wonderful and I-I just wanted to honor him by showing the world that his work and adding to what he did. One of his satellites returned and, with some help, I was able to send it back into orbit. It reflects light from the sun to be able to get images that are farther away."

"Is he the reason why you love stars so much?"

"Yeah. They've been a constant source of comfort for me my whole life just as my papa said they would be." Feli watched as a shooting star flew by, "I remember once when I was a tiny thing, he took me outside at the summer villas we have in Italy, our family was going through some...personal issues and it frightened me. But papa sat with me on a blanket and showed me all these pretty constellations and told me to look into his telescope." Feli swallowed again, though this time his eyes crinkled at the memory he was telling, "He said that he found a star and named it after me. That way when he died, he would always have me close to him when he was in heaven. Look, it's that one."

Ludwig looked towards where Feli was pointing and nodded. It shone brightly amongst its siblings, a wave of nostalgia brushing over him as he thought about his own mother. Was she up there too? Was she happy for him? He entwined his fingers with Feliciano's and brought them to his lips. Was she laughing at how much of a sap he'd turn for the little Italian in his arms? Knowing her, she'd probably be jumping up and down like Elizabeta tended to do. The two had
always gotten along in that aspect. Sighing contently, the German pressed a kiss into Feli's hair as well, "It's almost as beautiful as you."

Feli chuckled lightly, "I've ruined you, haven't I?"

"I don't mind."

Chapter End Notes

1. How did some rando know something intimate about the Vargas like their agoge when the rest of the world still don't seem to know much other than they're obscenely rich??

:) 

Because this is the last time I will ever post this story again, I think it'll be fun to help y'all solve this mystery novel of a fic ^^
A Religious Experience

Chapter Summary

After taking the next step in their relationship, Ludwig and Feli can't keep their hands off of each other. Their friends and family notice the couple but only Alfred seems to be displeased by the happy couple, especially after Feli asks Ludwig to spend Christmas with him and his family.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much, y'all, for still showing an interest in this old fic <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Ludwig noticed was how incredibly and comfortably warm he was. Enveloped in a billowy comforter and lean legs entwined in his, he fought to cling to his last moments of sleep. He didn't want to wake up in fear that last night had been nothing but a beautiful dream, though he was positive that this time it had been real. Smiling, Ludwig tightened his hold on Feliciano. The second thing he noticed was the scratch of stubble on his chest. The feeling itself was more shocking than it was uncomfortable. He never would've have guessed that Feli was capable of growing so much over the night.

Draping an arm over his head, Ludwig allowed himself to peek at the still sleeping Italian. Sure enough he had some growth along his jawline, making him look older. And that was another thing that Ludwig was unable to grasp. His lover was older than him by a whole year; he himself having barely turned twenty-six in October. Feli often joked that Ludwig was an old man trapped in Michelangelo's David. Only that he was way hotter.

His words.

Ludwig's cheeks pinked as he continued to observe Feli sleep. His sun kissed skin was blemished with purple bruises of various sizes and bite marks but then, so was he. Feli nuzzled his face against his chest and smiled in his sleep. 'He's so cute,' thought Ludwig to himself but despite the happy feeling, a little part of him was still trying to figure out what was going to happen in the future. There was no doubt that he loved him, and if he could have it his way, he'd never let him go. But was that right? Was it ok to do this knowing that one day he'd have to say goodbye?

A sharp pain gripped at Ludwig's heart and he buried his face into Feliciano's soft hair. No. He didn't want to let him go. He didn't. He couldn't. Here was a man who lays everything at his feet and more. From the meals he makes him for their breaks at work to the way he'll wait until all their paperwork was filed away despite it being well past his scheduled work hours. The way Feli's eyes would genuinely light up whenever he'd enter the room always made his heart skip a beat. And the fact that there was so much proof of the Italian's love for him….There had to be a way for him to show Feli that he meant just as much to him as well. But how?

"Mm, buongiorno."
Ludwig returned the greeting through Feli's hair, hiding his reddening face because was suddenly flustered by how deep Feliciano's sleep laced voice was.

Feli chuckled as he shifted so that he could rest his chin on Ludwig's chest, "How are you feeling?"

"I should be asking you that," mumbled Ludwig as he ran a hand over Feli's back. "I didn't hurt you too much, did I?"

"No, you were wonderful." Feliciano giggled at the pink on Ludwig's cheeks and reached up to kiss them before settling back next to him. He reached up to pull him in for a cuddle but Ludwig caught his arm and brought his wrist to his mouth. Panicked, Feli spoke up before Ludwig got a chance to ask anything, "I-I was wondering…"

"Hm?"

"Do you have any plans for Christmas?"

Ludwig paused to think about it. His family usually spent it together but this year he heard talk about how Gilbert was going to go to the states with Matthew, and Roderich and Elizabeta were going to go to the capital to spend the holidays with her family. "I don't think so. Two of my brothers are going out of town and I think my dad said something about spending it with some old friends. Why?" He bit back a smile as Feli looked away shyly.

"Well, I was thinking—if you don't have any plans—that maybe you'd like to spend it with… me and my family at our cottage in Italy?"

"By family, do you mean…"

"Well, just Lovino, Antonio, my cousins, Oswaldo, and Monika. You see, we always spent the holidays together but after they finished their agoge we weren't really allowed to, so it'll be our first Christmas together in four years."

"And you want me to come?"

"Only if you want to."

Ludwig thought about it and nodded, "Alright."

"Really?"

"Ja."

"Oh! That's—Yay!" The corners of Feli's eyes crinkled with joy and he wrapped his arms around Ludwig, bringing his leg up as well to wrap around his hips, "Thank you~"

"Y-you don't have to thank me. I want to spend the holidays with you… It's something couples do, right?"

"I think so; this is so exciting!"

With the way Feli was radiating with glee, Ludwig couldn't help but grin freely. And how could he not? Feliciano's excitement was contagious. The couple cuddled for a few more minutes, simply enjoying each other's company, until they had to drag themselves out of bed. Ludwig tried not to look at his boyfriend with lecherous eyes but he found it incredibly hard not to. The Italian's
perfectly rounded bottom was taunting him with memories of last night.

'Nein,' he scolded himself as he shook his head free of lust-filled thoughts. 'We need to get ready for work and I still need to go pick up the paint. And take the dogs outside.' Ludwig grimaced as he thought about all the things he still needed to do before heading out to work. Part of him wished that he hadn't allowed himself to stay in bed so long.

Feli started to hum to himself as he walked out of the bathroom in a pair of scrub bottoms. He sent Ludwig a smile before skipping into the kitchen where he heard Feliks greet him. The German couldn't help but shake his head fondly. Another larger part of him wouldn't have gone about this morning any other way.

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The rest of the morning went by a lot smoother than Ludwig had anticipated. Feli had offered to take the dogs out to do their business while Ludwig quickly cleaned up his living room. They'd also managed to pick up something before arriving at the hospital. After putting their things away in their office, Ludwig put his hand on the door, preventing Feli from opening it.

"What's wro-" Feli eyes widened as Ludwig pressed him against the door with a kiss. Though surprised, he wasn't about to deny his love affection so he wrapped his arms loosely around Ludwig’s shoulders and kissed him back enthusiastically. A whimper escaped him when Ludwig suddenly lifted him up and pressed them against each other.

Ludwig let out a groan as he nipped at the smaller man’s neck until he remembered himself. He slowly lowered a dazed Feliciano back to his feet and tried to step back but Feli held tight. "It's ok, Luddy."

Still, Ludwig shook his head, "I'm sorry; I shouldn't have-"

"I said it's ok, silly." He lightly brushed his nose against his and grinned, "I feel it too. It's hard to keep your hands off of your partner after you make love. Antonio calls it the honeymoon period."

Ludwig nodded, vaguely recalling that Gilbert told him the same thing. "Still, I'm sorry."

"It's ok," said Feli again. He straightened their scrubs and pulled on his stethoscope with a wink over his shoulder, "We can take care of it during lunch."

After a lot of bargaining with their coworkers, the pair managed to get their week of vacation for the holidays. In return, they had to pick up extra hours and shifts, which unfortunately meant that by the time they got home they were far too tired for anything of the physical nature. Of course, that didn't mean that they didn't get creative with their time.

In the course of the next three weeks, Feli and Ludwig found themselves making love whenever they could, wherever they could. More often than not it was during their lunch break in their office much to Ludwig's delight. He finally got to fulfill one of his fantasies of taking Feli over his desk. Feli shamelessly admitted, as he tucked himself under Ludwig's desk, that he always thought about going down on him while Ludwig worked on their paperwork. Not that it was remotely possible to get any of it done when Feli had his face buried in between Ludwig's legs doing sinful things with his tongue.

"Hey, Ludwig," said Roderich as he strolled into the couple's office without knocking. Ludwig sat straight up in his chair and rolled it all the way up to his desk, accidentally choking Feli by the sudden movement forward. He forced his face to remain as neutral as possible as his brother took a
seat across from him, finally looking away from his clipboard.

The brunette German raised an eyebrow but didn't comment on his brother's disheveled appearance. Instead he asked, "Where's your better half?"

"H-he's…around," stuttered Ludwig. Damn that Feliciano! Why wasn't he stopping?!

"Right. I actually came to speak to you—I'm sorry, are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Roderich got up and moved to go around the desk with his hand reached out to check Ludwig's forehead but paused when he yelled out that he was sure. Shrugging, Roderich sat back down in Feli's chair. "If you say so." He cleared his throat, "As I was saying, tomorrow you and Dr. Vargas are going to be working a twenty-four hour shift."

Ludwig felt Feli release him and nearly wept at the loss of his mouth, not that he blamed him. When his brain registered his brother's words, he stuttered out, "Twenty-four? What will we be doing?"

"Mostly, you'll be in the ICU with Berwald, but since it's a Friday you'll also be on call for the ER. And since you two will be working for so long, you will be given a six hour break. How you use those hours are up to you but I would strongly suggest that you get a nap in there somewhere. You'll need it. Also, Gilbert is going to be doing his first open heart surgery on his own after the holidays if you two want to watch. Alfred will be assisting and Berwald mentioned that it could be good for the residents to observe. Thing is, all the surgical residents are going to be watching so you should sign up if you want a good spot."

Ludwig tried hard not to look at his brother because Feli had picked up where he left off and was now stroking his lower abs as he sucked. Did Roderich have to tell him all this now? What the hell happened to email? When he realized that his brother had stopped talking, he nodded, not trusting his voice. His hands were balled up into tight fists as he struggled to pretend that his boyfriend wasn't hiding under the desk giving him possibly one of the best blowjobs yet.

"Well, I can see you're busy," said Roderich as he tossed his clipboard over to Ludwig. "Just sign that and have Feli give it to Jessica as soon as possible." He poked his head back in before it shut and it was all Ludwig could do to throw his paperweight at his brother. "One more thing, you two should really lock the door if you're going to be doing things like that. Better yet, just go use our private showers on the top floor." With those final words and a smirk, Roderich reached around to lock his younger brother's door and left.

The next day proved to be hell. There was no other word.

Sure, being a resident meant that the hours were longer and things were definitely not as bad as in the States. Both Alfred and Matthew would often comment about their time as residents and how their week was a little over eighty hours and that wasn't even including the study time they had to do. It had taken a toll on their health and Gilbert had refused to let Matthew continue. He suggested coming to Genovia to work at Asclepius and after seeing the drastic differences between the hospitals, Matthew couldn't help but move. Alfred, of course, followed, though his reasoning had more to do with a certain British Nurse that he would later marry but that was neither here or there.

Right now, Ludwig let himself collapse into a chair in the cafeteria, startling those around him. It had barely been ten hours of working non-stop and he was so done. Feli sat on the windowsill behind him and massaged his shoulders, "Ve, it’s ok, Luddy. Just eight more hours of actual work
and we'll be free. Oh, gosh, I still need to wrap up Alex's presents before packing."

Ludwig pinched the bridge of his nose, "You still haven't packed? What on earth have you been doing these past few…" He didn't even finish his thought. He knew.

Alfred looked between the two doctors and poked at his meatloaf casually, "Are you two going out of town for the holidays?"

"Si~ "chirped Feliciano happily. Despite the ache in his feet, he was still very cheerful due to the fact that he and Ludwig were going to spend a whole week—

"…Together?"

Feli stopped massaging Ludwig just as the latter stopped pinching his nose to stare at Alfred. Actually, everyone at the table was staring at the American, unsure where he was going with this. Beside him, Matthew clenched his fork tightly. The Italian tilted his head, "Of course. We're going to take the train to Italy and then drive over to my family's cottage. My family's going to be there so…"

"Your family?" Alfred's jaw tightened as he turned his attention to Ludwig, "You're going to spend Christmas with his family?"

It was then that Ludwig discovered a new way to chase away lethargy. It worked remarkably well; if one was willing to replace it with fearful confusion that is. Why on earth was Alfred so upset by this news? Slowly nodding, Ludwig said, "Ja. It's only going to be his cousins though. I think his mom and grandpa are going to stay in the city to spend it with the children at the orphanage."

"I see." Alfred pushed away his plate much to everyone's surprise.

Tino and Elizabeta exchanged worried looks while Matthew simply mimicked his brother, "A word, Al."

"Give me a moment. Hey, Ludwig, I could've sworn you said that you were going up to Russia for —ow! What the hell, Matthew?"

"I said I wanted a word, Alfred," hissed his younger twin as he gripped his arm tightly and hauled him away and out to the hall. Ludwig watched with wide eyes and a heavy heart as the two argued. Though he couldn't hear what was being said, he only imagined what Alfred was saying if the angry gestures in his and Feli's direction were of any indication. He could vaguely make out the words 'loyalty' and 'not fair to' but it was hard to tell. Feli's hands were trembling on his shoulders and seeing as though he was among family, he reached around to gently hold one.

The silence was pretty awkward when Arthur came by with his own lunch. He took in Feli's face and frowned, "What's wrong, mate?"

Feli blinked a moment before shaking his head, "I'm sorry, what?"

"I asked if you were ok."

"Oh…I think I am." He pulled his hand away from Ludwig's hold and rubbed his arm with it, "Ludwig, why were you going to Russia? Why was Alfred so mad?"

Fear grew tenfold as those words left his beloved's mouth. Was this really it? Was this how things were going to end? No! He would be damned if his relationship ended like this. Ludwig grasped for a suitable excuse when Gilbert, Berwald, Tino and Elizabeta shouted, "Lecture!"
Elizabeta smiled, "It was something he signed up for months ago. There's going to be a convention in Russia and world renowned Dr. Andrew Blaze is going to be a guest speaker. We're all fans but Ludwig most of all."

"Really?" Feli sounded surprised by this, not that Ludwig blamed him. He knew that Feli was well aware of his dislike of doing more than was required of him where medicine was concerned.

Ludwig realized that Feli was waiting for him to confirm this reason and he nodded, "I…it was something that my Vati wanted me to do." And that wasn't a lie. "Not to mention, I hear Dr. Blaze enjoys baking as well." He waited for Feli to call him out on this load of bullshit. His heart was already breaking from the silence that followed until the Italian suddenly draped himself over him in a tight hug.

"You're so cute, Luddy, but I feel so bad now! Why didn't you tell me you already had plans? I wouldn't have asked you to come with me to the cottage."

"I want to go with you," said Ludwig immediately, twisting in his seat to hold Feli's hand again and not caring if Arthur saw. "There's nowhere else I'd rather spend Christmas with," he added shyly.

Feli's mouth parted into a small 'o' before he buried his face in Ludwig's hair, "You're so good to me, Luddy. I love you!" Pulling away he asked, "But why was Alfred so upset?"

Arthur looked over to where Alfred shoved his brother away from him and walked towards the elevator. He put two and two together and sighed, "That's mostly the agency's fault I think. Well, that and the fact that he wanted to attend the convention as well but Ludwig got to it first. And now that he isn't going…well, he isn't too happy. Not to mention that my brothers decided to change our holiday plans on us at the last bloody minute and come down to Victrola instead of Alfred and I going up to England." The Brit sipped his tea before continuing, "All in all, it's been pretty stressful. Please forgive the git for his temper. I'll be sure to have a word with him."

"If it means so much to you guys, I can see if Dr. Blaze can give us a private lecture. He's my cousins' uh, hold on," he pulled out a folded paper from his wallet and extended it on the table. The Italian ignored everyone's wide eyes as he checked the names on the Blaze Family tree, "Great uncle." Shrugging he put the map back up, "He's also really good friends with my uncle Paulo, which, actually…let's just leave it at that cause thinking about the Blaze family gives me a headache."

"The fact that you're related to someone who shares the Blaze blood," started Gilbert, trailing off in thought before grinning, "That's fucking awesome!"

"I…guess?"

"Ignore him, dear. And yes, I think that sounds like it would be very interesting. You should run it by Dr. Beilschmidt. I'm sure he'd love the idea."

Tino put his plate on Berwald's as his husband got up to dispose of their trash. Turning to Arthur, he asked, "What did you mean about the agency? Are you guys having trouble?"

"It's not so much trouble as it is a hassle." Arthur rubbed at his temples, "Apparently, the orphanage lost a lot of the children's records in the fire and are still working with the state in getting them back but you know how the damn mayor is. Blasted Collins…"

"Collins," asked Feli, his eyes narrowing. "What's that man doing this time?"
"It's not the one you're thinking about. It's his father; he supposed to be mediating the transaction but somehow it's on his back burner. Whatever the hell that means. It's really been frustrating and it's been taking its toll on Alfred. He's really been smitten with our two boys."

"Two," asked Matthew as he finally got back to the table, "I thought you guys were only getting one."

"We were looking into that but there was this adorable boy who just became really enamored with us and he has a little brother who's just a darling."

Ludwig and Feli exchanged glances. Alex had told them that Daniel and Sam were being visited often but they didn't know that they were so close in getting adopted. Ludwig sighed. As hard as he tried, he himself couldn't help but grow fond of the little blue eyed angel. He'll be devastated when he finds out that his best friends were going to be leaving him.

Elizabeta 'humphed' loudly and crossed her arms, "I'll call my uncle Magyar and have him straighten out this Collins fellow. And he'd do it too if only to spite Collins senior for the campaign smearing when he was running his seat in the senate."

"Would he really be able to help us with that sort of thing," asked Arthur, hope blossoming in his face.

"If not him, I'm sure Mr. Vargas can."

"How?"

Feli answered for her, "I suppose you can say that when a Vargas wants something, we get it. If push comes to shove, my grandfather will go request those documents personally."

The look of pure joy on Arthur's face was nice and all, but Ludwig couldn't help but mentally frown. Did the Vargas truly have that much power? How did a family of businessmen and musical artists come by such influence? He opened his mouth to ask but Feli was nuzzling against him again. A quick glance at his watch told him that perhaps he and Feli should take advantage of their six hours before the night time influx of patients arrived.

With a sigh, he carefully stood up so to not hit Feli, "We're going to go take that break now. See you all later. Come on, Feli." Ludwig pulled Feliciano by his wrist and walked out the Cafeteria. "Do you want to take a nap?"

"If you want," said the Italian as he swiped his I.D. on the elevator so that it would allow them to go all the way upstairs. His smile became mischievous as he eyed his boyfriend, "Or we could take a shower. Roderich mentioned it yesterday, didn't he?"

Ludwig covered his face in embarrassment, "Ja, he did. I still can't believe you did that while my brother was there."

"Ve, you didn't exactly stop me," purred Feli as he pressed against him. He nuzzled his face on Ludwig's shoulder as the German brought his hands away to rest them on Feli's hips. "We don't have to if you're not up for it."

"I didn't say that." The elevator dinged and opened its silver doors. Both doctors got out and went to their respective lockers to get their things. Feli pulled out his caddy and towel before tossing his scrubs into a plastic bag he'd later take home for laundry. He heard the knobs turn as he entered the bathing portion of the bathroom, "Do you want my iPod or yours?"
"You can connect yours too." Ludwig poked his head out, his hair now out of his usual slicked back style, "The thing will just shuffle our music together anyway." Feli did as he was told before skipping into the stall with Ludwig. He nearly slipped but Ludwig caught him in time. "Careful! What have I said about doing dangerous things like that? Do you want to get hurt?"

Rubbing the back of his head sheepishly, Feli shook his head, "Sorry. Hehe~ but I knew you'd catch me if I fell. You always do."

"Yeah, well, please be more careful," muttered Ludwig, setting Feli back down so that he could push the button that would frost the door. They bathed as their music played in the background. So far, things hadn't been so bad at the hospital. Mostly they've gotten people whose main complaint was the cold. Others came to get vaccinated against the flu while others needed to get boosters or physicals before they traveled. Still, that didn't mean that they weren't tired.

Feli watched Ludwig's muscles flex as he reached up to run his fingers through his hair to get the last of the shampoo out. His eyes followed the pine scented soapy trails down his back and over one of the wings of the black imperial eagle tattooed along his side.

It had surprised him when he first saw it but Ludwig told him that it was his family crest and that everyone had the same one with the exception of Lilly. Hers was smaller and less intricate. It had been amusing to both men that the Italian couldn't keep his hands, or sometimes even his mouth off of it.

And now, as Feli continued to watch, he found himself irrationally jealous of the tiny ravines running over the bird.

"Liebling?"

"Ve?"

"I asked if you were done." Ludwig bit back a smirk at having caught his boyfriend staring again.

"I am."

After inspecting for any remaining suds, Ludwig nodded in approval and turned off the water. As soon as Ludwig shut it off, he found himself with an armful of his boyfriend, "F-Feli? What are you-mph!" Without a second thought, Ludwig reversed their positions and lifted the Italian up by his thighs, pressing him against the wall.

(*)

Feli wrapped his legs around Ludwig to support himself, "Ludwig," he breathed in between kisses, "Mm, amore mio, I need you."

Without pulling too far away, Ludwig asked, "What about our nap?"

"We can take one after we-oh god!" Feli arched his back when his lover let his wet adventurous fingers dip into his opening , "I-is that a yes?"

A cold drop of water fell from Ludwig's fringe and Feli's eyes followed it as it rolled along his boyfriend's neck, over his collar bone, down his chest. He caught it with his tongue just as it made contact with Ludwig's nipple.

The warmth of Feli's mouth contrasted with the coolness of the water droplet, and Ludwig pressed forward, hoping that Feli would understand that he liked it. Feli had played with his chest before
but not as often as he liked. He hissed when the Italian gently bit down, the pain shooting bolts of pleasure to his arousal. Ludwig decided not to stand idle and allowed his free hand to run down Feliciano's back, delighted when his lover arched into his touch when he gently squeezed his cute little bottom.

Feli licked the trail the droplet made and latched onto Ludwig's Adam’s apple, gently scraping his teeth along his skin until he found his pulse. "Do you want anything in particular," he mumbled against his skin in between open mouthed kisses, his voice getting noticeably deeper and it did wonders for Ludwig's libido.

Gasping as Feli bit him again, Ludwig managed to get out, "There's a lot of things I want. What do you feel most comfortable with right now?"

"Mm, I like what you're doing with your fingers," he said sweetly into his ear, licking the shell before nibbling on his lobe, "but I'd very much like if something else was down there," he continued as he ran his hands over the German's muscles, lightly stroking the fine hairs on his abdomen until he followed it to the treasure they led to.

Something awoke within Ludwig at his boyfriend's teasing and he lowered Feliciano back down so that he could position himself against the wall. Reaching into his caddy, he pulled out a small bottle of lube to coat himself. They'd agreed that condoms weren't necessary after they confirmed that they were clean and that was fine by him; one less thing to come in between him and his beautiful Italian. Because Feli was in fact his now; the man had wormed his way into his life, hell his heart, whether he had wanted him to or not. Somehow, he'd made sure to rewire his inner thinking so that all his thoughts were now consumed by him and his quirky ways. Like the way his smile still made his heart flutter or the way time always seemed to slow when they were together. Or the way that he wanted to protect him from anything and everything.

And that included the ugly secret Ludwig was hiding. As he eased into his boyfriend's tight heat, he couldn't help but feel angered at how close Alfred had been at destroying what he had with Feliciano. Couldn't he see how much the Feli meant to him? He dispelled the thought and focused on finding—ah there.

Feli's loud moan was absorbed by Rammstein's vocals as the mixer chose to play one of Ludwig's songs, *Du Hast*. The German couldn't help but give a dry chuckle at the choice. A more ironic song couldn't have been picked. Did he want to go through the marriage until death did they part? Hell no. They asked him once if he would be willing to marry the Russian and, to spare his little brother from the task, he agreed. When Vash found out, he'd smacked him across the head and then attempted to crush him in a hug. Ever since, the young Beilschmidt had tried to find loopholes in the agreement.

Ludwig closed his eyes in bliss and buried his face in between Feli's shoulder blades as he thrusted powerfully into him. He shouldn't be thinking of such things, not when he had his, and he blushes in embarrassment for even thinking it, true love in front of him mewling every time he brushed against his sweet spot.

"I-I don't," whimpered Feli in between moans.

"Huh?"

Reaching around, the Italian wrapped his arm behind Ludwig's neck and pressed his forehead against his, "The…the song. I don't hate you. I love you. I love you so much."

There he went again. Saying something like that so easily when Ludwig was struggling so hard to
say it back. It wasn't as if he didn't feel it. Far from it. He loved him too and he felt so guilty at not being able to tell him—

The song stopped and they heard someone get into the stall in the far corner. Tino's stall. The couple froze with Ludwig still buried deep inside Feliciano. They looked at each other with worry until Tino's cheerful voice cut through the silence, "Woops, sorry there Luddy. Didn't think that it would just stop like that; I was just hooking up my iPod. Hope ya don't mind."

"I-it's fine, Tino," said Ludwig in a strong voice that managed to impress him given his current state. "Are…are you going to shower?"

"Hm? Oh yes. I'm getting a little sleepy and figured why not, right?"

"…Ja."

At the sound of another door frosting over and the water pressure increasing, Feli ground himself against Ludwig impatiently. The German bit his lip and brought his hand to Feli's hip to still him, not wanting to pick up until they had music to drown out the sound of skin slapping against skin. Which was a pity really because Ludwig found that there was no other sound on earth that could arouse him as much as the sounds that they made during sex. With a click, Rammstein continued where they left off and so did Ludwig.

He let himself drape over Feli as he reached forward to stroke the Italian in time with his thrusts. A groan escaped him but he didn't think too much on it until Tino called out from his stall, "Are ya ok, Luddy?" Face flushed in embarrassment and annoyance, Ludwig grunted a ja.

"Can't wait till Christmas, it's my favorite time of the year." Really? Was his brother-in-law going to talk the whole time? "Oh! Feli mentioned that he hadn't wrapped presents yet. I can do it if you want." Apparently, he was. "Teddy and I were going to go spend the holidays at the orphanage too. The little ones are just so adorable. Did he tell ya that we've been thinking about adopting ourselves?"

Oh. Mein. Gott. Ludwig managed to not let his grunt sound like he was currently pleasing his love but Tino kept on talking, "Yeah, we met a boy who is just a handful but sweet. He—"

The screen in the wall turned on just as a jazzy song came on next in the mixer. Ludwig thanked whoever blessed him with this small miracle. That is until he saw who was singing. Felicia, dressed in a beaded flapper dress that exposed her long legs, laid coyly on an ottoman.

"Isn't she precious," cried Tino, "She reminds me so much of Feli. They're both so cute! Felicia sent me this music video. It hasn't even been released yet and I think Seraph is in it. Or maybe Oswaldo, I'm not so sure. I could never tell them apart."

Ludwig felt a little more awkward now that Felicia's voice was resonating in the bathroom but Feli didn't seem to mind. In fact, Feliciano was glaring at him now, silently demanding that he fuck him. And well, when he looked at him like that, who was Ludwig to deny him?

…hot hot heat between you and me. Mmm I'm burning up inside…you don’t know, you don’t see all the static electricity and every time you touch me right, it’s like oh! Oh! Oh my…

"Oh," cried Tino from his stall. Ludwig paused for a second until the repeated 'ohs' were just his brother-in-law singing along. Fine by him.

Ignoring everything else but Feli, he gave into the pleasure and bit Feli's shoulder. Close! He was
so close…and based on Feliciano's quivering legs, he was too. Feli leaned back to rest his head in the crook of Ludwig's shoulder where it met his neck and Ludwig brought their lips together, happily swallowing every moan Feli fed him. Reaching back down, he furiously stroked Feli until they both came simultaneously.

(*)

Weak knees finally gave way and Feli lowered himself onto the black tiled floor bringing Ludwig with him. The taller man didn't complain save for a grunt of his own. Together, they savored their orgasm with loving kisses and soft touches. Above them, Felicia was in bed next to a sleeping woman and appeared to be trying to slip out of bed without disturbing her. That's when one of Feli's cousins popped onto the screen, Ludwig figured it was Seraph. He didn't pay attention, instead choosing to wash away the mess on Feli's belly. The brown lines that didn't wipe away were still calling to him and even though he knew it was the furthest thing from romantic conversation, Ludwig was dying to know about the scars, "Feli--"

"Ozzie?"

Ludwig looked up to see what Feli was staring at and shrugged. So it was Oswaldo, who cared. Feli fidgeted. Apparently, he did, but before he could ask why he heard a rather unmanly scream followed by angry Finnish. Feli and Ludwig looked at each other before scrambling to get up, the latter pushed a button to silence the music while Feli gathered their things in a caddy. With warm towels wrapped around each other, they stumbled out of their stall to see Tino yelling at Mathias while Berwald was frozen with humiliation in their stall.

"I-I didn't know you were going to be like that with your hubby, bro," cried Mathias as his brother shook him.

Tino backed off when he realized they had an audience and jabbed his finger into his brother's chest, "Why are you even up here? Don't you have your own shower downstairs?"

"Well, yeah but…I like your stall better. The water pressure is good."

"Couldn't ya have knocked?" Blushing, he looked away, "Didn't you hear us?"

Mathias nodded, "I did but I figured it was just you singing."

That's when it hit Ludwig that Tino and his brother were….oh god. Groaning, Ludwig covered his face in embarrassment and tried to drag his own lover out for that much needed nap but found that Feli wouldn't budge. Curious, he looked to see what had caught his boyfriend's interest. He found Feli staring at Tino and Mathias' sides, particularly at the hawk tattooed there. On their shoulders he could see what looked like a circle with squiggly lines around its circumference like a sun.

Shaking his head, he was about to ask but Ludwig was pulling him away and this time he allowed himself to be dragged. He was starting to see things again…sleep never sounded so good.

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The following day, Ludwig left early to go take his dogs to his father. Lilly had wanted to take them in but Vash feared that the dogs wouldn't get along with his pet pygmy goats. Feli took that time to quickly wrap up Alex's Christmas presents along with two more for Daniel and Sam. His luggage was already waiting for him in the entryway and all he had to do is put Gino in his carrier.

"Like, are you sure you have everything, Fe?" Feliks was putting together a snack bag for himself. He sighed happily to himself, "I can't believe Toris wants me to spend the holidays with him!"
"Ve~ I can. He really likes you."

"Do you really think so? Oh, who am I kidding. That's not to like." The two friends shared a giggle before finishing up their last minute tasks.

"Ready?"

"Yeah."

Feli dropped Feliks off at Toris' before heading towards his old house, smiling when he saw how it was already decorated with Christmas lights. He recognized his mother's car along with Berwald's and figured that Ludwig was already there.

Sure enough, as soon as he entered, his mother tackled him into a hug, one that he happily returned, "Mama!"

"Il mio bello bambino," she cooed as she smothered his face in kisses. "I was just talking to your," Nicola cast a glance over her shoulder at Ludwig before giggling and returning her attention to Feli, "your boyfriend and he told me that you two were going to the cottage."

"Si~ The others and I were thinking about going to the cabin but we'd rather not. It's too-"

"Flashy?"

"Something like that, yeah. Where's Alex?"

"I'm right here, Feli," chirped Alex as he tried to get in between the two Italians. Feli chuckled and let go of his mother to scoop up the child for a hug of his own. "Is that Gino in the bag?"

"It is, come on. We can let him out in your room." The two made their way upstairs, Ludwig following close behind. "I was hoping that you can take care of him for me while I'm away."

"Of course!" Alex hopped onto his bed where Johan was already curled in a slumber and waited for Gino to come out of the carrier. He hugged his stuffed bumble bee to his chest. "When will you two be back?"

"On the twenty-eighth hopefully," answered Ludwig as he carefully stacked the gifts under the small Christmas tree the boys set up in their room. "We'll be back to welcome the new year with you."

Alex smiled shyly into his bee, "Thank you. You guys don't have to though if you don't want to."

"And who says we don't want to?" Feli knelt down in front of Alex's boat shaped bed and grinned, "Who else would we want to spend time with other than the best little boy we've ever met." He fumbled with his cell phone and wrote down a few numbers, "Here are the emergency numbers. If anything happens or you need anything—"

"Don't be afraid to call," interrupted Alex while rolling his eyes half-heartedly, "I know, I know. You don't have to keep reminding me, papa."

Feli and Ludwig froze, and Alex did too upon realizing what he said. The child's lower lip quivered and tears rushed to his eyes in fear but Feli was quick to hug him, "Shh, don't cry, piccolino." He bit his lip to keep from smiling but the word 'papa' had created warmth within him that he couldn't deny. Kissing Alex's black hair, he pulled away, "Don't cry, sweetheart. It's ok."
"Y-you're not mad?"

"Not at all." Looking pensive for a moment Feli smiled, "We'll talk more about that when we get back, ok?"

Nodding rapidly, Alex gave Feliciano one last hug before timidly giving one to Ludwig as well. The German ruffled his hair affectionately before sliding into the passenger seat of Feli's car, "See you when we get back."

Feli was speaking quietly with his grandfather before he got into his car. They waved goodbye to their loved ones as they drove out. However, instead of getting onto the freeway that would take them to the train station, Feli took the opposite one that would take them to the airport. Curious by the sudden change of plans Ludwig asked, "Where are we going?"

"My grandpa decided to give me my Christmas gift early," answered Feli with a grin. After a few minutes, given the way Feliciano drove, they pulled towards the private part of the airport where a jet waited patiently for them.

Ludwig's jaw dropped, "He got you a plane?"

"Si~"

It was then that Ludwig felt foolish for his once ludicrous thoughts about the Italian only wanting him for his money. The biggest thing his father ever got him was the bakery and even then he had to share with Emma and his little sister. He watched as Feli drove into the lowered hatch of the plane and parked next to a black version of his car. "Is that-"

"Come on bastards we don't have all fucking day!"

Feli flinched and gave boyfriend an apologetic smile, "Ve, sorry, Luddy but I don't know how to fly a plane yet and Lovino is going to be going there with us so…"

Ludwig managed a small smile, "It's ok." He took his lover's hand and brought it to his lips, "You have to put up with my brothers on a daily basis. I don't mind-"

"The fuck did I just say," hissed Lovino as he tapped on the window. "Get a move on!"

They got out of the car and boarded the plane properly; Lovi was grumbling something in Italian that had Feli puffing his cheeks in annoyance. It was rather cute if Ludwig did say so himself. He was pulled into an affectionate hug by Antonio who let go and did the same to Feli, "Hola~"

"Ciao, Antonio. Where's Marcello?"

"He went with Monika to meet up with the quadruplets and Felicia. They'll meet us at the cottage." Grinning, he patted the plane's wall, "I can't wait to put this baby in the air! Reminds me of the time Gilbert and Francis and I-"

"Yeah, yeah," interrupted Lovino as he shut the door to the plane. "Good times, now let's get the damn show on the road." He dragged his boyfriend towards the pilot's cabin and shut the door behind them.

With a sigh, Feli took a seat in one of the plush leather chairs and buckled in, "I'm sorry it took us a while. We won't be in Italy until night time."

"It's fine," assured Ludwig, taking the seat next to Feli. He accidentally brushed a lever and the
Table in front of them flipped open to reveal a caddy of snacks and drinks. "Guess we won't be having a hostess, huh?"

"I can be your hostess. If you want something hot to eat, just let me know and I'll go into the kitchenette to make something."

"I think I'll be fine. I don't want to be a hassle."

Feli looked at him peculiarly, "A... hassle? You? Never." Snuggling into his seat, Feli closed his eyes, "I'm going to take a siesta."

"Alright fuckers listen up!"

"Lovii!"

Lovino ignored the Spaniard and continued to speak through the intercom, "This is your captains speaking. Because you asshats took your sweet time getting here, we're a little behind schedule. Oi! Give that back you bast-"

"This is Antonio speaking." Ludwig rolled his eyes at their antics. Who else would be speaking to them? "What my adorable tomato means to say is that we're going to be arriving in about five hours. So, sit back and relax."

Lovino took back the microphone and spoke in a quieter voice, "Don't worry, fratello. I'll make the ceiling go clear as soon as the sun goes down so you can see the stars. Have a good nap till then."

Ludwig was about to ask Feli why he needed to see the stars but his Italian was already fast asleep. Deciding to best leave the question for another time, he reached out for his book. This one was about how to get along with your Italian boyfriend's family. He skipped over a few chapters until he found one on older brothers. If he was going to survive this trip, he was going to need all the help he could get.

Lilly was waiting patiently outside of Emil's lab for her boyfriend to come out when she got a text from her future sister-in-law. Frowning at the message, she texted back a response before bringing a dainty hand to her mouth. Odd, she was feeling just fine when—Lilly gagged and rushed to the nearest bathroom to expel the contents of her belly into the toilet.

When she finished, she was shocked to find Emil waiting outside her stall with a moist napkin and a worried face, "Are you ok, Lil'?"

"I-I think so." She took the napkin gratefully and pulled out her travel case in search of her toothbrush. "It must've been something I-wait! What are you doing in here?!!"

Emil shrugged, "I saw you run in here and got worried. Are you sure you're feeling well?"

"I am." Lilly smiled at her boyfriend via the reflection, though deep inside, she felt terrified.
A loud bang resonated from Natalya's office causing everyone working outside to shudder and huddle in their cubicles. Ivan, who had been walking by, shook his head and scurried past before she noticed that he was in the proximity. He was having a rather good day and didn't need his sister's foul mood to bring him down. His machine was working properly and now all he needed was for Eduard to start production on another one to send to Wolfgang. The cherry on top had been the wonderful news Natasha had given him; her drug had been approved and was now only a matter of getting hospitals and other pharmaceuticals to try it out for themselves.

And that was the tricky part. The only way for others to trust in him and his family's company was if someone of the utmost reputation trusted him. Bless his stars when Wolfgang had offered a partnership. Ivan smiled and toyed with his Pinocchio, "He is a good man, isn't he little one?" He looked towards his door and sighed in relief that he had locked it. Natalya was starting to pound on the door. "Don't worry, little comrade, she won't get us."

Outside Natalya huffed in irritation. She hadn't been in the best of moods ever since returning from Victrola and that damn wedding. Her supposed family to be hadn't even realized she was in town; not that she wanted them to. It helped her escape with her dignity intact. After all, what girl wanted the world to know that her fiancé was making out with someone else that wasn't her and that that someone was another man.

Natalya balled her hand on Ivan's door. And another thing, her brother was upset that his precious toy had been broken and blamed her for it. He'd been avoiding her almost all month! With a sneer, she stomped over to her sister's office instead. The oldest sibling was hunched over her research when she heard her door slam shut, "Oh, hello, Nat. What's wrong?"

"Ivan is still ignoring me," muttered the blond with her arms crossed in a huff.

"I'm sure he's only busy. Is there something I can help you with?"

"You can tell me where your worthless husband is."

Natasha looked up from her work, "Eduard? Why?"

"I need to ask him something about the male psyche so unless you have something that you aren't telling big brother and me, call that idiot to my office." With that Natalya went back to her office.

A few minutes later Eduard cautiously entered the room, "Y-you called for me?"

"Da."

"...Well?"

"I want to talk to you about Ludwig."

"Oh?"

"Hm. He's...he's dating someone isn't he?"

"So it would seem."

"Does that mean I don't have to get married?"

Eduard frowned, "Only if your brother or Wolfgang forfeits the partnership but...there's a lot of money on the line."
"So my happiness must also be forfeit?"

"Well I know it's unorthodox, but it would mean a lot to your brother if you went through with the marriage. Love can grow—"

"Not if he already loves another." Natalya leaned back in her chair and played with her long hair thoughtfully. "Do you think he could really love me, Eduard?"

"Of course. You're a very sweet, intelligent young woman. It's not as uncommon as you think in this day and age. As I was saying, love will grow over time. You just have to be patient and Ludwig will—"

"No! Not Ludwig. Ivan!"

"He does love you, Nat."

"Not like how he loves Natasha. I don't know what he sees in that damn cow."

The man sputtered, "Cow? Th-that's my wife, Nat-"

"Exactly! She's married…” Natasha trailed off with a gasp, "That's it! Maybe Ivan likes pregnant married women!"

"P-p-pregnant?!"

Natalya waved him away, "Get me the first flight to Genovia. I'm going to surprise my fiancé for Christmas. Ooh! This is going to be great!"

Eduard stayed frozen in place while his sister-in-law left her office mumbling plans to herself. "Pregnant?"

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~In Spain~

"How are you, dear," asked another woman dressed in a simple dress as she entered the greenhouse. She fixed her ring baring the sun with a slash cutting through the metal, "Where are my darling nephews?"

"Flavio is getting his hair done and Luciano went out on an errand." The woman dressed in white turned to her sister-in-law and smiled, "I didn't know you were going to come visit me, Lucrezia."

Lucrezia returned the smile and motioned to the parcels she brought with her, "I brought them their Christmas presents."

"Oh?"

"Mhm. I had them custom made; they're just like his."

"They're beautiful. I'm sure my boys will love them."

"Mama," cried Flavio as he ran to his mother. "Lucy called and said they weren't there." The blond Italian turned to his aunt and squealed, "Zia Lucrezia! Oh, it's been forever!" He hugged her tightly before turning to his mother, "What should I tell him? He wanted to know if he should just come back home or…"
The woman in white lowered her watering can in thought, "Well, they didn't seem to appreciate the message we sent them last time." She tapped her chin for a moment before scowling, "Then again, our messengers did hire a pitiful excuse of a servant to get the job done. Your brother is so much better at that sort of thing. He has a way with words just like your father, you know?"

"Ok, so...who is he going to talk to then? You know how he gets when he’s lonely and bored."

Nodding, the woman in white lit up, "Oh, I know! I know! There's a gentleman who works there, a mister…"

"Sunwell," offered Lucrezia.

"Yeah! That's right, Sunwell. Flavio, tell your brother to talk with him for a while and if they're not there by ten to just come back home. We'll have plenty of time to play with the others soon enough."

"Ok, mama. Ciao, zia. I'll see you later, si?"

Lucrezia nodded, "Of course, nipote." She turned to her sister-in-law in time to see her pick up on watering her flowers. "After all, family shouldn't be apart during the holidays."

"Ain't that the truth," said the woman in white with a girlish giggle. She ran a gloved finger over a flower petal, "Aren't my Acidantheras gorgeous?"

Ludwig was jolted awake by the sudden turbulence. Over the intercom, the two pilots assured them that everything was fine and that they were going to fly around the storm. It would only be another hour before they landed. The German sighed and checked his watch before looking over at his boyfriend. He shook his head at Feli's ability to sleep through anything. It was something he often envied but he supposed that the Italian deserved rest. He slipped an arm around him and pulled him in for a cuddle when Feli started to scream.

Blue eyes widened in shock but before Ludwig could try to wake up Feliciano, the pilot's cabin burst open and Lovi stumbled out, "What the hell did you do, potato bastard?"

"Nothing," cried Ludwig, "I-I was just trying to-"

"Go tell Antonio to clear the ceiling."

"What?"

"The ceiling! Tell him to clear it."

Confused and frightened by Feli's screams, Ludwig scrambled to do as told. When he came back, Lovino was leaning over Feli's seat as if watching something. He heard murmuring in Italian and it took a while for Ludwig to recognize the voice. On the screen in front of them, Oswaldo was talking to Feliciano and motioning to the star filled sky. Silent tears were running down Feli's cheeks but his eyes were engrossed with the glittering dots above. Lovi looked over his shoulder when he realized his cousin was looking past him. Running a hand through his hair, he addressed Ludwig, "He’s fine. Just had a nightmare." With that, the older twin left the couple be and returned to the cabin.

Awkward silence quickly filled the void between Ludwig and the older Italian on the screen but the latter made sure that Feli was fine before ending the call. Before Ludwig could say anything, Feli spoke, "I dreamt that everyone I loved was hurting and it was because of me." The Italian snuggled into Ludwig's embrace and glanced back up, "I don't remember much but…I-I can still
feel it. Everyone hated me." His lips trembled but he gripped his hair and tugged, shaking his head violently as if he were trying to force something out.

When the tugging became more insistent, Ludwig pulled his hands away and kissed them, "That's not true. Nobody could ever hate you."

"You don't know that for sure."

"Yeah, I do. You once told me that you could never hate me and now I'm telling you that I couldn't either."

Feli turned around and stared into Ludwig's eyes, "I love you but you don't know everything about me. How could you possibly say that?"

"The same way you can say it to me. You don't know everything about me and yet you still love me. I don't need to know everything to know how I feel."

"What if...what if I'm," Feli stopped talking and looked down to his thighs.

Ludwig followed his gaze. Licking his lips, the German decided to sway the conversation in a different direction, "Why don't you tell me more about Oswaldo? You two are close, huh?"

To his surprise, Feli's eyes cleared and his cheeks tinged with color, "That's one way of putting it."

The beginnings of a smile teased the Italian's face and Ludwig couldn't help but feel jealous that it was the mention of the older man that caused such a reaction in his lover. Slowly, Ludwig pulled Feli into a kiss much to the latter's delight.

The rest of the of the flight was without incident. The couple continued to make-out until it was time to land. Lovino and Antonio promised to meet with them at the cottage but they wanted to take a detour to buy groceries. Ludwig drove this time around after Feli's...enthusiastic driving in his homeland became too much for the German. It was another forty-five minutes of travel by the time they arrived at the cottage.

"I can't wait, Luddy! Oh, this is going to be so much fun," chirped Feli as he got out of his seat. A quiet hiss caught his attention and he went around the car until he located the source. "Oh no!"

Ludwig walked up, "What is it?"

"My baby has a flat."

"I can change it."

"What, now?"

Ludwig shrugged, "I don't see why not. It won't take me long. Why don't you go inside and start a fire? I'll bring in our things when I'm done."

"Ve, okie dokie!" Feli gave Ludwig's cheek a quick peck before opening the trunk and grabbing his messenger bag. He carefully skipped along the stone trail to the door but when he reached out to unlock it, the door opened on its own.

White puffs of smoke came out of Feli's mouth in short intervals. The hell? Mr. Sunwell would never leave the door unlocked even if they were coming. Looking over at Ludwig, who was busy switching the tires, Feli quickly calculated the probability of an intruder being on the premises. Deciding to better be safe than sorry, he drew out his gun from the messenger bag and slowly
entered. The cottage was quiet save for the crackling of a fire in the living room.

He sighed in relief when he saw the elderly man sitting in front of the fire. He was hunched forward to gaze at the fire, "Thank goodness. Mr. Sunwell, you nearly gave me a heart attack." When the grounds keeper didn't reply or move, Feli put his gun away and came closer, "Mr. Sunwell?" Again, he said nothing and Feli gently tapped him on the shoulder.

The Italian swallowed a scream when Mr. Sunwell fell backward on the chair, eyes missing and mouth cut opened in horrid grimace. Pinned to his chest was a note with a flower drawn and the words 'Merry Christmas Fuckers.' A bloody sun was painted upon Mr. Sunwell's stomach just above the gaping wound where his tattoo had been carved out. Clutching the note in his hand, Feli turned on his heel and ran out, colliding with Ludwig just outside.

"Liebling, what's wrong?" Ludwig saw fresh tears on Feli's face and immediately wiped them away.

"I-I'm…dio mio!"

"What? What's wrong? Did you hurt yourself?"

Hurt? No. What if they were still here? He needed to gather his courage quickly! Feli sniffed and pocketed the note, "No, I'm just really really really stupid. We weren't supposed to meet here. The grounds keeper just informed me that this place is crawling with pests, what with the cold weather. My cousins just called me to let me know that we'll be going to the cabin instead. Please don't be mad!"

Ludwig stared at his boyfriend as he tried to make sense of what just happened. "I…what?"

"We're at the wrong place." Feli saw frustration behind Ludwig's eyes as he was still trying to wrap his head around it. "Are you mad?"

The German shook his head, "I'm not but I am pretty tired. I don't know if I can drive-"

"I'll drive!" At his boyfriend's incredulous look, he added, "I promise I'll drive safely. I swear I will." Feli tugged him towards the car, not wanting them to be out in the open, "You go ahead and take a nap. I'll wake you when we get there."

"How far away is it from here," asked Ludwig as he buckled himself in.

"Another hour I'm afraid but I promise I'll make this up to you." Feli strapped himself in and sent a mass text to his brother and cousins. "I'm sorry, Luddy. I really am."

"It's ok, Liebling. I'm just happy we didn't take everything out." Ludwig yawned and lowered the seat a bit before taking Feli's hand in his, "Gut nacht."

"Nappy nap, Tesoro."

A million thoughts traveled through Feli's mind as he drove in silence. He'd contemplated on turning on some music to keep him company but he decided against it. He wanted to keep a sharp ear for anything suspicious.

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The Italian forests were beautiful and were almost Feliciano's favorite thing about his country. Almost. He couldn't really say yet what his favorite thing was because he loved all of it. It was a
pity that his first time back in years had to be morbid. Pulling into the private path that would take him to the cabin, Feli glanced over at Ludwig to make sure that his boyfriend was still sleeping. Sure enough he was, and thank god for that. The last thing he wanted was for him to witness the next thing. Two men in warm parkas ushered Feli into a garage like cell.

One of them asked in Italian, "Who are you and what is your business here?"

Feli pulled his flannel shirt open to expose his chest and answered back, "Feliciano Vargas, heir to the family. I'm here for the holidays."

The two men automatically stood straighter and saluted him, "Forgive us, sir. We weren't aware you were coming. May we ask who that is next to you?"

"My boyfriend, Ludwig Beilschmidt. My brother, Lovino, will be arriving with Antonio. As will Cerberus, Eric, Marcello, Felicia and Monika. Cerberus will brief you later."

"I understand, sir. Please enjoy your stay here." Both allowed him to fully enter the garage where he turned off his car and waited for them to scan it. When it cleared, Feli drove up the long gravel driveway until he reached the actual garage.

By the time he parked, Ludwig was already waking up. Bleary blue eyes took in his surroundings, "Where are we?"

"Home away from home," chirped Feli happily. He blushed suddenly, "I must warn you though, it may be a bit overwhelming."

Ludwig got out and stretched, "I'm sure I can handle it. My father's estate isn't exactly modest you know."

"Alright. Don't say I didn't warn you," teased Feli as he rolled out Ludwig's suitcase. The two men walked over to the elevator and waited patiently to be delivered to the foyer. "You know...we're going to have the place to ourselves for the night."

"Feli, I'm tired."

"I can make you sleep warmly though~"

"You always make me sleep warmly with or without...that," murmured Ludwig with a yawn. It took him a moment to realize what he'd just confessed but before he could freak out, he found himself in an embrace. Sighing, he hugged back until the glass doors opened to let them out. His eyes widened at the sight. He walked out and went directly to the wall to floor window overlooking the snow-covered trees and mountains. The moon shone brightly, casting a soothing glow over the scenery, "Feli, this...this is beautiful."

Wrapping his arms around Ludwig's waist, Feli buried his face into his boyfriend's back, "I'm sorry, love. So, so sorry."

"For what?" Ludwig twisted around so that he could hug Feli back, "This place is amazing. I don't mind the extra travel. Hey," he gently lifted Feli's face by the chin, "I'm not upset so please don't you be upset." Smiling softly, he lightly pinched the Italian's cheeks, "Y-you...you look so adorable when you smile."

The light returning to his little boyfriend's eyes was well worth everything and it was all Ludwig could do not to kiss him. Oh hell, why not. To his surprise, Feli pulled away before he got a chance to, "Ve, let's go put our things away. I want to show you the greenhouse. We have a hot spring that
I'm sure you'll enjoy."

Feli led the way to their room, silently chuckling at how awed Ludwig was despite his previous comments. And Feli couldn't blame him; the cabin was modern in design and really big. The interior complimented its modern features but still gave that rustic feel of the outdoors. But most importantly, it was safe. Anyone would have to get through the guards stationed at the foot of the cabin and get past the garage before even attempting to get inside. The elevators had sensors that scanned their person through their clothes in search of their tattoos and anyone not baring it or one of their affiliated families was gassed on the spot. Just as an added security.

Ludwig carefully unpacked both of their suit cases and put their clothes away in the drawers and closet while Feli pulled out a couple of towels and stuffed them into a tote bag along with a small bag of toiletries. He peeled off his winter layers until he was down to his long-sleeved shirt and pants and tossed them aside much to the German's annoyance, "Must you do that?"

"Ve, do what Luddy?"

Sighing, Ludwig picked up the clothes and folded them, "Never mind. Now, where is this hot spring of yours? Won't it be too cold for us to get in?"

"Not at all, come on. I'll give you a quick tour." The Italian laced his fingers with his boyfriend and dragged him around the cabin. He mostly pointed out the important parts such as the kitchen, living room, library, and gym. Giggles erupted from within him at how excited Ludwig got from that last room. Finally, he led them a floor down that gave way to an enclosed walk way that attached the greenhouse to the cabin itself.

"Feli...how the hell is this a greenhouse?" Ludwig's eyes widened at the amount of foliage that seemed to go on for miles. Various plants and trees made the place resemble a jungle, especially with the sound of a waterfall echoing through the trees. "What did you guys do? Enclose your backyard?"

"Something like that. My mom and aunt love flowers and my uncle always wanted to keep them in bloom, so they made the greenhouse a few acres big." Feli bounced on the balls of his feet with his arms behind his back. He looked up at his German cheerfully, "It's great 'cause it's temperature controlled so we can grow fruits and vegetables all year around. There's the path that we can take to enjoy the flowery part of the garden and that one takes you to the food. This one will take us to the hot spring~"

Ludwig allowed his boyfriend to pull him along and again he couldn't help but wonder just how rich Feli was. It wouldn't be the first time he wondered and he often thought back to his cousin's words, "They're freaking royalty compared to us." Now that he saw things like this, he was willing to bet that maybe the Vargas was one of the richer families in all of Genovia, if not Europe. He suddenly felt inferior now in more ways than one. He didn't deserve him. Not at all.

"Luddy?"

Shaking out of his self-pity, Ludwig followed the voice until he found Feli, "Ja?"

"I love you."

Ludwig smiled. He really didn't deserve him but he was going to be selfish and tell whoever thought that to fuck right the hell off.

"Let's get in," shouted Feli as he stripped out of all his clothing and jumped in. Warm water
splashed onto Ludwig's face. "Oops, sorry." The German slowly removed his own clothing but was hesitant in removing his boxers. "Ve, don't worry. No one will see us and the water's safe. It's not a natural spring and it gets tested often so it's clean."

"Not natural?"

"Uh-uh. Grandpa had it made." The Italian grinned as he watched Ludwig's hands move to his boxers, "Will you take it off like how I took off my clothes that one time at the club? Remember when I did that dance?"

Ludwig furrowed his brow, "I will not. And yes, I remember." He took them off and quickly got in, "Where did you learn to dance like that anyway?"

"I'm a man of many talents, amore mio," purred Feli as he swam up to Ludwig and nuzzled against his chest. "Mm, but really? My cousin taught me."

Oswaldo immediately came to mind and Ludwig scowled, "Which one?"

"You don't know her, yet. She's from my dad's side of the family." Feli looked up at Ludwig through his lashes and kissed his boyfriend's pec, "I'll dance for you again someday, if you want. I'm really good at dancing. I'm really good at a lot of things."

Smiling in spite of himself, the German wrapped his arms around him, "I know. It's one of the many things I love about you." Feli grinned before swimming away. Shaking his head at his boyfriend's childlike tendencies, Ludwig leaned back and let the warm water relax his tired muscles. It was rather nice, this. He propped his elbows on the ledge, all thoughts other than Feli escaped his mind as his eyelids drooped tiredly.

From the other side of the pool, Feli was watching lover relax. His smile slowly disappeared when he was absolutely positive that Ludwig couldn't see him. That had been a close one.

Too close for comfort. The heir in him was infuriated that someone would dare harm one of his people while the him that Ludwig knew was relieved that they hadn't been there during the attack. He wasn't sure if he could have protected them both.

The man-made waterfall cast a warm spray over him as he ran his palms over the surface of the water. Small droplets disturbed the smooth reflection of himself. Surprised that he was crying, Feli quickly washed them away. Now wasn't the time to cry. Later. He directed his attention to Ludwig again; the German was close to dozing off, so unaware of what could've happened to him.

"Ve...and all from just being with me," murmured Feli to himself. But he didn't want to give him up despite how incredibly selfish that was. He couldn't. Ludwig made him feel whole again, something that he hadn't felt after he had forgone going back to his family and instead had gone back to school for a medical degree. When he was with him, even if it was just filling out boring paperwork, it was as if everything fell into place. Like Ludwig was a bead within the kaleidoscope that was his life that made everything else make sense.

"Little fox?"

Feli gave a small yelp when he looked back up and found that Ludwig was standing a foot away from him. Guilt gripped his belly with both hands at the look of concern on Ludwig's face. He didn't deserve to be looked upon like that. Not when he still had so many things to tell him. His family's dark history, his place within his family...his past. How could he possibly make his lover understand? He'd turn away from him as soon as he learned the truth for sure.
Ludwig's concern increased when Feli didn't respond to his pet name for him. It was a little embarrassing but he only used it when they had absolute privacy. Feli's smile could outshine the sun every time he called him his little fox so it was worth it. What was wrong with his Feli? He'd been acting strangely ever since he woke up from his nap on the plane and was unusually quiet.

He tried again, "Feli?"

"Ve~ I'm ok," chirped Feliciano with a grin. He dove off his rock and splashed Ludwig, somehow managing to get water into his hair and loosen the gel's hold on the golden locks.

Scowling, Ludwig tried to locate his boyfriend. Clearly, the man was holding back on what he was truly feeling and it was beginning to upset him that Feli didn't seem to trust him enough to say what was on his mind. "This isn't like him," he muttered as he swam back towards the ledge, "The man wears his heart on his sleeve but won't tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong, Luddy."

"What the—F-Feli!"

"Ve!"

Feli pulled Ludwig underwater with him, this time fully ruining his slicked back hair style. When Ludwig resurfaced he pulled himself out of the water and sat on the sun chair. Wrapping a towel around his hips, he glared at his boyfriend, "Wh-what was that about?!"

"Are you mad?"

"Well no but-" Ludwig sighed into the kiss Feli suddenly shut him up with. Leave it to Feliciano to figure out he couldn't stay mad at him when he did things like this. Blue eyes widened as the auburn haired man pulled himself up and straddled his boyfriend's lap. He pulled away, "Liebling, I wasn't kidding when I said I was tired." In spite of his words, he found his body reacting to the prospect of making love to Feli. How could he not?

"I know," cooed Feli as ran a warm hand over Ludwig's shoulders to gently massage the tension away until Ludwig was putty in his hands. Trailing his hand back down, he also traced over his abdomen before lightly running them over his muscled thighs. He pressed soft kisses along the German's jaw, speaking in between each peck, "And if you really don't want to I'll stop but if you do, I promise that you don't have to do anything. I'll do all the work."

Ludwig snorted, "That'll be a first." He hissed when Feli rolled his hips against him and smirked. "Was that your form of punishment, Liebling? Because if it was…" Ludwig trailed off as Feli gently pushed him down, his lips not leaving his pale skin as he continued to roll his hips.

(*)

Their hardened members rubbed against each other through the towel every time their pelvises met. Ludwig tried to flip them over but in a surprising display of strength, Feli pinned his hands over his head. Chuckling, the Italian brushed his nose along Ludwig's jaw, "I told you I'm going to do all the work." He pulled away so he could look at his lover better, "I know you're tired, Luddy. Let me take care of you."

The words oozed over his spine and straight towards his arousal like honey, leaving behind a warm stickiness that felt too good to want to wipe off. Ludwig gave a little moan as Feli mouthed sweet nothings against his pulse, his hand coming to lazily stroke the Italian's soft skin.
Feliciano hummed happily as he traced the kisses down Ludwig's neck until latching onto his collarbone. He loved it when his lover touched him. Every stroke against his skin, even the innocent ones they happened to give each other when going about their business, felt like little universes were being created where they touched.

Sliding Ludwig up a bit more so they both could rest comfortably on the sun chair, Feli let go of his wrists so that he could let his hands explore the rest of his lover's body. He kissed along the center of his pectorals before moving teasingly slow towards his right nipple. Underneath him, Ludwig fidgeted impatiently, making him smile. He knew that Ludwig enjoyed it when he played with his chest and instead of teasing him like he usually did, Feli dove in and helped himself.

Ludwig shivered, pleased that Feli wasn't going entirely slow. He savored the feeling of the Italian's wet mouth on his body. The warm mist from the waterfall surrounded them like a steamy blanket and that only added to the hot coil beginning to form in his belly. He almost regretted telling Feli that he was tired. Gasping when his lover bit down on his sensitive nipple, Ludwig gripped Feli's hips tightly and ground against him.

Without deterring his attention from his lover, Feli reached into his tote and pulled out a small vial of lube, pleased that the greenhouse's temperature had warmed up the liquid inside. He squeezed some onto his fingers and moved to stretch himself. Ludwig caught sight of what the Italian was doing and nearly choked on air. That had to be, hands down, the single most erotic thing he'd ever seen in his life.

Feli noticed the staring and smirked, "Do you like watching me, Ludwig? Do you like seeing me finger my hole so it can take your big, thick…" Leaning over Ludwig, he continued to finger himself as he whispered filthy things into his ear.

It was all Ludwig could do not to just flip them over. He couldn't even if he tried; Feli had clenched his thighs securely around him to prevent just that. Instead, he settled for refreshing the fading marks on Feli's skin.

Feliciano parted his lips in heavy pants; Ludwig nipping at his hickies combined with him working himself open gave way to something familiar. He slowed down knowing that he would probably come all too soon if he kept going. That wasn't how he wanted to do it, so he slowly pulled his fingers out and slicked Ludwig with the excess lube. Wiping the rest on the towel underneath them, he rose on his knees to hover over Ludwig's twitching length.

But before he allowed his boyfriend to penetrate him, Feli tugged on his hair to tear his attention away from their lower region and towards his eyes. Ludwig's baby blues were darkened with lust and…affection. So much affection. How did he ever get so lucky?

Earlier in his courting, Feli had told him that all he needed was a teaspoon of love. At the time, it seemed like it would be enough to get him by. But now that he saw just how much devotion Ludwig was willing to give him, something he'd only ever had directed to him once, he felt greedy. He didn't want just a teaspoon anymore; he wanted the whole damn mill.

Holding Ludwig still with one hand while the other was still tangled in his hair, Feli lowered himself slowly, his eyes not leaving Ludwig's. His boyfriend's pupils dilated further with every inch he took until he was fully seated on his lap and only a thin ring of blue was visible. This made Feli laugh breathlessly.

"W-what," asked Ludwig as he tried his hardest not to buck upwards. It was rather difficult but he was managing.
"Your eyes," moaned Feli, "they look like a lunar eclipse. They're gorgeous. You're gorgeous."

Blushing, Ludwig huffed before shyly mumbling, "Everything about you is gorgeous."

They stayed still for a moment to stare into each other's eyes. Strangely enough, that was more intimate than the fact that they were one with each other. Finally breaking eye contact, Feli closed his eyes and pressed a hand on Ludwig's ribs, slowly grinding down, hips moving in small circles.

Ludwig gasped in pleasure too, hands balling into tight fists as Feli started to move up and down. He brought his hands to rest on Feli's thighs and leaned his head against the cushion of the backrest to watch his beloved melt over him.

Behind closed eyelids, Feli could see everything. Feel everything; from tiniest droplets of mist on his skin to the delicious way Ludwig was rubbing him inside. Once, when he was a still a kid, he asked his father what it was like to be in love. His dad had replied that it was like having a religious experience. Given their line of work, the Vargas often shied away from the church and the Vargas heir was no exception. Besides, what did religion have to do with love let alone something like this?

Well, now he knew. It had absolutely nothing to do with it. The universe was flawed, hell, that was a lesson he learned ages ago, and that was the only truth he could live by. He also knew that Ludwig had flaws despite how often he would praise his perfection. And he could live with those flaws; they made up who Ludwig was. Like how he had this annoying habit to make sure everything was nice and organized all the time. Or like how he just had to hover over him when they were cooking together so he could wash everything or wipe any little speck on the counter. Or the fact that he has trouble talking about his feelings so he hasn't quite said the L word despite how it shines brightly in his eyes. No, Ludwig wasn't perfect and neither was he, and perhaps neither was their relationship. But that was ok.

And even if this was probably the furthest thing his father meant when he told him that, Feliciano realized that this could easily be his religion, Ludwig his deity, and every thrust a prayer that kept his world spinning. Their moans were hymns and he'd never get enough of them.

Because perfection lied in the moments when he was with Ludwig be it cuddling or working side by side or just enjoying each others company in silence as they worked on their own things. Perfection lied in the fact that every time he was like this with Ludwig, be it in the comfort of their bed or even over their desk, he saw something behind his closed eyes. He saw something infinite that was silent like space until the symphony of their impassioned moans and cries for each other filled the void. Much like now.

Feli gasped when Ludwig brushed against his prostate and he increased his speed only to have him suddenly stop him. Scooting back until he met the indention of the sun chair, Ludwig brought Feli with him without pulling out. He ran his hands along his boyfriend's spine and pressed kisses onto his moist skin. Feli grinned; it would seem that his lover hadn't liked not kissing him. When he saw that Ludwig was comfortable again, he slid his arms around Ludwig's broad shoulders, picking up where they left off. Panting as he bounced harder and faster, the slight burn in his ring of muscles from the friction added to his pleasure, much to his surprise.

Then again, he really shouldn't be surprised. He found himself liking many things that he didn't think he would ever since dating Ludwig. For instance, he never thought he'd like to be bitten the way Ludwig was sinking his teeth into his shoulder. He never thought he'd absolutely love the way it felt when Ludwig dug his fingers into his hips and pulled him roughly against him.

"Oh fu-hah, yes!" Feli pushed himself towards Ludwig's hand as it wrapped around his leaking
arousal and stroked him as he continued to bounce. The coil in his belly was tightening so sweetly and he the vision of the infinite behind his closed eyes was beginning to take form.

Ludwig kissed Feli's temple the best he could, "Are you close, Liebling?"

"Uhhuh."

"C-come…come for me."

"Nh..not yet." Despite his words, Feli didn't slow down. He opened his eyes and tugged Ludwig back so he could see him, "Open your eyes."

"What?"

"O-open them…I-nng-h-I want to see." When Ludwig finally did what he asked, he felt it incredibly hard to look away. There it was. A supernova of emotions in the vast of Ludwig's beautiful eyes. Lust, desire, adoration, trust. Happiness, hope. Each and every single one, stars, or rather they will be by the time Feli's through with him. "Keep them open," he demanded as he bounced harder, fueled by Ludwig's pants and moans.

Leaning forward, Feli captured Ludwig's lips. He coaxed his tongue into his mouth, watching carefully as he sucked on it.

"Feli," cried Ludwig, as he fought to keep his eyes open. Overwhelming pleasure coursed through every fiber of his being at the feel of Feli's heat milking him for all that he was worth.

Feli saw, as his lover trembled in orgasmic bliss, the collision of all those emotions until all that was left was a single one burning brightly amongst the debris: Love. That was enough to push him over the edge. Gripping tightly to Ludwig's shoulders, Feli cried out his name as he felt his own body shake with euphoria. White ribbons shot out, coating both of their stomachs but neither complained.

(*)

Ludwig curled his legs in, wrapping them around his waist before curled his own around him. He pulled him in for a strong embrace, not at all minding the fact that he was smearing Feli's essence between them. "Th-that was amazing, liebling," he whispered as he snuffled against Feli's hair before kissing him.

The Italian nodded in agreement before wincing, "Ve…could you please help me up, Luddy?" He felt Ludwig's hands on his waist, carefully lifting him up and off before pulling him back in. Chuckling softly, Feli looked curled into his boyfriend's warmth, "Yay for muscles! Did I do good?"

"You did wonderfully."

"I told you I could do it."

"Yes, you did." They laid in comfortable silence as they basked in the afterglow. Their labored breathing steadily returned to normal and Ludwig felt himself doze off to the gentle sound of the waterfall and feel of Feli's heart beat against his skin. When the lights suddenly dimmed, Ludwig jumped in alarm and tried to reach out for their clothes but Feli wrapped his limbs around him and kept him still. "Feli-"

"It's ok, amore. The lights are on a timer. No one's here; my family won't be here until late
tomorrow morning." Kissing Ludwig sweetly on his shoulder, Feli, cuddled close, "Let's go to sleep."

"Here?"

"Mhm. I don't feel like getting up."

Ludwig seemed hesitant, "Are you sure no one will see us?"

"Positive. And if they do, so what? You shouldn't be ashamed of your body."

"It's still embarrassing."

"Look at mine," murmured Feli sleepily, "I'm not very muscular and have lots of scars but I'm not embarrassed." His eyes shot open upon realizing what he said but it was too late. Ludwig looked more alert and was going to take this opportunity to ask what had been on his mind since he first laid eyes on the thin brown lines.

"What happened," he suddenly blurted out. Eyebrows furrowing at his own lack of tact, Ludwig cleared his throat and tried again, "I mean—er, how…uh, how did you get those?"

Feli tightened his hold of Ludwig and felt the German do the same to him. He didn't say anything for a good while and just when Ludwig thought that his boyfriend had fallen asleep, Feli spoke up. His nails dug into pale flesh but Ludwig didn't mind, "I was young…and lost and in a bad place after my father died. I felt alone and like it was somehow my fault that he died. He just—he meant so much to me."

The gears were slowly turning in Ludwig's head as he put two and two together. Realization hit him hard and he pulled Feliciano on top of him. He wasn't exactly sure what to say but he hoped that the action could speak for him.

"Ludwig?"

"Ja?"

"I love you, please don't be sad for me. I'm ok now. More than ok actually because I have you and," Feli shifted to rest his chin on Ludwig's chest so that he could look at him, "when I'm with you everything bad that has ever happened to me, or the fear of things that will happen to me, fades. You—you make me feel safe."

Reaching up, he caressed Ludwig's pink cheek and smiled, "Can I tell you a secret?" Ludwig kissed the pads of Feli's finger tips and nodded silently, pleased that his little Italian was finally going to tell him what had been on his mind today. "While we were doing it, I was thinking about something my dad told me when I was a kid. He told me that I would know when it's true love whenever my lover makes me have a religious experience.

"And I didn't understand at first but tonight, I finally confirmed what I've had a hunch about." Grinning excitedly, Feli continued, "I love you!"

This time Ludwig laughed with him, "I know. You tell me every chance you get." And he slightly envied him for being able to say it so freely.

Feli's auburn hair swayed this way and that as the man shook his head, "You don't understand, Tesoro. My skin literally gets these tremors every time you touch me, sexy or not." He ignored the embarrassed expression on his boyfriend's face and continued, "When I kiss you, I feel like the
ground I'm walking on is going to give way and I'm just going to fly away unless I'm holding on to
you. When you embrace me in your arms, time just stops for me a-and I—there's no other place I'd
rather be than nestled in your strong muscles."

"What if I wasn't muscular, would you love me then?"

"I'd love you even if you were missing a limb or an eye!"

Ludwig smiled softly, "Would you still love me even if I wasn't a doctor?"

"You could quit and be a fulltime baker for all I cared. I'd accept you no matter what you were."

'What about a liar and a cheater,' thought Ludwig mournfully, 'would you love me then?' He was
drawn out of his thoughts by nimble fingers tracing along his tattoo.

"Feli," he croaked before clearing his throat and trying again.

"Ve?"

"There's something I want to tell you and…I'm not so sure how."

The Italian let out a small puff of breath against his skin and the warmth of it warmed his entire
being. He focused on Feli's face, noting how smooth it was with the exception of a few whiskers
starting to grow along his jaw. He had to tell him. He had to try. "Feli, you know I'm…not very
good with words but you deserve to know."

"Ok."

Right. Ok, he could do this. Licking his lips, he tightened his hold on the Italian before continuing,
"I am afraid that I'll lose you. I never thought I'd—I'd be so lucky to find someone like you. All my
life, I've been this strict, antisocial guy with very little friends. Scratch that; I've never had a friend
outside my family or pets. I'd never let anyone close because I was afraid that they just wanted to
use me for their own benefit. And for a long time, I was fine with that. I was perfectly fine with
living day by day."

Glancing down at the Italian, Ludwig chuckled, "And then I met you. This loud, obnoxious, lazy
weirdo with the strange curl who wouldn't leave me alone despite how much I pushed him away.
Who made me realize that I was living in the dark despite there being sunlight out. And who
smiled at me like I was worthy of something more. Feli, your smile—no—your happiness, I've
found that your happiness can light up my day brighter than any sun. Feli, you are the sun to my
day."

In the greenhouse somewhere, an echo of something falling faintly registered in Feli's mind. The
man was too busy gaping at his lover, staring at him with watering eyes. Did he…did he really say
that to him? Was this a dream? No…no it wasn't. It wasn't a dream! Feli could feel those tingles
again, could see the infinite and the galaxy of stars in Ludwig's eyes. He had meant every word and
that was more than Feli could ever have hoped for. He realized then that his father had been right.
He always was right and that made him love him even more.

All his demons, who he was and who he had to be, were cast out and all that remained was the fact
that he was just Feli. A romantic fool who loved Ludwig with everything he had. Closing his eyes,
he finally gave way to his exhaustion, "Ve~ I love you, Ludwig."

Ludwig watched as Feli fell asleep almost instantly. Sighing contently, Ludwig kissed his moist
hair before settling against the sun chair himself, "Goodnight, Feliciano," 'I love you, too.'
Oswaldo slumped against the tree he'd been hiding behind. He'd only gotten in a half hour ago. After receiving the mass text Feliciano had sent out, he told his brothers that he was going to the cabin to make sure Feli was safe. Imagine his surprise when the guards told him that his angel wasn't alone. It'd taken him a moment but he eventually found the pair in the greenhouse, and in the most intimate embraces.

The older Italian had been shocked at first, then sick. And yet, he didn't leave. Anxiety over what had transpired didn't allow him to, so he walked over to the garden area of their green house to block the sounds of the couple's love making. Oswaldo dozed off momentarily near a patch of sunflowers until he awoke with a start. Figuring that they were done by now, he wandered back and froze when he heard what Ludwig told Feli about him being his sun. His golden eyes shot open and he'd fallen over onto a pot but neither man had noticed.

"I don't think the idiot realizes what he's done," muttered Ozzie to himself. Straightening back up, he peeked around the tree only to find the couple fast asleep. Shaking his head, the Italian-American figured that it was safe. With silent steps, Oswaldo approached them.

Feli was sleeping soundly on top of Ludwig with the German holding him protectively against his chest. Their legs were intertwined and Ozzie could see white trickling down Feli's scarred thigh. Sighing, he reached into Feli's tote and pulled out a large fluffy grey towel to drape over them. When he made sure that his angel wouldn't be cold, he continued to watch Feli's sleeping face.

'He looks so peaceful,' thought the older Italian. Without thinking, Oswaldo reached out and smoothed Feli's hair before placing a kiss to his forehead, "Sweet dreams, angel. Io—ti amo."

With that, Oswaldo retreated back to the cabin, thoughts about what needed to be done before the rest of their family arrived replacing the things he'd witnessed.

Golden eyes cracked open at the soft click of a closing door. Feli pulled a corner of the towel to his mouth before pressing his cheek against Ludwig's chest, "Anch’io, Oswaldo," he whispered with a sad smile.

A series of furious knocks startled Roderich from his sleep. Elizabeta groaned irritably and tried to pull him back but the German managed to escape her hold, albeit begrudgingly. It was barely dusk and someone had the nerve to call upon them. He kissed her hand gently before slipping out of bed, "I'll be back in a bit, darling."

Roderich pulled on a white undershirt and his boxers before stomping over to the door, "I swear if it's you Gilbert…" His violet eyes blinked rapidly at the disgruntled Russian at his door. "N-Natalya?" Eyebrows furrowing, he crossed his arms, "What's the meaning of this? Do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Where is he," she snapped as she looked over his shoulder.

"Who?"

"You know who, damn it!"

The German rolled his eyes, "If I did, I wouldn't be asking."

"Ludwig!"
"He's not here." Both Roderich and Natalya looked to see Elizabeta emerging from the hall
tightening her robe around her figure. "He's out of town for a convention in the states with Matthew
and Gilbert. Won't be back till the new year I'm afraid."

Natalya's glare softened at the sight of the Hungarian's bump. "Alright," she spoke evenly, her
voice losing all heat. "Tell him I stopped by. I'll be leaving for Russia in the morning. See you all
at my wedding." As the Russian drove off, Roderich and Elizabeta exchanged worried glances.
What the hell was that all about?

Buttons were quickly dialed on Natalya's cell phone until she managed to find her brother-in-law's
number. Connecting the call, the young woman worried her hair until he answered, "Eduard…well
who the hell else would it be?!...yes, I made it fine….no, I'm not ok. Those damn Beilschmidts lied
to me! First, his dad wasn't at the estate, so I went to the albino one…yes, Gilbert. I went to his
house and he and his invisible man of a husband told me that Ludwig wasn't there. Then I went to
the tall stoic one with the girly man-bride of his and they told me that Ludwig wasn't there. Finally,
I went to the prissy one with Elizabeta and they told me that Ludwig had gone to the states with
Gilbert and the other one! They're all lying to me!"

The Russian glared at her manservant in the front when he looked at her via the rear-view mirror.
Shaking her head, she listened intently to what her brother-in-law was saying before answering
back, "Do you really think Ivan will be upset?...No, I don't want big brother to be sad. I'm going to
try the little ones next…Shoot me? Why would he…Trigger happy? No, I suppose no. Da, I'll be
returning home tomorrow…and you'll help me think of something?...Thank you. Da, goodbye."

Natalya hung up and leaned back against her seat in thought. Eduard promised to help her get her
footing back in check with Ludwig and his family, and she trusted him to keep his word. She
pulled out her brother's little Pinocchio doll and gently patted its head, "For big brother, I'll do
anything."

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a comment to let me now your thoughts!
The Thing About Love

Chapter Summary

Ludwig and Monika spend Christmas with the Vargas.

Chapter Notes

I think the fact that "What Does the Fox Say?" was popular when I wrote this chapter is a testament to how old this damn story is lol!

Morning came all too soon and then not soon enough. Feli was the first to wake up, though this was mostly because he heard the mock rumble of thunder in the greenhouse which was usually followed by a light 'rain' for the foliage. Gently rousing Ludwig awake, the two shared a lazy morning kiss before gathering their things together and shuffling towards the cabin. The sprinklers turned on just as they closed the door and they were greeted by pots and pans banging in the kitchen.

The smell of coffee and breakfast cooking immediately roused their bellies to grumble in want. Oswaldo came out holding a cup of hot chocolate, "Good morning!"

Embarrassed, Ludwig rushed to their bedroom for a quick shower and a change of clothes. Feli giggled and ran up to the older Italian, "Ozzie! Where are the others?"

"They'll be here in a few minutes." Oswaldo tenderly kissed Feli’s cheeks before handing him his coffee. He glanced up to make sure Ludwig was gone before addressing Feli again, "Lovi and my brothers did a sweep at the cottage but didn't find anything missing. It couldn't have been a robber though 'cause old man Sunwell could handle himself."

"Ve...no, it wasn't robbers." Feli reached into his back pocket and pulled out a note, "This was pinned to his chest."

"'Merry Christmas Fuckers'...what the hell?"

"I know, right? And the flower...it's a sword lily just like the one they painted at the orphanage. Ozzie, I don't like this. They hit us at one of our homes!"

"Shh," cooed Oswaldo, looking over Feli's shoulder to make sure Ludwig hadn't appeared at the younger Italian's outburst.

Feli followed his gaze and shook his head before lowering his voice, "It was a home, Ozzie...home." His eyes widened as that bit of information finally sunk in. His breath came out harsher, "H-home...th-they—home! Oh, god! Oh, god!"

"Feli, come on, angel." Oswaldo hugged Feliciano to him, "It's ok. You're ok."

"But Mr. Sunwell-"
"Put up one hell of a fight. That wasn't your fault. Ok?"

"If I'd gotten there sooner--"

"Hey! What did I just say, huh? It wasn't your fault. Now come on." Gently nudging Feli to his own room, Ozzie prepared a shower for him, "Wash up, ok? I'm going to finish making us some breakfast and our brothers and Tonio and Licia and Moni will be here and we're going to have a wonderful Christmas." His eyes softened as Feli started to take off his clothes, zeroing in on the scratches and bruises on his body, "How on earth did you get--"

"Ludwig."

"Ah. Well, I'm going to go finish getting breakfast ready…unless you want me to stay."

"I'll be fine."

"Did you bring your medicine?"

Feli stepped inside the shower, "I told you I'm not taking it anymore. I'm fine, really. Tell Ludwig, if he gets out before me, that I'm showering and I won't be long."

Oswaldo nodded and took his leave. He'd wanted to ask why Ludwig was there in the first place but figured that now wasn't the time. Carefully tucking the bloody note into a plastic bag, he put it in one of his drawers so that they could take a closer look later. The smell of burning bacon caught his attention, "Merde!"

~In Victrola~

Fur tickled Alex's nose as the boy unconsciously pulled Gino closer to him. Beside the tabby, Johan watched over the two protectively. Some of the older children had been harassing Alex about his arm again and this time Daniel hadn't been around to defend him. This whole arm thing was getting old. He'd learned to accept his fate, why couldn't they? Sniffing sadly, Alex was halfway tempted to call Feliciano like the Italian had asked should he ever feel the need to.

However, Alex didn't want to be a bother. He felt he was already pushing his luck by always wanting to be near him, and the last thing he wanted was for Feli to stop visiting him. On the other hand, he'd grown used to the man's kindness and had even started to entertain the idea that he would want to adopt him. He confessed his desires to Daniel who only smiled and crossed his fingers. That's when the older kids brought up the fact that the only reason he even knew Feliciano was because he was missing half of his arm, and that Feli would never have given him a second glance if the orphanage hadn't burned down and was only visiting him out of pity.

And now here he was, holding on to cat who belonged to a man he was already calling father. Alex looked at Gino sadly, "Do you…do you really think he's only visiting because he feels bad for me?"

"I don't think he is." Alex gasped and curled into himself further at the sound of a feminine voice. He relaxed when he saw that it was only Nicola Vargas. The Italian squeezed behind the bookshelf next to the boy, not at all minding that her jeans or oversized cardigan got dusty.
Alex stared at her kind face. Her eyes were green and almost feline like her brother and sister but they still held the warmth Feli always looked at him with. When she extended her arms in a silent invitation, Alex shyly climbed into her lap and allowed her to embrace him.

"You know," she started, her voice thick with an Italian accent, "my son used to hide here all the time when he was younger."

"Why?" The boy tilted his head to the side in confusion, "Were they mean to him too? I can't think of anyone who would want to be mean to him."

Nicola's eyes saddened at a distant memory but she smiled through it, "You would be surprised, piccolino, at the cruelties the world hides." Shaking her head, she continued, "But that doesn't mean that there aren't good people waiting or willing to soothe your wounds with love. My son...sons and nephews, they learned at a young age how cruel people can be but they never lost sight of the good in people too."

"The other kids make fun of me and are mean to me," confessed Alex as he stoked Gino's fur. "I don't mind anymore because I'm used to it, but I don't like it when they tell me bad things about Feli. I hate it! He's a good man. He is!"

"Shh," cooed Nicola, rocking them both, "I know he is. He's my son after all, ah? Please don't hate them. They are simply jealous of how good my son has been to you."

"He's good to everybody."

"But he only loves you." When Alex gasped, Nicola smiled, "He has confessed—or rather expressed—his interest in making you a part of our family, with him as your father. I am personally thrilled as I've always wanted grandchildren. However, I did tell him that I would first speak to you and ask for your opinion on the matter."

Alex's blue eyes started to water. Feli wanted to adopt him...Feli wanted to adopt him. Him! He knew it! He knew that Feli wasn't just visiting out of pity. He smiled grandly and nodded, "I want him as my papa! I do, I do, I do! Oh, but wait. What about Ludwig?"

Nicola bit her lip in thought, "Would you want him as your father as well?"

"I like him too. He reads to me and Daniel and Sammy. Also, his hugs make me feel safe but...what if he doesn't want me?"

"Feliciano told me that he wants to adopt you regardless."

"I don't want to make Feli and Ludwig break up. Feli loves him too."

"You won't. Can I tell you a secret?" At Alex's eager nod, Nicola leaned in and whispered something into his ear, making his eyes light up even more. "But you have to keep it a secret, ok?"

"Cross my heart, I won't tell anyone."

"Va bene~ now come on, let's go see if my sister and Matron Megan need any help with Christmas dinner."
In Italy

Ludwig, Feliciano, and Oswaldo were putting away their dishes when the others arrived. Lovino was cussing up a storm about how prices had gone up since he'd last visited and could swear that it had more to do with the fact that the local grocers knew they were in town than anything else. He nodded at Oswaldo and Feli before heading to his and Antonio's room.

Felicia and Monika walked in next, the former squealing in delight that Feli had won over his own German. She tripped a couple of times in her desire to hug her cousin but Monika was there to help her back up and stop the tears before they even started. Rolling her eyes in mock suffering, she greeted Ludwig politely and rolled her and her girlfriend's suitcase to their room. Finally, Bernardo, Seraph, and Eric came bustling in with Marcello, the latter pulling Feli in for a hug.

"It's been too long," cried the younger Italian. His large golden eyes held tears, "Why don't you visit me more often? We live in the same city and you don't play with me as often as Lovi and Tonio do. Why?"

Feli clucked and hugged his cousin back, "I don't mean to ignore you! I'm just really busy. Between work and Ludwig and visiting Alex…I promise to start making time for you too."

"Who's Alex?" Seraph pried the emotional Marcello off Feli so that he could kiss his cheeks in greeting.

"He's the boy I was telling you guys about. Remember—"

"Oh, right!"

Ludwig stayed back and watched nervously as Feli's cousins greeted his boyfriend. They weren't going to try and greet him like that, right? Then again, he supposed they were just happy to see each other again. Feli had mentioned it'd been years since they last got to spend so much time together. It was nice to see that it didn't mean that their relationship suffered because of it.

"You'll get used to it," said Monika. She'd come out after putting everything away and was now leaning next to her own cousin. A soft smile made its way to her face, "It took me a while to get used to their habits but they mean well. They're very good people. Loud and a bit obnoxious but good. Let me warn you though…they can be a bit, eccentric."

"I,uh," Ludwig cleared his throat and gave his cousin a side glance, "I've read a few manuals on how to meet your significant other's family. Is there anything you could—uh—any tips you could offer would be great."

"They don't judge, well, Lovino might, but the others, they won't. Just be yourself and relax."

"You're telling me to relax?"

Monika blushed and nodded, her fringe moving to hide her eyes, "I am. They taught me not to be so frigid. Felicia—"

"Come on guys," called Eric as the Vargas' rushed out of a closet with wicker baskets in hand. Bernardo handed one to his brother before jogging to join the others. "We're going to harvest some veggies." Looking around to make sure Felicia wasn't listening he whispered to Monica, "She wants to use the garden shears to get flowers."

The panic in Monika's face was priceless. She uncrossed her arms and nudged Ludwig, "Come on. Knowing her, she'll find a way to trip and or hurt herself."
Ludwig chuckled and followed after them. He shyly reached out to hold Feli's hand, "Hi."

"Ve, ciao, bello~" Feli winked at him and handed him a small basket, "We're going to get vegetables for pizza and salad."

"We're making pizza for lunch?"

"For dinner. Marcello still needs to prepare the dough and it's going to take a few hours to rise perfectly. We're having pasta e fagioli for lunch, is that ok? It's a simple pasta and bean soup but since Bernardo's making it, he's probably going to add more things."

"I'm sure, it'll be delicious." Ludwig blushed as they walked past the route that would take them to the hot springs. When they finally arrived at the vegetables, Ludwig gave a gasp. Rows upon rows of vegetables were organized neatly by color starting with the carrots, "How big did you say this place was?"

Feli smiled and led him to the tomatoes, "This part of the greenhouse is five acres, foliage covers about ten. Ve~ aren't these yummy looking?" Just as he was about to reach out to pluck the juicy red fruit, a hand slapped his away. He looked up to find his brother scowling, "L-Lovi what-"

"Take a step back and avert your eyes from the food of gods," growled Lovi before eyeing the tomatoes kindly, "only those worthy enough may pluck them. And you, fratello, and your potato bastard are not worthy—oof!"

Antonio draped himself over his boyfriend and laughed good naturedly, "Don't mind him, amigos. He just really loves tomatoes and is protective of his garden. You should see how protective he is of his cherry tomato garden on the balcony of our loft. He has his cat sit outside and guard them from pigeons."

Scoffing, Lovi shoved the Spaniard off of him, "Yeah, and Mico is fucking awesome at keeping those rats with wings away."

"Language, Lovi," admonished Antonio making the Italian grumble as he returned his attention to plucking tomatoes and gently sitting them in his basket.

Feli looked around and saw that the quadruplets had distributed themselves among the other vegetables while Felicia and Monika went over to the flowers. Sighing contently at being with his family again, he gently nudged Ludwig towards the enclosed mushroom patch, "Come on. We can harvest these. They'll be really yummy on the pizza!"

When they were finished filling up their baskets, Oswaldo draped his arm over Feli's shoulders and pressed a kiss to his temple. Ludwig didn't think too much on the matter given what Monika told him but he would be lying if he said that he didn't feel jealous when Feli blushed lightly and returned the gesture. Before he had a chance to swipe his boyfriend back, he felt a heavy arm drape itself over his own shoulder. Tensing, he looked over to his left and saw that it was Bernardo…or was it Seraph?

Seraph smirked, "We decided to go easy on you and dress differently. I'm Seraph, the oldest. Want to come with me and Antonio to cut down a Christmas tree?"

"I—uh..."

"Oh, yes," chirped Feli. He met Ludwig's eyes in a silent plea to attempt to bond with his family and Ludwig gave a mental groan. Curse his boyfriend and his adorable puppy eyes!
"Ja…"

"Va bene, come on!" Seraph took Ludwig's basket and gave it Eric, "We'll take a cart with us so we don't have to carry it all the way back."

Feli watched in amusement as Ludwig buckled himself in and gripped the seat tightly. No doubt he thought that his family drove just like him. Well, he wouldn't be wrong to assume that. He skipped his way to the kitchen where Marcello was already prepping the dough while the girls busied themselves making flower arrangements.

"So," started Oswaldo as he dumped his vegetables into the large basin to wash them, "you're really serious about this Alexander kid, huh?"

Helping to rinse away the dirt, Feli nodded, "I didn't mean for it to happen…it just did."

"I can relate to that."

"Yeah. I mean, he's just so adorable. His way of viewing the world is innocent and…he deserves to be happy, and I know I can make him happy. He called me Papa, you know? Poor bambino thought I would be mad but it made me happy."

They looked up at the sound of a pot falling to the ground. Marcello was trying to stifle his laughter at Lovino's shouts while Eric simply rolled his eyes and continued to help cut out the pasta dough for their lunch. Taking a step closer to Feliciano, Oswaldo shook his head at the commotion, "Um, Feli?"

"Ve?"

"I didn't want to ask with him here but…why exactly is Ludwig here with us? Not that I mind," he added quickly.

"Why wouldn't he be?"

"Well just a few months ago you were barely courting the guy and now he's–"

"Felicia brought Moni to Christmas their first year together when they first started dating."

"That's true but her situation was different. You know how her dad was." Feli nodded solemnly at the memory. "Besides, it's not like you two are that serious anyway."

"And what makes you think that we aren't?"

Oswaldo tilted his head in confusion. "Are you?"

"Of course! I love him, Ozzie."

The confusion increased exponentially, though this time Oswaldo masked it with interest. He allowed Feli to give him all the reasons as to why he loved the German while he finished drying the vegetables. He kept waiting for him to mention the real reason why he bothered with Ludwig to begin with but it never came. "Feli, are you sure it's wise to invest so much in him," he asked finally.

The younger Italian wrinkled his brow, this time he being the confused one, "I don't understand…do you not like him or something?"

"It's not that. I just thought that it was a job and nothing more. I didn't think that you were actually
"A job?" A bubble of dread made its way into his belly but it popped instantly when he realized what he meant. Giggling, Feli flicked water at Ozzie, "Silly. Of course, it started out as a job, but I fell in love with him regardless. The fact that we're partners at the hospital only adds to the fun~"

"Th-that's not quite what I-"

"Hey, Osvaldo," snapped Lovino, "Are you done with the damn carrots? Bernardo wants to add it to the soup."

Ozzie wrinkled his nose at the name before realizing what his cousin said. His disgust overwrote his annoyance and he cried, "Carrots? For Pasta e fagioli? Hell no! That shit is going to make the broth come out too sweet." He pointed a carrot to his brother, "Stick to the damn recipe."

Bernardo shook his head, "But it's going to be too bland."

"Not if you season it right. Besides, it's just to hold us off till dinner. If you add more stuff to it, it'll only take longer to cook and we still need to wrap presents, decorate outside, and put up the tree." Slapping his forehead, "Shit, we still need to make sure the pizza oven is still working."

"It is," offered Felicia, "I checked it when we got back."

"Oh, well, still. No carrots."

His sibling stuck his tongue out childishly and reached his hand out in a grabby motion, "I want the carrots so give me."

"And I said no!"

"Come on Oswald."

A collective gasp from their cousins shook the Italian from his shock. He narrowed his golden eyes, "I don't like it with carrots Bernardo."

Ludwig walked in with Seraph while Antonio took the tree to the living room to attach it to a stand. The two men stared at the scene before them before the German cleared his throat, "What's going on?"

Seraph rolled his eyes at his brother's antics, "No doubt they called each other by the Americanized version of their names. You'll come to find that nothing insults Ozzie more than being called anything other than Italian."

"That's not true," whined Oswaldo as if insulted by the very notion of being insulted. He motioned to his face, "My brothers and I are from a highly mixed heritage and while I love my other parts, I love being an Italian more."

Washing his hands, Seraph asked, "Ber, is that soup almost ready?"

Bernardo tasted the broth and nodded, "Yeah, if Ozzie would give me the damn carrots it would."

"Ew, no. No carrots. That shit makes the soup taste sweet."

"Ha," cried Oswaldo triumphantly. "Told you!"

Bernardo shrugged, "Whatever. I'm going to tell mom on y'all. Tell her how you guys forbade me
from adding her special twist to her favorite soup."

"Whatever." Oswaldo tossed the carrot he had in his hand at his brother when he stuck his tongue out again. When he realized what he did, he cried out in horror, "No, wait! Ah, merde!"

Bernardo broke the carrot into pieces and tossed them into the soup with a triumphant smirk, "I win~"

"Fuck you, Bernard."

"Can't man, we're fratelli."

Groaning, Oswaldo turned his back on him. A soft smile tugging on his lips at the sight of Feli laughing, "At least I made you smile, angel."

"You always make me smile, Ozzie." Wiping his hands dry, Feli went over to Ludwig who gave him a kiss before ushering him to the living room. "Wah! That tree is beautiful," taking in a deep breath, Feli grinned, "I love how pine smells."

Smiling, Ludwig pulled Feli in for a hug. Though he'd only been gone for a half hour, he had hated being apart from his boyfriend. There had been a dull ache in his chest despite knowing that he was in the cabin with the others. Perhaps that's why it ached. He hadn't like how Oswaldo looked at his lover. 'Nein,' he hissed to himself, 'they're cousins. I'm being irrational.'

The couple helped Antonio straighten the tree in its stand before heading to the dining table, which was really a polished oversized tree stump. Ludwig raised an eyebrow when Oswaldo started to joke with Bernardo as if their squabble in the kitchen hadn't occurred. Eric noticed and chuckled, "Fights between us don't usually last longer than a few minutes. Kinda hard to stay mad at each other, you know?"

Chores were distributed amongst them while they ate and they soon set off to do them. Ludwig and Feli stayed behind to wash the dishes as the quadruplets went to get the decorations down from the attic. The girls worked on wrapping presents in the library while Lovi and Antonio gathered firewood. Every now and again, he would hear Felicia burst into a Christmas carol and eventually Monika would begrudgingly join in.

By the time six rolled around, they'd already decorated most of the house and tree in lights. Stockings were hanging by the fireplace and presents were already stacked neatly underneath the tree.

"Shouldn't the tree be decorated first," asked Ludwig, "Or do you guys just put on the lights?"

Feli shook his head to wake himself up, "No, we put up ornaments too but we'll do that while the pizzas are cooking." He yawned and rubbed his eyes, "Ve, I wish we hadn't skipped our siesta."

"There was a lot to do, liebling."

"I know…but still. I'm sorry. I asked you to come to vacation with me but all we've been doing is work."

"It's ok. I like keeping myself busy and if me being productive gets me points with your family, then that's only icing on the cake."

The Italian's eyes softened and he stretched himself on his tiptoes to kiss Ludwig, "I love you. Come on, let's go get the stations in the kitchen ready."
"Stations?" Ludwig lowered his brow in confusion, "What stations?" When they entered the large kitchen, there was flour and various dishes everywhere. Ludwig tensed at the mess, his fingers itching to clean everything in sight. Feli must've noticed because he laced his fingers through his and squeezed gently. The sentiment was nice but that didn't keep Ludwig from reaching out for a dishrag and wiping the surface clean. Or rather he attempted to.

Marcello slapped his hand away, "No touchy, amico. We need it to be floured else the dough will stick to the counter."

"I understand. My apologies."

"No worries~ Monika did the same thing when she first cooked with us. Stick with us and you'll get over your problem too."

"I don't have a problem."

"Says the man trying to get the sauce out of my apron," teased Felicia as she handed the German one of his own. "Here ya go. You're part of the family now, si?"

Ludwig took the apron with a blush, "I am?"

Feli blushed himself and smiled sheepishly, "Only if you want to be. And don't worry, I'll help you clean every inch after we're done."

Warmth and an unreal sense of giddiness swelled in Ludwig's belly and worked its way up to his heart, "Ja, I want to." He watched as the Italians set themselves up in stations to prepare the toppings for the pizza while Marcelo kneaded the dough and divided it up for a pizza each. "Will we really need that many?"

To his embarrassment everyone erupted in laughter, even Lovi cracked a grin. Shaking his head, Lovino said, "Of course, potato bastard. With the lives we live, it's kind of hard to make pizza as delicious as ours on a daily basis. On special occasion like this, we eat until we're about to fucking explode."

"Lovi," clucked Feli, "don't be rude."

"What? I'm being honest. Go on and start cutting up the meat. I want pizza damn it." The older twin added some spices to the tomato sauce while his boyfriend cut up some more tomatoes to put onto their pizzas.

"Ok, we ready ragazzi," asked Marcello as he distributed the balls of dough.

The Vargas took their dough and rolled them out before setting their pins aside. Ludwig watched in confusion, "What are you doing?"

"We forgot the music!" Felicia grabbed a small remote and turned on their stereo. The beginning notes sounded like something out of a bad gangster movie making her cousins chuckle at the irony.

"Music while cooking? Won't that distract you?"

Feli kissed his cheek, "Ve, it only adds to the fun, amore. Pizza tossing doesn't really--" He cocked his head when Ludwig suddenly started laughing. And by god, if it wasn't the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. His cheeks started to redden at the symphony that was the Germans deep laugh.

"I-I'm sorry," stuttered Ludwig in between chuckles, "but y-you can't really expect me to believe
that you all know how to toss pizza."

"I know it makes us sound like stereotypical Italians," started Bernardo sheepishly.

"But it's really fucking fun, man," finished Oswaldo with a smirk. "You're going to love it."

The grin fell from Ludwig's face at that, "What?"

...A boy went back to Napoli, because he missed the scenery...

"Ve, that's right! You're going to toss your very first pizza. Don't worry," assured Feli, "I'll help you. You'll be a master by the time we're done with you."

Marcello scoffed, "Don't lie to the poor man, Feli. You'll get his hopes up. No offense, but none of you come close to my pizza tossing."

"Oh ho-ho, is that a challenge, big brother?" Felicia dumped her shredded cheese into a bowl and straightened her ponytail before washing her hands. Quickly drying them, she picked up her dough, "Cause I'll have you know, mommy taught me very well."

"Come of it, Licia," purred Seraph, "Our old man taught us how it's done. We've got moves, ain't that right boys?"

...the native dancers and the charming songs. But wait a minute something's wrong...

Lovino wiped his hands and surrendered his wooden spoon to his boyfriend before making his way to the kitchen island, "All of you are full of it. Me and Feli were taught by the true master herself. Mama is fucking awesome."

...Cause now it's...

The two Germans exchanged amused glances as the Italians all tried to stand a little taller and stare each other down. They watched them pick up their dough and just as the gentleman started the first verse of the song, Marcello tossed his into the air.

...Hey mambo, mambo Italiano. Hey mambo, mambo Italiano. Go go Joe, you mixed up Siciliano...

He caught it with one hand and tossed it back up, the dough spinning rapidly and extending in the air. Ludwig snorted at the song playing, and his cousin nudged him in the side, "They love to toss pizza to that song," she whispered as she watched her girlfriend toss her own pizza dough.

Monika’s eyes warmed at the sight of Felicia sticking her tongue out in concentration when she sent it back into the air to make the dough spread out.

"Come on, Moni," said Felicia with a giggle. She sat her flattened crust aside and handed Monika a ball of dough, "Come make yours, too!" She bounced on the balls of her feet while Monika took the dough and tried to toss it, stopping to immediately and patiently reteach her the steps when Monika almost dropped it.

Swinging his hips to the music, Feli motioned Ludwig to come over to him, "Watch how I do it." Ludwig stood closely by his boyfriend and watched as he took his slab of dough and twirled it with his fingers until it spread out before sending it into the air. He caught it with his left fist and kept his right hand under it before spinning it like a top and pushing it back up, "See?" Feli did it again before giving it to Ludwig, "Now you."
"I'll try my best." Ludwig lightly dusted his fingertips with flour and took the dough gingerly in his hands.

"You don't have to be gentle, Ludwig," said Eric, "It's very forgiving as long as you're confident. Look at my brothers." The blond Italian motioned to where the identical men were spinning their dough as if they were geisha fans. Seraph sent it over his shoulder and had it spin along the span of his arms before tossing it back up. Oswaldo was getting fancy with his hands, the dough practically dancing over his fingers while Bernardo was spinning two at a time.

Antonio laughed at Ludwig's expression, "You can do it, amigo. And if you screw up, it's ok! You can always try again."

"Ve, he's right, tesoro." Feli watched Ludwig furrow his brow in concentration before cautiously tossing it a few inches up. Giggling, Feli set his dough down and put his hands on Ludwig's wrists to guide him, "Here, move your hands like this and push up in a curve-like motion. Put more force." Ludwig nodded and tossed it again, this time sending it a few feet before catching it with his fist. He smiled over at Feli who jumped up and down eagerly, "You got it! Yay! Keep going until you get it as big as you want, then we'll put our toppings on it."

"Haha, dance with us, man," encouraged Oswaldo as he sashayed over to Feli's and Ludwig's side of the island. He got close enough that Ludwig was able to see that his eyes were different from the other Vargas’; he had a ring of blue around his pupil. Grinning, he shook the German to the music, "Hey goomba, I love how you dance the rumba," pulling back he sang seriously, "but take some advice paisano learn-a how to mambo. If you're gonna be a square, you ain't-a gonna go anywhere." Ludwig would've taken offense to that had it not been for the way his eyes tried to communicate something deeper. But the look left just as fast as it came because Oswaldo pulled away to sweep Feli into a dance instead.

The rest of the Vargas joined in, "Hey, mambo Italiano. Hey, hey mambo mambo Italiano. Go, go Joe, shake like an Giovano." Felicia broke off and held a wooden spoon like a microphone, "E’ lo che se dice you get happy in the feets-a when you mambo Italiano~"" Eric put his pizza on a wooden paddle and took it to the oven where Lovino was organizing them so that they could all fit. He wiped his forehead, smearing flour over it, "Hey chadrool, you don't-a have to go to school. Just make it with a big bambino, it's like vino~"

"—Kid you good-a looking," cut in Bernardo with a smirk, “but you don't-a know what's cooking 'till you, hey! Hey, hey, hey~”

Easing away from Ozzie, Feli gracefully danced back to Ludwig and held his dough and flour covered hands, lovingly cooing, “Shake baby, shake, cause I love it when you take-a me by the pizzeria, that’s where I’m gonna be-a.” Ludwig felt his brief moment of jealousy pass and allowed himself to dance with Feliciano and his boyfriend sang along to the song, “Don’t ya tell your papa, he’s gonna tell my mama. There’s nothing to it; come on baby, let’s-a do it!

"Hey mambo, mambo Italiano. Hey mambo, mambo Italiano. Go, go Joe, you mixed up Siciliano; E’ lo che se dice you get happy in the feets-a when you—" "—Mambo Italiano," sang the cousins in unison before falling into a fits of laughter. Monika caught Ludwig's eye and grinned, this was just as much her family now as it would be his...if he played his cards right and learned that there was more to life than just doing as he was told.
Daniel noticed that his best friend had emerged from their room with a bounce to his step and had taken any matter of teasing with stride. After dinner, Matron Megan had allowed them to have extra free time given that it was Christmas Eve. Nicola and her sister, Marzia, were currently helping their Matrons in the kitchen, so nobody was present to supervise the older children's play. When they tried to force Alexander into the role of the villain again, he couldn't help but march right up to them.

He felt a timid hand on his shoulder, stopping him from giving them a piece of their mind. To his surprise Alex shook his head with a smile. "I'll play the villain if you can find me," he told the others.

"Hide and seek," asked one of the older kids. She thought about it before smirking, "Alright. You have to the count of twenty to hide."

Alex waited for them to close their eyes and start counting before grabbing a hold of Daniel's and Sammy's hands. He led them away from the group of children and up the stairs to their room. Daniel frowned, "This is the first place they'll look."

"But they won't find us. Look what I found." The dark haired boy pulled away their treasure chest filled with toys to reveal a panel painted blue.

"...that's a wall."

"I thought so too, but look what happens when I push like this." With a little pressure, the panel gave way and slid open, "It's a secret door."

"Cool!" Danny helped his brother in before slipping in himself.

Alex motioned for Johan and Gino to follow before making sure to grab the string he attached to the chest and tugged it as he closed the door back to slide it back into place. He turned on a little light, illuminating the secret room. Toys and boxes were lying about as if they had been tossed in a hurry. Old wrappers of candy and other food were collected in a small basket in the corner. What had interested Alex the most, however, were the carvings and drawings on the wall. Well, that and the large floor pillow and the mini shelf that held various notebooks.

"How did you find this place," asked Daniel after settling Sammy with the cats on the pillow.

"I found it by accident. I was playing with Gino and he batted his toy over here. When I moved the chest, I tripped and fell against that panel. It sounded funny and I tried to see why. The panel moved and I found it," he looked at the wall, "but I didn't get to really see it 'cause lunch was ready."

"Oh." Danny grabbed a book and joined his brother on the pillow while Alex kept looking at the wall. Small sketches were drawn on it, though it was mostly flowers or other insignificant things... Suns also seemed to be the main thing along with a V in the center, though he figured that it was because it was Feli's family crest. He'd seen the Vargas sisters wear pendants with it and Romulus had a ring with the crest. Something else stood apart from the rest. He reached out to touch a heart carved into the wood with the letters 'O and F forever' inside.

"O and F? Who's O?"
Daniel tugged on Alex's pant, "Look, this is a diary. I think it's Feli's." He pursed his lips when he opened it to a random page, "He, uh, he certainly had a scary imaginary friend."

Intrigued, Alex sat next to him and looked over. The leather notebook was worn with time, the pages yellowed but the ink was still very clear. The drawing in question was that of a man without any features save his pitch blue black skin and the various glitter dots sprinkled all over his body like a galaxy. Shrugging, the boys turned to another random page. This one was dated fifteen years ago. "We weren't even born yet," he murmured. Cradling his prosthetic, he leaned closer to read.

March 11, 1998

I dreamt of my babbo again. They're getting worse, my nightmares. I keep seeing what happened that day and I can't...I can't stand it. I don't know how the others were able to move on. I don't know how or why I'm barely now feeling it. I hate feeling like this, it sucks.

The two boys exchanged glances when the writing became blurring as if tears had smudged it. Flipping the page, they continued.

March 12, 1998

Again! It's happening again. Mama is worried. I know she is and I'm trying to be better. I want to be better. I don't like this.

They flipped the page again and the boys saw the date. "This is a few months after," noted Daniel. Nodding, Alex rested his chin on his friend's shoulder so he could read.

May 12, 1998

The quadruplets have come to live with us. I like that. They were with my uncle Paulo in America but I think the adults have figured out that I can't stand not being with them. They were there...they know how I feel better than any doctor does. I hope he won't leave me alone this time. I need Him.

May 13, 1998

Lovi is mad at me. He says that I shouldn't cling to Him like I do; that that's what he's there for. That he's my twin brother and as my twin I should be going to him instead of a cousin. I can't help it...I just prefer Him.

The boys finished reading through the rest of the diary, each time becoming more and more confused. Feli never really stated who he was referring to other than he loved him very much. "He sounds so sad," whimpered Alex with a few tears, "What happened to him?"

Daniel shrugged and put back the journal. Reaching for another, he sat back down next to his friend, "I don't know, but he's ok now. He's happy. Don't cry, Alex." Sniffing, Alex hugged his prosthetic arm and leaned against the wall. Once comfortable, the two opened the journal. The writing was different, messier.

September 1, 2002

He kissed me today. It was my first kiss and I couldn't be happier that it was Him who did it. I don't think anyone knows and that's good. I hate to think what would happen if people were to find out. It's bad enough that I like boys, it would be worse if people knew that I liked my own...you know what? I don't care if nothing happens between us. I am happy to have Him in my life. Is that selfish?
September 2, 2002

He's ignoring me.

September 3, 2002

Why won't He look at me? He kissed me. Why is He acting like it's my fault?

September 13, 2002

I hate Him! All this time...he was with some girl. Why would he do that? I didn't even know I liked him had it not been for that stupid kiss and now he has the nerve... How—the words were smeared with tears again but not so much as before—I hope I never see him again!

September 20, 2002

I want things to be like they were before. I want my dad back.

October 3, 2002

I don't want to be heir anymore...I don't want anything anymore.

October 4, 2002

The only thing that makes me sad is the fact that mama had two of us...she's still going to have to see my face even after I'm gone. I'm sorry mama. I'm sorry Lovi. I'm sorry Ezio...I'm so sorry babbo. I should've tried harder. I wish I was braver. I couldn't save you and I know mama and my family blame me. If I wasn't there, nobody would've died. They all died because of me. Grandpa keeps telling me that it wasn't my fault but I know better. Papa died because of me. I killed my papa. I killed...

Alex and Daniel stared at the book in horror, not necessarily at the words because they've heard some of the kids blame themselves for their parents' death, but at the fact that there was dried blood on this page. Green eyes blinked slowly before throwing the journal aside in an effort to comfort Alex, "Don't cry Alex! He's fine now. He's happy. That...I don't--"

"But he was so alone, Danny," sobbed Alex, "Feli... he was alone. He needed someone and nobody was there. That's so sad. And there was blood!" Now that he thought about it, he had found a blade earlier that day but he gave it to Marzia who had paled and taken it immediately without a word. She'd made him promise not to tell her sister that he had found it.

"Do you want to read another one?"

"I don't know if I can handle it..."

"The story can only get better right?" Daniel got up again and grabbed another journal. He sat down and put a comforting arm around his friend, "Here, this one looks good." Noting the tear stains, he paled, "I hope..." This journal like the other was leather bound and looked worn, only the ink was blue instead of black and the writing was in print instead of cursive.

October 15, 2002

I can't believe I'm so fucking stupid. Feli...my Feli...he—and it's all my fault! I never should've left him. After that kiss...how could I possibly stick around and not want more? We can't have it, I know. I tried dating that one girl but things didn't work out like I wanted. At all. And now my Feli
is in some mental hospital and they won't let me see him. Don't they know that he needs me as much as I need him?

November 1, 2002

They finally let me see him. He looked like he did when he was younger after that day. He wouldn't talk to me. At first, I thought it was because he was mad about what happened between us but then I realized that that was arrogant of me. He was just drugged up because he threw a fit. These people are fucking lucky I wasn't here. It scares me when I think about how far I'm willing to go to insure Feli's happiness....They did tell me that he probably won't remember much about what happened. I don't know how I feel about this. On one hand, I suppose it's good but that just means that we're going to have to make him remember someday. I'm not looking forward for that day to come.

November 2, 2002

He recognized me today. Feli wasn't mad but he said that he felt tired. I hugged him tight and told him that it was ok that he was tired. He said that all he wanted now was to sleep and I told him that he could nap and that I would carry him wherever he needed to go and would always be there to carry him when he felt too tired to walk. He smiled and said that he felt like napping. I said he could so long as he promised to wake up. He promised.

November 15, 2002

Feli's getting better. He hasn't mentioned the kiss. As a matter of a fact, he's acting like it never happened. I'm not sure why I feel sad about it. The doctors said that he can come home now; they told him that he was very lucky to have a boyfriend like me. Stupid...didn't realize that we weren't dating. Couldn't they see how we look alike? Maybe it's my black hair and the blue in my eyes that sets us apart...Well, regardless, I'm not going to leave him alone ever again. I couldn't even if I wanted to.

The next page was just a bunch of doodles and games of tic-tac-toe. Little poems were written every now and again. The boys flipped past those until they found one dated two years later.

May 26, 2004

My brothers and me are graduating tomorrow, and we're nervous. Our life of luxury is coming to an end and we're going to get tossed out to make a name for ourselves. My older brothers have a plan for us so I'm not really worried. If push comes to shove, we'll do what we can to survive. We've already decided the we role we want in the family. We want to be just like how papa was before he settled down with mom. He was a legend in the streets; they called him Typhon because he was like a fierce titan. It's kind of funny because seeing him now, all domestic with mom and us, it's hard to see it but it's true. Maybe we should adopt a mythical name too. Typhon had a son with three heads....dad has a son with three heads. I'll run it by my brothers and see what they think.

Anyway, this is going to be my last entry and I wanted to get something that I think you already know off my chest. I'm in love. And no, it's none of that cheesy shit people read about or see in the movies. At least I don't think it's that because I wish I didn't feel the way I do, but ever since we were young kids I knew that there was something special about him. I knew even before that day so many years ago that united all of us in a way that can only be seen as the silver lining. United Feli to me in a way that I guess most would see as a curse. I don't see it like that. Not anymore at least.

You see, I've been thinking. Love means a lot of things to a lot of people but I've figured it out. Love is...well, love is something special that doesn't come and go. Love, and I'm talking about True Love
as I've come to realize, only happens once in a lifetime. I know because I've tried and I'll try again, but everything pales in comparison. When you love someone, you find that they're always on your mind. It's when you hug them and lose track of time. It's when you are no longer scared of admitting that what you're feeling is real and all the things you are willing to do for that person are nothing because in the end their happiness is what counts. Man...if you knew what I'd be willing to do for Feliciano. It used to scare me. Not anymore.

For him, I'd swim oceans just to see his smile. For him, I'd combine the earth and sky so that he could touch the stars. Hell, I'd steal the damn things and put them in a jar so he could always have them. For him I'd...I'd give my life for him. And that does not scare me as much as it should. I guess that's just the thing about love, huh?

I love him and he knows it. I just wish that we...I wish our circumstances were different. But it's ok because I accept my fate as it is. Feli, if you find this journal, I mean every word of it. I lo—ti amo.

Daniel and Alex exchanged glances again before blanching. At least there was a semi-happy ending. Only question was who the heck was this guy who loved Feli so much? What happened to him? Unless, Ludwig bleaches his hair, and has an O in his name somewhere...there was someone else Feli loved before him.

The brunette put the book back, "No offense Alex, but that stuff about love is gross."

"I think it's nice."

"Whatever. Come on! We've been here for an hour, I think everyone is asleep now." Carefully picking up his sleeping brother, Daniel motioned for Alex to open the door for him, "I hope Santa doesn't skip out on us 'cause we're not sleeping yet."

"He won't. Come on, let's all share my bed." Pajamas on and covers snuggly tucked around them, the boys quickly went to sleep. The last thought on Alex's mind regarded the journals and the boy who loved his papa so much.

~The Cabin in Italy~

Oswaldo glanced away. They were all singing Christmas carols, or rather Felicia and Marcello and his brothers were. Eric had pulled out his saxophone and started to play for them. They fooled around with singing as they dressed their tree and Feli and Ludwig had taken advantage of that, the former sneaking kisses where he could. The dark haired Italian had hoped to get some attention as well but Feli had been preoccupied with his boyfriend. He settled for observing their interaction in hopes to get a reading of their feelings for one another. It was clear that Ludwig didn't know what they really did for a living but it was also clear that he was hiding something.

His brow furrowed slightly. He'd have to call his grandpa and ask as soon as possible. There was a chance that Feli didn't know himself what was going on and that thought unnerved him. For the sake of their get together though he pushed his feelings to the back of his mind and allowed himself to enjoy the holidays. It wasn't that often that they were all under one roof and he was going to make the best of it.

Tip toeing around the boxes of ornaments, he plugged in his iPod, "Hey, I wanted to show you this
Felicia poked her head around from the tree, "Little Jay? Oh gosh! It's been forever since I've seen him. How is he?" Gasping gleefully when a little boy around six dressed in a T-shirt and shorts came on the tv screen. "He's gotten so big!"

"Who's that," whispered Ludwig as he studied the boy. His puffy hair was styled in an afro making him look very adorable. The boy jumped onto one of the triplets and wrapped his arms around his neck.

"That's Little Jay," said Seraph proudly, "he's our…uncle?" Checking his miniature family tree he nodded, "Yeah, he's our uncle on our mom's side."

"But…he's so young, how—"

"Auntie Sky adopted him," chirped Eric. "Heh, try not to think too hard about it. The Blaze family is pretty confusing when you're related to them and even more so when you're not."

Ludwig nodded slowly and looked back at the screen where Eric was playing the saxophone while the triplets were raiding what looked like a thrift shop ran by a bored looking girl with short white and black hair. Oswaldo was dressed in a ridiculous outfit as he sang the chorus. He looked at the man in surprise, "You don't sound like how you do now...how–"

Laughing sheepishly, Oswaldo hung his ornament next to Bernardo's, "Yeah, that happens sometimes when we're with the other family. You see, my mom's a southern belle and she has a heavy accent. Actually, they all have accents and ours just vanishes. Mine more so, but it doesn't take long for it to come back."

"Ah."

Feli pulled out a pink doughnut-like plastic ornament and his face fell, "Aw, look Lovi. It's our fratellino's. Wonder how it got into my box."

"He probably left it there from last time we were all here," grumbled Lovino as he took it from him. Shaking his head at the thing, he placed it on the tree, "Damn brat. Why did he have to go to the states?"

"Ezio has the right to go wherever he wants during his agoge. You went to Spain."

Lovino blushed and ducked his head, "I...it wasn't because I liked the place."

"Or like you were looking for anyone special," muttered Marcello under his breath to his sister making her giggle.

Ludwig helped Feli put up his small box of glass ornaments, which were a mix of small replicas of famous Italian statues, adorable cats, a plate of pasta, and stars. He shook his head at how adorable his boyfriend looked as he animatedly told him the story behind each one.

"Ve!" cried Feli, "I almost forgot, here open it." He handed the German a navy blue velvet box eagerly.

"What is it?" Ludwig carefully sat aside Feli's box and opened his. Inside were a few ornaments of his own. He took out a bowl with mock batter and whisk and stared at it in awe, "Danke, liebling, I love them." Shyly leaning down, he kissed Feli chastely on the lips before hanging it next to Feli's easel ornament. The rest were wooden carvings of his pets, "Did you make these?"
"I wish I could say I did but I'm not very good. No, I asked Antonio if he could make them for me." Turning to said Spaniard, Feli gave him a hug, "Grazie! They're perfect."

Antonio returned it gleefully, "I'm glad you like them."

"Ve…but I do wish Fabrezio was here."

Bernardo reached out to hang a miniature set of his boxing gloves on the tree, "Maybe Santa will bring him to—ow!" He leaned back down and rubbed his lower back.

"Are you ok?" Feli moved his hand away and lifted his cousin's sweater, revealing an ugly scar, "Is it acting up again?"

"I'm ok, Feli. Only happens around this time of the year. The cold irritates it." He ruffled his cousin's hair, "Don't worry about me, kk?"

"Ve…” Feli nodded, "If you say so."

They continued to decorate their tree while occasionally checking on their pizza. Lovino brought up a large bottle of wine to have while they finished up with the tree. As they worked, a familiar tune came up on the mixer making a few of the Vargas groan. Ludwig recognized it as something Tino and Mathias had been singing as of late much to the annoyance of their coworkers.

"Do you seriously have that on your iPod, Ozzie," teased Lovino, "Lame!"

Oswaldo blushed, "It's a catchy song and you know it...besides, Lukas must've put it on while I wasn't looking."

"Sure, he did." Lovi turned to Antonio and whispered something in his ear that made him chuckle. "Oi, potato bastard."

"Lovino," admonished Feli with a frown, "Don't be mean!"

Ignoring his younger twin, Lovi addressed the German, "We have a tradition. Whoever tries to date any of us has to go through a test."

Ludwig tensed, "Test?"

"Oh, yeah!" Marcello brought Monika and his sister in for a hug, "I remember we did the same to Moni here. You're going to have to sing a song for us~"

"Show us you're not afraid to make a fool of yourself for our little Feli," added Bernardo.

"W-what do I have to sing?" Ludwig paled as Oswaldo turned up the volume, "Nien…"

"Si," they all cried together. Ludwig looked to his boyfriend for help but Feli was grinning broadly. Even Monika waved for him to try. Seraph motioned for them to put aside their empty boxes, "Here, we'll do it with you. We aren't afraid to make fools of ourselves, are we cugini?" Fixing his red sweater, the eldest Vargas started them off.

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Meanwhile, outside their cabin, a modest blue Fiat drove up to the garage. One of the two guards tapped on its window and asked in Italian, "Who are you and what is your business here?"

"Ari, do not tell me you don't recognize family when you see it?" The Italian rolled his eyes and
rolled up his sleeve to show his tattoo. "He's my plus one. I'm sure you recognize his mark." The blond next to him moved his collar to show off his lion.

"Of course. Welcome home, young sir." They moved aside to let him drive in to the garage.

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Feli gently pushed Ludwig against the wall just as Felicia did the same with her own lover next to him. The red head nuzzled his nose against Ludwig's, cooing, "Big blue eyes, pointy nose, chasing mice and digging holes."

Felicia gave a tinkling laugh and held her girlfriend's hands daintily in hers, "Tiny paws up the hill suddenly you're standing still."

Ludwig's face softened, suddenly feeling at home with the way Feli was looking at him. He couldn't help himself. Reaching out he ran his fingers through his boyfriend's thick auburn hair, "Your fur is red, so beautiful, like an angel in disguise. But if you meet a friendly horse—"

"—will you communicate by," cut in Monika so that she and her cousin's voice intermingled as one, "Mo-o-o-o-orse. Mo-o-o-o-orse? How will you speak to that ho-o-o-o-orse, ho-o-o-o-orse?"

Feli's face threatened to crack, his smile was so big. Reaching up on his toes he tried to kiss Ludwig but Marcello jumped on his back, "What does the fox say?"

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The two gentlemen sat their suitcases in their room and shrugged off their coats. In the living room, they could hear the rest of the Vargas making strange noises in the living room. The blond fixed his sweater vest and smoothed out the dark jeans for the tenth time since they settled in. A warm tanned hand gently gripped his wrist, "Don't worry; they're going to love you. Come on."

Tugging in for a chaste kiss, the Italian led him down the hall. He heard Feliciano and Lovino sing almost sadly, "What do you say? You're my guardian angel hiding in the woods. What is your sound?" He picked up his stride, dragging his lover along. He hummed under his breath; his heartbeat picking up in excitement of finally seeing them again after five long years. "Will we ever know?"

"A- bubu-duh-bubbu-dwee-dum," sang the young man as he spread open the doors leading to the living room and smiled toothily, his geometric like curl almost giving the illusion of a heart at the sight of the twins.

Feli and Lovino's mouths parted into a small 'o' as their youngest brother danced his way in happily singing the part of the fox, "Bay-buh-day bum-bum bay-dum!"

Fabrezio extended his arms and his two brothers rushed to embrace him tightly. Ludwig sighed at the sight of his love happy, a small smile playing at his lips. He felt Antonio clasp his hand on his shoulder to give it a friendly squeeze. Oswaldo did the same on his other side and offered a grin. Did he do it? Was he really part of the family now?

Looking back at Feli laughing and talking to his little brother in Italian, he couldn't think of a better place he'd rather be. As a matter of a fact, he couldn't even begin to imagine a life without his little fox. Thinking back to the engagement ring weighing heavily in his jewelry box, he made up his mind. There was no way in hell that he was going through with it. If it meant that he'd have to surrender his entire inheritance, then so be it. Nothing was worth losing Feliciano.
And just like that, he felt a weight lifted from his shoulders. He allowed the full strength of his love for his boyfriend engulf him. Ludwig leaned against the wall and closed his eyes only to open them at insistent tugging on his arms, "Wha—Willem?"

"Hey there, Luddy," chirped the blond that had accompanied Fabrezio, "Long time no see, huh?"

"Does your brother and sister know you're in Europe?"

Rolling his eyes, Willem crossed his arms in a huff, "Of course they do. Lars was a little miffed that I missed Berwald's wedding and your graduation but I did a video conference with Teddy and Tino the night before." Looking away sheepishly, he rubbed his head, "I am sorry about your graduation though. I swear I wanted to come by but I was really busy with school."

"It's ok." Ludwig patted his young cousin on the shoulder awkwardly, "I understand that MIT is a very demanding school."

"It is, but boy is it worth it. I've met with Chad Blaze himself. He's offered me a job in his company for when I'm done. I don't know if I'm going to take it though."

Fabrezio squeezed himself out of his brothers' embrace and wrapped an arm around Willem's waist. He said, "I told him he should. A chance like that won't happen twice."

The family moved to the large dining room and set the table, pouring wine and setting out a salad Felicia had prepared earlier. They took out their pizzas from the oven and Feli brought out a lasagna he'd made as well. Ludwig sat next to his boyfriend as the Vargas all talked over themselves. It was vastly different from his family's dinner yet the same. There was love and jest amongst them. Bright golden eyes shining and crinkled skin at their corners. He had to wonder though, did it hurt them to smile so much? Or perhaps it was just him seeing as he wasn't all that used to it. When he felt Feli hold his hand under the table and wrap a leg around his, he couldn't bring himself to care that his face muscles were aching. This was definitely an improvement.

Monika turned to her little cousin, "So, how do you two know each other?"

"He's my husband," responded Willem happily. Everyone stopped talking and stared at the two incredulously. "What?"

Feli was first to speak up, "Does grandpa know?"

"No…but so what?" Ezio wrapped his arm around his husband's shoulder, "I've already graduated and I love him. Who cares?"

"I don't think mama will be very happy that–"

"Oh, come on, fratellone. You know that if I had told them that, they would've wanted a big wedding in Genovia. Besides, I'm a teacher now and I didn't want to get involved in…you know."

Feli's eyes hardened for a second before softening, "I understand."

"I don't think Lars or Emma will be too happy about that," muttered Ludwig. It hit him suddenly how intimate his family was with the Vargas. First Monika, then him, and now Willem. He took a bite of his pizza and nearly let out a delighted moan. It was so delicious; the crust was baked to a perfect crunchy outside and fluffy center, the sauce had a nice tang and the meat…well, no one could go wrong with some nice wurst.

Ludwig caught Feli's eye before his boyfriend lightly head butted him, "Ve, do you like it, amore?"
"It's amazing. Thank you for showing me how to make it."

"Heh, don't thank me. It only tastes as good as it does because it was made with love and family."

They continued their dinner in peace. Well, as peaceful as you could be with a house full of Vargas. Ludwig listened to them tell their stories about their time in the agoge. The trio decided to put their little brother through school while they dedicated themselves to underground boxing. Bernardo had the most knack for it so he continued to train until he was recruited to fight professionally. Meanwhile, Seraph and Oswaldo became enamored with rap, though this was something that they had picked up from, surprisingly, their mother.

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Marcello had, as he had seen months ago, been a swimmer and had even gone to the Olympics. However, after he won a few gold medals, he decided to follow in his grandfather's footsteps and try his hand at a small business in hopes to make it big. It was luck and careful strategy that he accomplished his task. Ludwig asked him if he ever missed swimming to which Marcello simply grinned and said sometimes but he really enjoyed being an entrepreneur.

Felicia went straight to Rome after graduating high school. She'd been trying to find one of the family's homes where she'd buried some money in hopes to be able to get an apartment. It was in the middle of the woods, where she'd been searching, that she ran into Monika, who had gotten lost on a hike. Apparently, Felicia had hidden in a wooden crate thinking that Monika was going to hurt her but when the German opened it, the redhead had tried to attack. Only, she fell flat on her face and Monika had spent the better half of their time trying to calm her down. They'd been together ever since.

Lastly, over some coffee and cookies, Ludwig asked Lovino what he did. His lover's brother studied him over his coffee before quietly answering, "I work with the fucking government."

"Oh?" Ludwig was surprised to hear this. Every time he'd try to ask Feli, the Italian would always find a way to avoid the question or simply give him a vague answer. Hoping to know more, Ludwig casually asked, "What do you do for them?"

"A little bit of everything but mostly paperwork." The triplets snorted at his response and sipped their hot chocolate in silence. Lovino yawned, "Well I'm shit tired. I'll see you losers later. Come on, Tonio." He tugged his boyfriend up and dragged them to their room.

The others took their mugs to the kitchen and stuffed them into the dishwasher before retreating to their rooms. Oswaldo lingered enough to give Feliciano a good night kiss and slip him a piece of paper before going to his own room.

And if Ludwig shoved his hands into his pocket to keep them from balling into tight fists, well, he'd never let Feli know. Jealousy wasn't exactly one of his most attractive features after all.

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Gently running black gloved hands down to smooth out the green heavy wool coat, Monika gave herself one last look over in the long mirror in the bathroom. Despite it only been a few weeks since she had last seen her love, she couldn't help but want tonight to be perfect. For her to look perfect for her sweet Italian. The German woman lightly bit her lips to make them look redder, though she was positive that by the end of the night both of their lips would be ripe with color.

"Monika," called Felicia. "Amore, what's taking you so long?"
Monika smiled, "I'll be only a few more seconds, liebling." Slipping on black heels, she stepped out of the bathroom. "Patience, Felicia," she breathed as she stalked her way towards her waiting girlfriend, "always rewards."

Felicia's honeyed eyes drank in the sight of her girlfriend. The military styled coat had a girly appeal to it, the lower part pleated out like a skirt. It only came down to her mid-thigh where the Italian could see bits of black lace gradient into sheer black stockings. She hummed in approval, "You really out did yourself, amore. Is this part of the winter collection?"

"Ja. But that's not all."

"There's more?"

Monika smirked, "For you, always, liebling. Now just sit back and enjoy."

The Italian woman did as she was told and bounced on the bed in excitement. With every bounce, Monika noticed gleefully, Felicia's short pink satin slip rode up, exposing her lightly tanned legs ever more so. She wanted to reach out and touch but forced herself not to, there would be plenty of time for that afterwards.

Monika pulled off her gloves with her teeth, knowing full well that Felicia loved it when she did so. Slowly unbuttoning her coat, she enjoyed how her girlfriend's eyes darkened with every button undone. When the last one was out of its slot, Monika ran her hands down the lapels of the coat before settling her hands on her hips, keeping the coat open for her hungry Italian to take in.

"Wa! You look so beautiful," exclaimed Felicia happily. She leaned back on her arms to get a better look, "Is this also part of your collection? I thought the secret naughty line was only going to be for men."

Monika reddened at how innocently her beloved said it, "I-I'm not. This is only for you...do you like it?"

Felicia let out a her breath in an appreciative sigh as she followed her German's nimble finger as it ran down from her lip towards her neck, brushing over her collarbone, over the swell of her breast, lightly flicking the black material of her bra, until it traced her toned stomach. From there, she lightly dipped her finger into the band of her panties, only to pull it out gently so that it would make a soft sound when it slapped her flesh. Another thing that drove her little Italian wild.

And drove her wild it did. Felicia felt the warmth in her belly increase tenfold and despite wanting to pin her lover down and have her way, she didn't. She wanted to make up for lost time; her tour had taken up an extra week and now she wanted nothing more than to remind Monika that she was worth her patience. With that in mind, she sat up closer to the edge of the bed and spread her legs so that Monika could step closer.

Amber eyes never leaving sapphire, she gently coaxed her girlfriend closer by tugging at her hips. Felicia sighed against the skin of Monika's stomach, taking in the scent of her flesh. Gardenias. Somehow, she never thought that gardenias would make her mouth water but she was glad that she was proven wrong.

"Perfetta," she murmured into the pale skin before kissing it. "Bellisima." Felicia looked up without removing her lips from her lover's stomach so that she could watch Monika's expressions. The German woman was staring back, her blue eyes darkening as well with both adoration and lust. Her full lips were parted slightly as she watched Felicia continue to lavish her midriff with affectionate kisses.
Monika let out a gasp and unconsciously bucked her hips when she felt more than lips. Felicia gently nibbled before running her tongue along the reddened flesh, "Sorry."

"I-it's ok. Don't stop." Monika ran her hands through Felicia's red hair, reaching behind to pull the ribbon in order to free it from its ponytail. She moaned quietly when Felicia began to suckle on a fresh patch of skin, her hands now squeezing Monika’s rear.

"Mmm," said Felicia with a giggle, "you're so tasty." She giggled again when Monika tried to hide under her bangs. "And, you’re still so shy. Cute! Just like your cousin."

That's right! Monika flushed as she remembered that Ludwig was also staying in the cabin… probably even down the hall with his own lover. Feliciano had been in a rather affectionate mood as well, which meant that they were probably doing the same thing she was about to do with Felicia. Monika was pulled from her thoughts by a bite on her hipbone followed by a sweet tongue that soothed the ache away.

"I know what you're thinking, Moni." Felicia eyed her lover mischievously, "and I bet we can be a whole lot louder than them."

"I bet we can."

"But we won't."

"Oh?"

"Well, we can try if you want, but," Felicia nuzzled against the her girlfriend’s stomach, "I want to make love to you tonight," she said sweetly. "We can see who's louder some other time."

Monika felt her heart swell as she looked down to her head fondly. "Whatever you want, liebe."

"Heehee! Really, Moni? Whatever I want?"

"Ja." Monika let out another gasp when she felt herself suddenly under Felicia. How or when that happened was beside her but she had no time to figure it out. Her girlfriend pressed a sweet kiss on her lips and pressed her lithe body against hers. Fingertips ghosted along her sides until it settled on her hip where Monika could feel Felicia's thumb pad rub against the tattoo there.

"Mia," groaned Felicia when Monika nibbled on her neck, "sei mia."

"Immer," whimpered Monika as the devious fingers that were tormenting her hips slipped into her panties. "Ah!" They had found their target and where now teasing it with agonizing slow movements. "B-bitte."

"Hmm?" Felicia lifted her face from her lover's cleavage. "What did you say, tesoro?"

"Please, don't tease me, liebling."

"Oh?" Felicia grinned and lightly tugged on a hardened nipple protruding lewdly against black silk with her lips. She released it and kissed the creamy flesh not covered by the bra. Looking up through her eyelashes, teasing smile tugging at the corner of her mouth, Felicia asked, "Do you want me to get on with it?"

Monika bit her lip, looking particularly debauched with her pink cheeks. The pressure on her increased for a fraction of a second before returning to its original state making her focus on what her lover was asking. She managed to choke out, "J-ja, bitte."
"What do you want me to do?" At this, Monika felt the pink in her cheeks intensify. No matter how many times she was asked this, it never failed to embarrass her. Felicia noticed this and pouted, "Don't be embarrassed, my love." She caressed her face with her free hand, brushing aside blonde bangs and kissed her nose, "It turns me on when you tell me what you want." Licking the shell of her ear, Felicia added, "Hearing you tell me what to do to you makes me ache."

Monika shivered with want, her embarrassment all but evaporated now that she held this piece of information. "In that case…"

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Ludwig, in spite of himself, pulled away from the heated kiss for air. Feli only allowed him a few seconds before pulling him back for more. Already they were down to their boxers, having found that the warmth of the room combined with the warmth radiating from their passion driven bodies proved too overwhelming. Then again, they would've lost them somewhere along the way even if it was cold anyway.

Ludwig felt his heartbeat quicken with excitement at what was to come when he felt his boyfriend tug at his boxers. Slipping out of them, and pulling the latter's off as well, he pushed Feli onto his back without breaking their kiss. His finger gently wrapped itself around his lover's curl before tugging on it enough to hear his boyfriend gasp and buck his hips against his stomach.

"God," groaned Feli, breaking from the kiss gasp, "Luddy, don't tease me."

"What if I want to?" Ludwig bit Feli's neck and tugged on the curl again making his lover keen in pleasure, his grinding against him becoming erratic. "Stop that, liebling." The German held Feli's hips down so that he couldn't move them, "I don't want you to come yet."

"No fair." Feli pouted, "I let you do it that one time in your apartment." A smug smirk made its way onto his face, "As a matter of a fact, I made you do it more than once." Ludwig blushed and buried his face in Feli's neck. "Aww, Luddy shouldn't be embarrassed." Feli poked at Ludwig's cheek, "Don't be embarrassed, amore. You make the loveliest sounds when you're coming." The Italian's eyes darkened with lust at the memories, "You make the most beautiful face and bless me with the sweetest nectar."

Ludwig felt Feli's hand inch closer to his member until he grasped him and started to stroke lovingly, "F-Feli…"

"Make love to me, tesoro," purred Feliciano hotly against Ludwig's lips before taking the lower lip between his teeth and tugged, "Or don't. We can fuck if that's what you prefer tonight."

Ludwig's breath hitched at the filthy word that escaped his adorable boyfriend's mouth. Capturing his lips hungrily, he reached out for their bottle of lubricant and prepared his lover quickly. Feli groaned into his mouth as he pulled his legs up to wrap around Ludwig's waist.

"Nein, not like that," growled his boyfriend, his voice like leather against his skin. Ludwig flipped them over so that Feliciano was on top and smirked as he covered himself with the excess, "You shouldn't have done that last night."

"Ve?" Feli watched in confusion as Ludwig leaned back comfortably against the headboard and tugged him towards his lap.

"Ride me...I don't think I'm ever going to want it any other way here on out."

Realizing what Ludwig was asking, Feli returned the smirk and held his lover's eager length
towards his stretched hole, sinking down on it slowly with a long, drawn out moan.

Ludwig took a hold of Feli's hips and could only stare as he disappeared inside, the silky slick heat of his boyfriend was almost too much. He felt as though he was going to come already much to his embarrassment but he couldn't help himself. It was so hot, and the blessed expression on Feli's face along with the deep groan coming from the Italian's lips, it made him twitch from within the gorgeous man in his lap.

Feli shivered in delight, "Let's do it together this time." He fell forward with a gasp when Ludwig didn't ask what he meant by that and started to thrust upward, reaching out to brace his hands against the headboard for leverage.

Blunt nails dug into Feli's skin when the Italian started to bounce in time to Ludwig's movement. Blue eyes stared up at Feli's flushed face in awe that it was twisted in pleasure because of him. Tossing his head back, he exposed his neck to Feli's waiting mouth, lips parting in a deep moan when he felt teeth sink in.

"I-is that all that you enjoyed from last night," groaned Feli into his ear. Their movements became erratic but he managed to pry Ludwig's hands from his hips without slowing and held them against the headboard. "Because I could've sworn you enjoyed when I did this much more than you let on."

Ludwig's already flushed cheeks darkened more but he made no move to deny that he had in fact liked, no loved, it when his boyfriend had pinned his wrists back. So instead of answering, he moved faster. The warmth and tightness of the Italian's body was beginning to overwhelm him, despite how many times they've already done it. Feli's sudden cry drew his attention away.

"Th-there, Luddy," he mewled, "my spot...please—you're almost—oh god, yes!" Ludwig watched Feli's jaw drop as he bounced harder, grinding his bundle of nerves against him.

He felt Feli's grip release its hold on his wrists and he immediately flipped them over without withdrawing, sucking bruises into Feliciano's neck and collarbone. Ludwig pushed into Feli in rapid, harsh rolls of his hips, pulling one of Feli's leg over his shoulder and thrusting as deeply into him as he could, watching the man below him jolt with a broken moan. He cherished the look on Feli's face as well as the burn of Feli's hands clawing at his back. He let Feli's leg drop back down so that his lover could wrap them around his waist instead and Ludwig felt the familiar hot coil release within him, forcing a deep moan from his lips as he came inside.

Beneath him, Feli whimpered, "Luddy, wh-what about me?"

Ludwig looked down at Feli's twitching arousal and took him into his mouth without hesitation. He glanced up from underneath his thick golden lashes and locked eyes with his lover. It didn't take much before Feli cried out in pleasure and he was swallowing everything Feli had to give. Licking his lips clean, he let his head drop on Feli's stomach.

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Feli ran his trembling fingers through Ludwig's hair, still unable to form a coherent thought let alone a sentence. They stayed like that for a while until Ludwig sluggishly moved to lay next to him, pulling his boyfriend in to cuddle. Wrapped up in one another, Ludwig's breaths were slowly becoming shallower and rhythmic, signifying that he'd already fallen asleep. Feli continued to gently run his fingers through his matted hair, brushing a golden lock away from his lover's sleeping face, "I love you," he whispered as he carefully got out of bed for a quick shower, nearly tripping on weak legs.
Pulling on some grey corduroy pants and a thick turtleneck, Feli gave his boyfriend one last kiss before going to the library. He paused outside at the sound of arguing.

"Lovi, why does grandpa tell me that Feli doesn't know about it," hissed Oswaldo as he jabbed a finger into his cousin's chest.

Lovi slapped his hand away and glared, "Because it's the truth? Ever think about that dumbass?"

"Why the fuck not? Do you have any idea what this can do to him?"

"He can't know. If he knew what was going on, he would've never agreed to do it in the first place!"

"How bad are things, seriously? Do we really need him to go through with it?"

"Of course, we do! This is important so don't you fucking go and tell him. The less he knows about it the better."

Oswaldo's golden eyes burned in anger, jaw clenched tightly before growling, "If he gets hurt in any way—"

"Are you threatening me?"

"You're goddamn right I am." Eric tried to soothe his brother's ruffled feathers but the dark-haired Italian brushed him off, "No, I'm serious. If he gets hurt, whoever was responsible for this, will answer to me."

Confused, Feli entered and stared at the two arguing Italians, "What's going on? What aren't I supposed to know?"

His family stared back; Felicia and Marcello shared a love seat with her sprawled over it and her bare feet on his lap. The quadruplets shared a couch while Lovino sat on a chair next to them. Antonio stood with his back to them while he organized a cork board with little cards. Fabrezio sat on the floor by Bernardo.

The young Italian perked up at the sight of his older brother, "There you are! They didn't want to start without you Don Feliciano." He said that last part with a teasing grin.

Feli ignored him and directed his attention to his brother, "What shouldn't I know about?"

Oswaldo crossed his arms and looked at Lovino pointedly. The short-tempered Vargas rolled his eyes, and said, "We were just discussing how you got your job at that potato bastard's hospital. We didn't want you to find out."

"Find out what?"

"That grandpa may or may not have given his recommendation to Dr. Beilschmidt and that his word may or may not have been the reason why you got the job."

Fists clenched at Feli's sides. He knew it. He fucking knew that his grandpa had stuck his hands in this! Falling into the chair by the fireplace, he tried to figure out why he'd done it. "Didn't he think I could've done it on my own?"

"It was just a recommendation," soothed Felicia, "Besides, Dr. Beilschmidt knows all of us. At least that's what mama says. He would've hired you in a heartbeat with or without grandpa's
interference."

"Because I'm a good doctor?"

" Heck yeah!"

Feli thought about it. Could he really say he was all that pissed? The pay was good and he got to court Ludwig. Had it not been for his grandfather's interference, he probably would've never had the chance at the German's heart. He smiled, "I guess you're right. Ve, I'm actually kinda happy he did it. I got my Luddy out of it after all~"

The rest of the young Vargas exchange glances of relief; that had gone a lot smoother than they planned. Tucking his feet underneath him, Feli looked to Seraph and Antonio, "Right, what did you guys find?"

"Nothing, aside the note you gave Ozzie," said Seraph with a tired sigh. He pulled out some developed pictures of Mr. Sunwell's body and passed them around, "I did an autopsy on him and found an Acidantheras stuffed down his throat. Grandpa had me send that and the thread to Naya and her Diamond Dogs."

Lovi furrowed his brow, "Naya?"

Seraph shrugged, "Grandpa said he wanted her to look into it. Not that she wouldn't have done it without him asking. She'd do anything for you and your brothers."

"You know that's probably the nicest I've ever heard you talk about her ever since she left."

"She's your cousin."

"Like that's stopped you from being a dick to her."

Bernardo chuckled and added, "He's only a dick to her because she ran away with his girlfriend."

"Ex," corrected Seraph with a scowl, "and that's not why I'm-"

"I want to know more about the poisoning," said Feliciano, looking at his older cousins and brother pointedly. "What was that about?"

"Poisonings?" Felicia sat up, "What poisonings? When did this happen?"

Eric licked his lips nervously, "I—uh...well we were given arsenic a month ago during our stay in Shanghai. We were in one of our hotels when it happened."

"We were interrogating one of the guys who burned down the orphanage when Blondie came running to our room." Bernard took a sip from his wine before continuing, "We took care of it of course but what was most disconcerting was the fact that it was an employee of that hotel."

"I tried to interrogate him," said Seraph, "but he escaped before we got a chance. Our dad went down there but apparently everyone that had been working the kitchen during our stay has disappeared. We're currently working on finding their whereabouts."

"So, we really can't trust anyone," muttered Elio. "Willem and I haven't been touched yet but I found it odd that one of your aunts offered to bring us to Italy in a Blaze jet."

"We told them to. As of now, we have to assume that everyone is an enemy."
"What about the others," asked Feli, remembering the tattoos on Tino and Mathias, "the original allies? Are they dangerous too?"

Antonio rolled the chart over and finally spoke up, "I don't think so. My tomato and I have been going over the list of families allied to the Vargas, new and old, and we've made a list of those who would have a reason to go against us and those who wouldn't." The Spaniard pointed to each family crest and gave a detailed explanation of their current affairs.

Meanwhile, Ludwig stirred in his sleep. He reached over in effort to pull his lover close but his hand fell onto an empty space. Opening his eyes, he scanned the room for Feliciano, "Liebling?" When no one answered, he got up and pulled on a pair of navy flannel pajama pants. He checked the bathroom but no one was there aside from leftover steam.

"Maybe he got up for a snack," he said to himself. Figuring that everyone else was asleep, Ludwig stepped out shirtless and made his way to the kitchen. However, that too was empty. He checked the living room and gym, though he couldn't imagine why his boyfriend would be there, until he finally heard people talking in the library. He padded silently to the door and listened.

"I don't understand though," he heard Feli say, "If this is truly a matter of business gone awry, why burn down the orphanage? Why attack Cerberus? Why hurt Mr. Sunwell?"

Lovi sighed, "That's exactly why, you idiot. Grandpa has made a point to make it clear to the Russians that we don't want their business. I don't know about you but ever since that fiasco with cocaine smuggling via an Estonian company, what was it called?"

"BioCorp Von Bock," answered Seraph, "It was partnered with that one Russian company that collapsed. After everyone left, the owner's son changed their name to N.I.N.B. LabCorp. Guess he wants to try and rebuild its reputation."

Feli spoke up again, "But you don't think that he's really trying to get access to the railroad do you? Genovia's importation laws have gotten stricter and with it, ours."

"Which is why they're attacking, fratello, come on, keep up." Lovino started to pace, "The only thing standing between them and their distributors there is us. Clearly they want——"

Ludwig shifted his weight, making the wooden panel under his foot squeak. A hand came to his mouth and he was shoved behind a large cabinet. Arms ready to push away whoever had attacked him, he felt another pair of hands wrap around him. That's when he noticed that it was Monika and Willem, both dressed in pajamas, holding him still. Monika mouthed at him to keep quiet as she peeked out to see Bernardo open the door and scan the halls.

When he didn't find anyone, he called back in Italian, "Let's continue this discussion in Italian. I trust you haven't told Ludwig about us?"

"No," admitted Feli bashfully, "Nonno hasn't given me permission yet."

"In due time, little cousin." Closing the door fully, Bernardo leaned against the mantle, "Now, where were we?"

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Monika and Willem ushered Ludwig back to his room and sat him on the bed. Monika ran a hand through her hair, "What were you doing?"

"I was looking for Feliciano." Narrowing his eyes in confusion he asked, "Why did you do that?
"Why were they being all secretive?"

"They like their privacy when discussing politics and business, Luddy. Do you really think they want to talk about stuff like that with us?"

"Cocaine and fires are business?" Laughing dryly, Ludwig stood back up, "What are they? Gangsters?"

Willem and his cousin forced themselves not to look at each other. Ludwig didn't know and until they were given permission to discuss the matter, it was going to stay that way. Willem sat next to Ludwig, "No, but they are business giants with their fingers in a lot of pies what with their grandpa's real estate businesses and their nuclear power plant."

"Their what?!"

"O-oh…um, you didn't—never mind. Uh, Nicola, ah, Ezio's mom, is a, or rather was a…you know what, it's not important. They just have a lot of influence over things like importations of pharmaceuticals what with their research facilities. And ever since that one scandal involving the importation of drugs via those Russian crates all those years ago, things have been...messy in that part of business and...look- what is important is that you should feel honored that Feli loves you enough to not want to drag you into boring stuff like that."

"What the hell are you going on about?!"

"What he means, Ludwig," said Monika after giving Willem a pointed glare, "is that sometimes things are best left unsaid until the time is right. You should know that best of all. Or don't tell me you've actually told Feliciano about Natalya."

"Dude, seriously?" Willem shook his head, "I thought you broke that off."

"I'm going to," growled Ludwig, "When we get back to Victrola, I'm going to arrange a meeting with my father and tell him that I'm not going to marry her. And if that means that I have to forfeit my inheritance to pay the fine then so be it."

"You're not going to tell Feli about it at all?"

"He doesn't need to know. If I break it then it's like it never happened, right?"

"I still think you should tell him, Luddy." Willem rubbed his neck, "Between Ezio and me, there isn't any secrets. He's told me his life story and I've told him mine. Granted, mine isn't exactly as exciting as his but...it's good to build a relationship, if you want one that is going to last forever, on a foundation of trust and honesty. You—you do want your relationship to last forever right?"

Ludwig didn't even have to think about it. Images of a life with Feli in a nice house filled his mind. His kitchen used and the smell of cookies and other pastries filling their home. Feli painting in the attic turned studio while their cats lounged in the window sill by a patch of sunlight, keeping him company. The dogs would be outside keeping a watchful eye on Alex—yes Alex—as the boy watched the bees collect nectar from their flowers. Maybe they could have another child, a younger one. And of course, that younger one would be on Ludwig's hip as he filled a pie shell and he could teach him the song that his mother would sing to make sure the pies would always come out good.

The German smiled softly, "I do want that. I want," he trailed off and his eyes saddened, "but what if he hates me for keeping something like that from him? I don't think I could…"

"You're just going to have to trust that his love for you is as deep and profound as he claims it is,"
said Monika softly, "Just like I'm sure he's going to trust the same in you when the time comes for him to tell you his secrets."

"What secrets could he possibly have?"

"Has he told you about his past?"

"If you mean the fact that he used to cut himself…"

This took both Monika and Willem by surprise, "Uh, no, I actually didn't know that. I knew he suffered from—look just remember that you love him, ok? If you can hold on to that, everything will be ok." Pulling Willem back up, Monika started for the door, "We're going to bed now. Try and get some sleep ok?"

Ludwig walked them to the door, "Ok." The German cousins startled themselves when they saw Felicia and Ezio walking back to their rooms. Further ahead, they heard the elevator doors close, "Who else is here?"

Felicia came up and snuggled into her girlfriend's arms, "No one. They boys are just going to the river."

"What, now?"

"Si~ It's a tradition they do every Christmas. Feli hasn't been able to participate in the last four years but he wanted to go now."

"Why aren't you two going?"

Ezio let Willem drape his arm around his shoulders, "We weren't there when it happened. Neither was Licia. To be honest what they're about to do isn't something I'm all too eager to take a part of even if I could. Remembering things from the past, bad things, is really shitty. I have no idea why they even do it."

"To pay respect to our fallen family members for one," scolded Felicia. "And remembering isn't all that bad so long as you don't linger in the past. Remembering history and the lessons learned helps us pave ways for a brighter future."

Ludwig rubbed his temples, "Does this have to do with what you said Feli is going to tell me one day?" Monika nodded. "Something tells me I'm not going to like it."

"Nobody likes what happened, Luddy. A lot of our family members died. Feli's dad included." Felicia walked back to the living room and looked out the window where she could see their cousins walking towards the lake, "I would go too but as I said, I wasn't there."

"Is there any way you can tell me what happened?"

Felicia met Ludwig's eye and studied him for a moment before shaking her head, "I'm sorry, no. It's not my story to tell.

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The boys quickly set up a small bonfire before sitting around it, facing the water. Lovino let Antonio wrap his arms around him and pulled him in against his chest with a blanket. Seraph held Marcello's gloved hand in his while Bernardo hugged Eric, and Oswaldo pulled Feli to sit in between his legs. Seraph closed his eyes and let his mind travel back in time.
It had started innocent enough. He hadn't been sure why the adults were fighting or why they were always tense but when he heard that his grandpa had suggested a family retreat, Seraph bounced up and down in joy. It had been a long while since he last got to see any of the other cousins. Not that he minded Feli or Lovi or Marcello or Licia. But why play with only a handful when he had a whole legion.

Beside him, Bernardo was refilling his water gun while he provided cover for him. Shooting his purple dyed water at a cousin, he giggled, "I got you, you're out!"

"Hey look," said his tawny haired cousin as he pointed at his purple stained shirt, "It looks like a happy face. Shoot me again to make a nose!"

Nodding, Seraph squeezed the plastic trigger, a loud crack reverberated in the gorge like a wrathful thunder clap. The laughter that had bounced off the rocky walls and danced through the trees became stunned silence. His cousin's eyes widened from both the sound and a sudden numbness in his chest before rolling to the back of his head as he fell backwards to the water.

Seraph stared in horror as red stained his cousin's shirt. That's when the screaming started. Women gathered as many children as they could while men tried to locate weapons. Seraph's seven year old brain clicked and he rushed into action as bullets rained upon them from above. Gathering Marcello in his arms, he ushered as many cousins as he could, "This way! There's a safe room in one of the caves," he cried, "Come on, Lovi!"

"Where's my brother," wailed Lovino as he tried to look past the herd of panicking Vargas. "Feliciano! Fratellino! Where are you?!"

The older boy grabbed his hand, "He'll be fine. Come on!" Children of various ages saw him ushering kids towards the mountains and followed after him. They tried their best to ignore the falling bodies and prayed that the next bullet wouldn't hit them.

Handing a weeping Marcello over to Lovino, Seraph shoved them into the cave, "Here, take him and go to the back of the room. I'll keep the door open as long as I—" He jumped when he heard an explosion followed by more. A pillar of fire came out from the neighboring cave. His tiny heart nearly broke through his chest in fright when the same explosion was heard in his cave.

"No," he whispered. Children were still making their way inside the bunker. He could feel the heat wave before he saw the light. "No," he cried again. Looking to the kids running towards the cave and to the ones already inside watching him with fearful eyes he had to make a decision no child should ever make.

Lips trembling and sobs threatening to escape, Seraph pressed the button that would close the door on the other kids...on his family. He pressed his back against the door, baring his teeth in pain both from the heated metal on his back and from the screams of agony on the other side. The hurtful looks on their angelic faces would forever haunt him.

Marcello squeaked as his cousin unconsciously squeezed his hand too tightly but didn't do anything to stop him. He knew what he was recalling. He was too. That day in the bunker, though he had barely turned five, would be something he nor Lovi would ever forget. Next to him, Lovino was sniffing while Antonio quietly cooed to him in Spanish.

On the other side, Bernardo's jaw was clenched, his eyes hazy from his mind being elsewhere. Eric leaned against his brother and closed his eyes, letting tears fall freely to the ground below. The soothing waves of the lake did little to calm either of them. As a matter of a fact, it only added to the brothers' pain.
Bernardo had seen that Seraph was leading the others to safety and he had half the mind of following had it not been for the fact that Eric was all the way on the other side of the gorge. Running in the opposite direction, he avoided hands that kept reaching for him and other kids blindly like a claw trying for a prize. In this case, whoever they caught was spared a cruel fate. The screams were nothing like he’d heard before. This had to be a nightmare; family members were dropping dead all around him as his uncles finally returned with guns and returned fire to those on top of the gorge.

He saw Eric with a small group of children and he hugged him tightly, "Stupid! We need to get to a safe room."

"We've searched for them but most are already closed," whimpered Eric as he rubbed his eyes. "I want mama."

"I know baby brother. I know. I do too." Ushering them behind a tree, Bernardo tried to think of where they could hide. The cabin was too far away and they would be easy pickings for the snipers. The caves! Poking his head around the tree, his heart stopped at the sound of explosions and fire coming out from the mouths on the gorge. He tried not to think about how his brother and cousins had run into those caves.

"That one, look," cried Naya, one of his female cousins. She pointed to a room high on the gorge. "We can climb the trees. We can make it."

Nodding, Bernardo started helping the smaller ones up the tree. Naya helped her brother and cousin up so that they could help the younger ones climb. Bernardo hissed and slipped on a branch, his thin arms wrapping themselves around the rough bark as he tried to swing himself back up.

"Are you ok," asked Eric.

His lower back felt like it was on fire and for some reason it felt like he was wetting himself. Far too scared to look, he tried to give a reassuring smile but it came out more like a grimace, "I-I’m fine, Eric. Keeping going."

"You're bleeding!"

"I know." Bernardo let a few tears slip, "It hurts but we need to keep—" Another, louder explosion, interrupted him and he nearly fell to the ground but Naya and Eric helped him steady. The sound of rock crumbling and the roar of water waiting to be unleashed was deafening.

Bernardo tossed Naya into the room and tried to get in himself but the cave was packed. Looking behind him, he screamed, "Close the door!"

"What about you two?!"

"We'll be climb higher just close the door!"

Crying, Naya did as she was told but the door wouldn’t close, "It's jammed, I can't get it to close." Behind her, screams of terror from the children were louder than the gunfire still taking place. Thinking fast, Bernardo threw his weight against a small boulder. Eric saw what his brother was trying to do and climbed off the branch and onto the ledge to help. Bullets grazed their arms and whizzed past their heads but lucky enough none hit their target.

With one last push, the two brothers managed to knock off the rock, bringing with it a much larger one that fell in front of the cave’s mouth, effectively sealing it and preventing water from getting...
inside. Unfortunately, they were swept in the water's current. Eric reached out for his brother's hand in an effort to stay together.

They found a low branch to grab a hold of and that's where Paulo found his two sons when he rushed with his brother-in-law to save them. Octavio went to get his son, Marcello, and nephews out of the cave.

"I really don't like water," whispered Eric and he buried his face into his brother's side, "or guns."

Tightening his arms around him, Bernardo nodded, "I know, Eric. I know." The two huddled closer to the fire for warmth while Ozzie held Feliciano. He rested his chin on Feli's shoulder while Feli stared blankly towards the star filled sky. Oswaldo breathed in his angel's scent to ground himself.

His chest was hurting because he'd never been so good at breathing while running. Not that he was focused on his breathing at the moment. He was more focused on not getting either of them shot. Oswaldo gripped his Feli's hand firmly in his with their fingers interlaced so that the younger wouldn't let go. All around them were fallen aunts, uncles, and cousins alike, their golden eyes glazed over and mouth parted in a scream. He could practically see the reapers washing over the field.

"O-Ozzie," squeaked Feli as he tripped over a body. A bullet flew by past his stomach, grazing the skin deep enough to surely leave a mark, as he reached for him. Strong arms plucked him up but before either of them could protest, they noticed it was Cesare, Feli's dad.

Cesare swerved around and shot at a few people Oswaldo assumed were the bad guys before holstering his gun and taking the little dark haired Italian's hand in his, "This way, to the cabin." They ran inside as others ran out to fight. Taking them to the library, he tore aside a painting of their great-grandfather Leonardo and his daughter and two sons, Lucrezia, Romulus, and his twin Remus. Inputting his code and voicing the password, he shoved the two boys inside before lowering the bullet proof glass door.

"There you are, Cesare," said one of the attackers with a sneer, "Oh my, my, my, is that the little prince I see tucked away like a rat?"

Growling in anger, Cesare, redrew his gun out and shot him along with anyone else who tried entering the library. Fear subsided within Oswaldo and Feli at the sight of the Italian defending their protective chamber. Outside, they heard explosions followed by the rumble of water, more people made their way into the cabin, Romulus being one of them.

"Is everyone ok," asked the weary older Italian. His men entered and checked the bodies for a pulse.

Cesare sat his gun aside and nodded to his father-in-law, "Is everyone else—wait. You're not—gah!" The Italian fell to his knees when the older man knocked all the air out of his lungs. Coughing up blood, Cesare glared, "W-where's Romulus, Remus?"

"My brother isn't here at the moment. Pity, everything could've gone a lot smoother if he had." Shrugging, Remus walked up to the glass shielding Feli and Oswaldo. "Why don't you let them out so that they can play with their great uncle?"

"You can go to hell, Remus."

"Tut, tut. Such angry words to say in front of children. Well, no matter. They won't live long enough to repeat such foul language." He swung his leg out and kicked Cesare's jaw upward, knocking his
glasses off. Reaching down, he gripped him by his chocolate locks and raised his face, "You should've joined me instead of running off to get my little brother. Because of you and your brat, all of this had to happen."

"Y-your words are wasted on me, Remus," wheezed Cesare. "I won't blame myself for this. It was your hand who stained this sanctuary red with the blood of your kin. Not me."

"Hn, yes, and soon enough this library will be stained with that of yours and those two brats." Remus let go and wiped his hand on one of his subordinates' suit. "Do what you must to get Feliciano out. He's always been my brother's favorite."

When the two men started to beat Cesare, Oswaldo held Feli tightly, "Don't look, angelo. Please don't look." He shut his own eyes and buried his face in his cousin's neck. Despite his attempts of shielding Feli from the horror of his father's torture, nothing could prevent them from the sounds and screams and eventually smell.

The men were unable to get Cesare to give them the code to release his son and nephew and eventually the man fell silent all together. Worn and battered, they nailed his feet and hands to the wall so that he hung upside down with his eyeless face pressed against the glass. Oswaldo refused to look but he knew Feli couldn't take his eyes away.

For days, they stayed in that cramped space until Paolo and Octavio came for them. It would take another couple of years for Feli to speak again and more after that to overcome the horrors he saw.

Licking his lips, Feli's soft voice broke through their silence, "I'll do it." The others slowly turned to look at him, so he spoke up again, "I'm going to be assuming the role of heir and, from now on, take on the responsibilities that it entails."

Lovino raised an eyebrow, "What brought this on? Why not before?"

The Italian fidgeted under his family's curious eyes, "I didn't think I could do it and...I don't know. It makes me nervous and I just wanted to live a normal life like everyone else. I guess I...no, I know that I'm scared but I don't want what happened to our family all those years ago to happen again."

Oswaldo took his hand gingerly in his, "It won't happen again, angelo. Not under our reign."

"He's right," muttered Lovi, "As long as it's our family who's in charge, nothing like that will ever happen again. And if it does, we'll be ready to destroy them before it can come close."

"If you're serious about finally taking your spot, we can help you." The dark haired Italian ran his fingers through Feli's hair affectionately, "I helped you once and I can do it again. It's just a matter of training your mind to obey you."

Feli pressed his cheek against Oswaldo's warm palm, "I'm scared. What if...I don't want another repeat of--"

"You're not alone, idiot." Lovino stood up, "You have us and that potato bastard. We won't let you fall again."

"Promise?"

"We fucking promise. Like I said, we're the keystone of the crime families, and a lot of people count on us to be strong. You're going to have to put your part into this role we've been given." The
older twin's eyes softened a bit, "It will require for you to take your therapy sessions seriously. If we need to dig up old records for you to remember—"

"I remember everything, Lovino."

Crackling of the bonfire filled the empty pockets of silence before Seraph spoke, "What qualifies as everything?"

"I mean everything." Feli played with his shirt, "I've known for years now. Why it happened is hazy but everything else, liked dad's death, the attack…our other cousins and aunts and uncles…I remember." Smiling weakly he patted Ozzie's hand, "He knows. He helped me through my panic attacks." Hardening his eyes, he continued, "I don't like what this Acidanthera group has done in their effort to intimidate us. I know I may not agree with our methods but if it means keeping us all safe, I'm willing to look the other way. Never again will Vargas blood stain our home."

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When Ludwig woke up the second time, Feli was back in bed and under the sheets, tucked in securely around him. Smiling, he wrapped his arms around his beloved and pulled him in tighter, 'I love you, Feliciano.' Unfortunately their peaceful slumber only lasted so long seeing that, as soon as their clock struck nine, Willem, Fabrezio, and Marcello jumped on their bed to wake them up.

"Come on, guys," exclaimed Marcello gleefully, "Santa came!"

"Uh-huh," added Ezio as he and his husband kept on jumping, "And he left loads of presents!"

Groaning in irritation, Feli covered his face with the blanket. This made Ludwig chuckle. Leave it to his ever happy lover to be a morning grouch on Christmas morning. Shooing the rowdy men off their bed and out their room, Ludwig rolled on top of Feliciano. He supported his weight on his arms at either side of Feli's head, "Get up, liebling."

"No," grumbled Feli.

"But you're already awake."

"No, I'm not."

"Oh? So, I suppose that you won't want the present I have for you."

"Mmm…"

"Or the morning pastries that I'm going to make."

"Luuuddy," whined Feli.

"Or the," he whispered something into Feli's ear that made both of them blush for different reasons. Pulling back, he smirked triumphantly at Feli's wide awake expression.

"Aww, Ludwig, you tease~" Despite his grumbles, Feli followed Ludwig to their shower. After a few minutes, and some certain administrations, the two emerged refreshed and ready for the new day. They quickly changed into some sweats and t-shirts before padding hand in hand to the living room.

There, they saw Seraph running around screaming into his phone, "I fucking love you, Uncle Chad~ Hell, yeah, I love the gift! Can I really use them? I can?! Holy shit, this is so badass! I love
you, too mommy! Thank you for letting Uncle Chad make them for me. Woohoh!" Running past them and to the kitchen, Seraph gave another leap of joy before thanking his relatives over the phone.

Feli nudged Eric with his toe, "What's gotten into him?"

Rolling his eyes, the blond Italian tore open his own present, "Our uncle gave him a pair of wings his company's been developing. Now he's going to think he really is a seraph."

Chuckling, Feli ushered Ludwig to the kitchen where he found a pot of steaming hot coffee. Ludwig set to work on those pastries he promised while Monika finished making scrambled eggs and sausage. Felicia walked in barefoot and her pink robe lazily tightened; her hair, though in a ponytail, was in disarray. She collapsed on a bar stool at the island and buried her face in her arms, absentely reaching for a mug for coffee.

Feli handed her one before reaching for his iPad to do a face time with Alex. He grinned brightly at the screen, "Merry Christmas, bambino!"

"Merry Christmas, P-Feli! Merry Christmas, Ludwig."

"Merry Christmas, Alex," said Ludwig, now hovering behind Feli's shoulder as he whisked a fruity filling in a large bowl. Both of them listened to Alex as the boy told them all about Christmas dinner with Romulus and his children as well as pointed to all his new presents from Santa. Alex and Sam overheard them and bounced onto Alex's bed to greet them as well. Alfred and Arthur were there and they too wished them a Merry Christmas.

While they spoke to one another, Oswaldo walked out of his room in the same zombie-like state Felicia had earlier, making Antonio chuckle at the family resemblance between the Vargas. Ludwig shook his head when he realized that the trio were dressed in identical boxers and t-shirts with the only difference being the first letter of their names printed in a huge block letter on the front and back of their shirts. By the time the pastries were done, everyone was alert and giddy with the Christmas morning spirit. Feli and Ludwig had said goodbye to their friends and Alex and were now opening their own presents.

Felicia held her breath as Monika opened hers. A delighted squeal was her reward when she carefully lifted the lid and out jumped a long red haired dachshund with blue bows in its ears and her tail wagging. "Oh, liebling, she's beautiful!"

"Heehee, look at her collar, bella," chirped the Italian. The boys around her took note of the way she worried the tip of her ponytail. A sign that she was incredibly nervous. When Monika's jaw dropped and her crystal blue eyes widened, she glanced back up to her girlfriend only to find her on her knees before her, "Monika Beilschmidt, w-will you do me th-the utmost honor and be mine f-forever? Seeing as though I'm retiring I thought...maybe we could...be a family with little Daisy as our bambina. And who knows...maybe one day we could have a real baby girl of our own."

Monika's eyes glazed over as her face turned beat red. Her mouth parted and she stayed that way for a moment, making Felicia giggle and hug her girlfriend out of her frozen state. When she came about, Monika latched herself to her girlfriend and nodded frantically as she slid on the engagement ring.

"Ve, you two are like the same person," said Feli to Ludwig with a giggle, "Well, except she's a girl." Ludwig sighed and nuzzled Feli's shoulder while handing him his present. Feli carefully opened the parcel and gasped. Inside was the softest knitted shawl he'd ever felt. Dark blue and grey gradient with white and silver flecks thrown here and there. When he extended it, his eyes
widened and his jaw dropped as he recognized what the dots were. "C-constellations?"

Ludwig blushed, "I've—uh, noticed that you have an affinity for stars. I tried to remember all the constellations you told me were your favorites but I couldn't fit all of them into—"

"You knitted this?"

Pink turned to red as Ludwig tried to recompose himself, "I...I may have found a manual on it. Roderich taught me how to sew in the constellations but—mmh!" Feli launched himself onto Ludwig's lap and pressed a hard kiss to his lips. He probably would've done more had Ludwig not pulled him away, "F-Feli! Control yourself, please."

"Ve, sorry but I...you have no idea how much this means to me. Look Ozzie!"

Oswaldo sat across from them with a cup of coffee and nodded at the shawl appreciatively, "It's beautiful. You did good, Beilschmidt."

"Now I won't have to wait for night time to see them~"

Oswaldo tried not to let the statement hurt too much. After all, Ludwig was giving Feliciano a source of comfort for when he would be unable to and that always counted for something. After everyone opened their Christmas presents, they cleaned up and dispersed around the cabin. Ozzie tugged Feli towards the gym, "Ok, now that you've accepted your title, we're going to have to train you how to defend yourself."

"But I don't want~"

"Uh-uh. None of that. What if something happens and you need to protect your kid and boyfriend?"

Feli rubbed his belly absently, "But I don't know if I still remember what they taught us as kids."

"Your body never forgets, angel. Here, I bet you could still hit your marks.‖ Oswaldo unrolled a set of throwing knives and led Feli to a target dummy.

"I-I don't know, Ozzie..."

"This was your thing back in the day, Feli! I know you can still do it."

Running his hands over the polished metal, Feli picked up a knife, holding it balanced on his fingers and feeling its weight. The knot of worry slowly unwound and he clutched the knife in his hand before letting it drop back onto the tray with a clatter. Releasing a huff of breath, he shook his head, "I can't."

"Feli..."

"Please, I can't. Not right now. I promise to practice another time...please."

"Ok. Let's try something else." He led them to a bar for pull ups, "Now I know that bodybuilding isn't your thing and that's cool. 'Cause your body is like mine; it was built for speed, not like Bernardo's or your Ludwig who are bulkier." He jumped onto the bar and showed Feli how to do a pull up before looking at him pointedly, "But that doesn't mean that strength is out of the question. Come on, up you go."

He watched as Feli jumped up and down in effort to reach the bar before chuckling, "Here, let me help you."
"Ve~ yay for muscles!"

Ludwig watched as Oswaldo lifted Feli to the bar and helped him with his pull ups, his hands every now and again brushing against his lover's abs. He wasn't sure why, but he couldn't deny that he was feeling—

"Jealous?" The German refused to acknowledge that he jumped at the sound of Seraph's voice. Shaking his head, he returned his attention to his boyfriend and the grabby Italian. Seraph leaned against the door next to Ludwig and continued talking, "You shouldn't be jealous. Oswaldo isn't stupid or reckless enough to try anything. He loves him too much."

Hoping he understood wrong, Ludwig gave Seraph a glance, "Love him like I love Monika and Willem…right?"

"Well, that depends. Do you want to kiss your cousins?" Ludwig's jaw dropped a fraction making Seraph chuckle, "I'm kidding. He doesn't want to kiss Feliciano. Not anymore at least. I think they got that out of their system when they were younger."

"Was—I mean, what?"

"It was just a kiss, Ludwig. Don't freak, besides it only happened like twice at most. Three if that. Don't act like you never wanted to kiss your cousin."

"I haven't!" Glaring at the Italian helping his boyfriend work out, Ludwig fumed, "Why didn't Feli tell me that?"

"Honestly? He probably doesn't remember it very well. A lot of shit happened that fucked with his memories. He's told you about his scars, yes?"

"He said that he was young and stupid and was having a hard time dealing with his dad's death. Why? What does that have to do with anything?"

Seraph played with the gold sun pendant at the base of his neck as he mulled over how to go about telling the German. The air became tight with tension until the Italian broke it, "He tried to kill himself because he was blaming himself for his dad's death."

Any anger inside Ludwig was quickly replaced with despair, making his blood run cold, "What?"

"Listen, I'm only telling you for two reasons. One, to try and make you understand the relationship my brother has with Feli and two…because Feli will never tell you about that part of his past. Not because he doesn't trust you but because he's ashamed. He'll probably be angry with me but you have the right to know before you get any deeper than you already are."

"What do you mean?"

Raising an eyebrow, Seraph gave him a lopsided smirk, "I'm not blind you know. I saw how you reacted when you saw Felicia ask Moni to marry her. It was like you were watching yourself getting proposed to by a girl version of Feli. I can see that it's something you're considering for the both of you."

"I-it's still too early in our relationship to be thinking about such things…" Despite his words, Ludwig felt himself giddy at the prospect of marrying Feliciano. 'Now, this is how one is supposed to feel when thinking about marrying the love of your life,' he thought to himself.

"As I was saying," said Seraph, interrupting Ludwig's musing, "Feli suffers from depression, or
rather, he did. I hate to say that he's cured because things like that are never really cured. Rather they are controlled with medication or, in my cousin's case, fall dormant. You see, his father was killed in his effort to protect him and Oswaldo when they were children, barely six and seven respectively. After his death, Feli refused to speak to anyone who wasn't my brother. That was reasonable enough given that they were together when it happened so it was only natural that he developed a bond with Ozzie. With some therapy, we were all able to recover for the most part except, of course, for Feli. I think it was because he had a deeper relationship with his father than Lovi did. He was his everything."

"I've gathered as much. He's always talking about him."

"Mhm. Well, you can only imagine what it was like for him to see him killed right in front of him. When he finally did start talking, he'd gotten it in his head that his dad died in a plane crash. That was a kinder death so for a while my aunt Nicola let him believe it. Everything was fine until when he was around eleven and Lovino tried to tell him the truth. That's when he lost it."

"Did he not go through PTSD immediately after that happened?"

"Not really, not until Lovi said anything." Seraph nodded towards his cousin, "Feli started to suffer episodes at night and with certain triggers. What was worse was that we were with our family in America so Ozzie wasn't around to help him. The doctors weren't getting through to him so they gave him a lot of medication to control it. They really helped him with the exception of nightmares. He'd scream and cry and then nothing. We came back at Oswaldo's insistence and he was the only one to get a good reaction out of him. So, he never left his side. Ozzie was taught how to soothe Feli through his episodes and eventually my brother was able to mold his mind so that he could handle certain situations. Feli eventually blocked out bad memories and he was happy for real this time.

"Then when he was fifteen the depression came back. He blamed himself and would often punish himself. Drugs came into play and not the good kind." Taking note of Ludwig's face, he chuckled, "Don't worry, Oswaldo nipped that in the bud really quickly. Eventually, we all stopped trying to get him to remember what really happened and Feli slowly started becoming the boy he used to be. The man he is today. His mother and Lovi told him stories about his father and Feli immersed himself in studies and he really did get better. Granted, he still has triggers that we have to be wary about but for the most part Ozzio was able to dispel the more serious symptoms. His father is the most common one but we don't talk about it unless he's the one to bring it up….our great uncle is another one but the time is coming where he is going to have to learn to overcome those too."

Ludwig watched Oswaldo tickle Feliciano as the redhead dangled from the bar. Feili's giggles made him lose his grip and he fell right into the older Italian's arms. "Did...did they love each other?"

Seraph followed the German's gaze in time to see Feli squirm out of his brother's grasp and take off towards to the trampoline. He laughed softly, "Don't be jealous, Ludwig. I can see that my cousin loves you and will devote his life to make you happy."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Does it matter? My brother won't interfere with your relationship if that's what concerns you. He would've given Feli everything he had to give if only it were possible. But it's not, so instead he loves him from afar and breathes in whatever Feli gives him; what he can give him. For Ozzie, this is enough." Seraph clasped his hand on Ludwig's shoulder, "Don't be frightened. The Feli you see is the man he is: kind, loving, and silly. That's how he was as a kid and it's what he'll always be."

"Did you think I would stop loving him because of what you told me?" Ludwig narrowed his eyes,
"Because I don't. I do love him and will continue loving him. His past won't stop that."

"Really? You don't care?"

"Why should I? That was in the past and I'm not one to dwell on that crap. What's important is our future."

"Do you see my cousin in your future?"

"If he wants to be, yes. I do."

"Then what of your fiancé?" Seraph's hand squeezed a bit harder, "Don't look at me like that. I know about your engagement, Ludwig. I can see everything. I am an angel after all."

"I—"

"I'm not threatening you and I'm not going to say anything, but I do hope you take care of it."

"I am. As soon as we get back, I'm breaking things off. I don't want anything coming between us."

Seraph grinned, "Ve~ hehe. Va bene! Let's go play with them. You any good at soccer? Oh, what am I saying, of course you are! Come on! Football, football, let's play some football!"

And like puppies to the sound of kibble falling into their bowl, the rest of the Vargas and Antonio dropped what they were doing and all but stampeded to the gym for a game of soccer. Ludwig watched them fight over who got to be on who's team, bemused that underneath it all, they really were no different from Feliciano or his own family. He didn't miss the twinkle in Feli's eye when they caught each other's glances. Smiling, he joined his cousins and the Italians. He was going to make everything right.

~Russia~

"Of course everything is fine," cried Eduard into his phone. He swiveled in his chair, "No, I understand that, Kevin. I'm trying to expedite—…well have you tried talking to them? No. They're already here, it's just a matter of shipping to Genovia." Eduard pinched the bridge of his nose, "I know they're getting impatient for their orders…well what do you expect me to do? I don't have distribution power here. Hell, just because I'm married to a Braginski doesn't mean I actually have all that power in their company. Or any for that matter."

Natalya burst his doors open and slapped a folder onto his desk. She tapped her foot impatiently for him to finish up. "Listen, my sister-in law is here. I'll do what I can to get the shipment moving as soon as I can get someone to sign the papers." Eduard sighed as he hung up, "I'm sorry about—"

"Don't care," she snapped, "Just look at that."

Cautiously, Eduard opened the yellow folder and pulled out pictures of Ludwig and Feli together. He looked at them one by one, his eyes widening as he looked at them all.

"What am I going to do?"

"Does Ivan know?"
"He's the one who gave them to me. He said that I have to take care of it or I lose not only my job but my damn inheritance. Help me."

"Do you know who this guy is," asked Eduard, pointing to the picture of Feli. "This is good, Nat."

"Good? How the hell is this good?"

"He's a Vargas."

"Vargas? You mean…like the mobster Vargas?"

"Well, his family has a lot of blood on their hands for crimes like drug and human trafficking. They started as smugglers during the prohibition."

"How does that help me?"

"Do you really think Ludwig would date someone with that kind of stain in their lineage."

"I—"

"Do you trust me, Nat?"

"I don't trust anyone, Eduard."

"You came to me, Natalya. Clearly you must trust me, even a little."

The Russian bit her lip and sat in the leather chair in front of her brother-in-law, "I don't want to upset Ivan. What did you have in mind?"

"Sign these papers for me to send Natasha's antibiotic out to Genovia, please. Leave the rest to me." Teal eyes glanced over the documents baring her family's company header, "Why don't you sign it?"

"Well, you want Wolfgang and Ivan to see that you're taking the initiative in this business? Show that you are more than a pretty face; you're also a bright young business woman. Ludwig does like hard workers you know."

"…Well, alright." Taking Eduard's heavy silver pen in her hand, she signed her name next to her brother's neat cursive, "And, this will save my brother's partnership?"

"It'll be a start, yes." Eduard smiled warmly and patted her hand, "Don't worry about anything. Everything will be alright, trust me."
Feel Free to Leave Me, Just Don't Deceive me...

Chapter Summary

Feli finds out Ludwig's secret.

Chapter Notes

(*)marks the beginning and end of when they make love. The beginning part of their love making has a rim job...I'll put this (*)in place from where it starts and ends within the love scene so that you can skip it if that's not your thing.

N.I.N.B LabCorp was silent. All of its employees had gone home for the day while its president had elected to stay behind. Ivan read through the results his machine printed out and smiled, "Another perfect reading down to the last gram. Dr. Wolfgang will be very pleased, right Pinocchio?" The Russian gently patted his wooden figurine before carefully unscrewing the arm to dip his pen inside to collect some ink. Screwing the arm back, Ivan signed his name along the dotted line. He sat the document aside and shut down his creation. He'd have to send this out as soon as possible. Perhaps with the shipment of his sister's drugs?

Ivan felt a soft body collide with his and he scowled, "Are you ok?"

Eduard visibly paled when he realized that he bumped into his brother-in-law, "I-I am. Forgive me."

"What are you doing here so late at night?"

"Paperwork I'm afraid. The hospitals in Victrola are eager to try out Nat's new antibiotic and—"

The shorter man trailed off when Ivan waved the thought away. "Um…what are you doing here?"

"This is my company, da? I can stay here as long as I want."

"I know; I was just wondering what you were up to…"

"Working on the machine I'm sending to Wolfgang. His son is trailing after some guy and I cannot let this opportunity at a partnership slip by just because Ludwig can't keep it in his pants."

Eduard blushed, "Well, he is in love, Ivan."

"Love? I don't care if he's found his soul mate; I need this partnership to go through. The future of this company depends on that marriage and I'll be damned if he doesn't see it through just because some guy batted his eyelashes."

"What are you going to do?"

"Whatever I have to." Ivan fixed the white scarf around his neck, "I think I may have to go down there personally to remind them who I am and that I'm not someone they want to make an enemy
of. I've already sent someone to send a message for me."

Eduard paled again and despite how cold Ivan kept the building, he felt himself sweat at his brother-in-law's dark face. Ivan took notice and smiled, "Don't worry little comrade. Everything will be just fine. Please send this machine on that same shipment to Wolfgang." Ivan gave his paperwork over to his brother-in-law before rubbing his head with rough affection. He pulled on his coat and hat, "Goodnight."

Eduard watched Ivan leave and looked at the manila folder in his hand then backed up. Well, that was a freebie. Going back to his office, he sorted out the rest of the paperwork to assure that the machine would be able to board the rest of their cargo to Genovia. Speaking of…Eduard stepped into Ivan's office to look at the C.C.P. It was sleek in design and something his brother-in-law had been working on ever since he was in college. His roommate had helped with the overall design and, despite his sisters' wishes, he was even planning in giving him his share of the credit.

"Honestly," sighed Eduard as he picked up the machine to take it to his office, "going through so much trouble. None of this is going to work. All they're gaining from this is making me grouchy from all the over time I’m putting in." Pulling out the appropriate paperwork, he sent out a text before filling it out. This was going to be a long night…

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December 28, 2013

Romulus liked seeing his house filled with laughing children. It reminded him of a time when his grandchildren ran around with foam swords and plastics guns instead of real ones. Things were so much simpler for them then. He took a seat in the sun room with a mug of coffee and his morning paper; the front page showing the Australian ambassador and his daughter who had just been released the day prior. Apparently, she'd made a complete recovery after having been found by the Nation's Guard Dogs a few months ago.

The elder Italian shook his head with a chuckle, "Those pups are the best thing to happen to this country." He glanced at Johan who was eyeing him curiously and scratched him behind his ears, "Not to say that felines are unimportant to this nation as well. We could always use a few more lions to hunt down the mice."

"Don't you mean rats," asked Alex as he walked in with Gino. The cat immediately started to purr when he saw his black furred companion. Alex put him down and watched as Gino ran up to nuzzle Johan.

"I think he loves him," said Romulus. He put his paper aside and patted his knee in invitation for Alex, "What's on your mind, piccolino?"

"Feli and Ludwig come home today." Alex struggled to climb on but eventually made himself comfortable.

"You don't sound so excited about that. I thought you would be happy to see them."

Alex fiddled with his shirt sleeve, "It's not that. It's just…well, I found a secret door in my room."

"Ah, yes, I remember it. It used to be Feli's favorite spot to hide. Did you find the others?"

"There's more?"
Romulus nodded, "Mhm. My great-great-grandfather had this house made before Genovia became recognized as a nation. It was designed specifically to smuggle goods in and out during the war and was the headquarters for the great founders you know."

"But your family is Italian. If your grandpa had it made, then shouldn't you be a Genovian like me?"

"Vincenzo Vargas, my great-great-grandpa, was a merchant and an importer. He was the only one brave and foolish enough to brave hurricanes so he and his crew were often hired to transport goods across the Mediterranean Sea. The day he happened to be hired to bring goods to this territory, he found out that a war was being fought to make it a nation. He had already completed his agoge but had not been recognized as leader because the family felt he hadn't done enough so he saw the war as an opportunity. The house was compensation and even though my brother and sister and I were born in Roma Italy, we would often come up here in our childhood. As a matter of fact, I spent time during my own agoge here in Victrola. This is where I met Wolfgang. You know, Ludwig's papa."

Alex tilted his head with a squint, "How is it that you and him are the same age but you're Feli's grandpa and Dr. Wolfgang is Ludwig's papa. Are you older than him?"

"Only by a few months." Romulus sat back and looked at the ceiling with a smile, "Our families go way back. His family is another of the founders of Genovia along with Elizabeta's family and the Jones' family." Rolling his eyes, he added, "And the Godfrey's. That's why the city pays tribute to our families every New Year and Independence Day with their fireworks display. All five crests are shot into the air. Here, let me show you."

Setting Alex down, Romulus got up to get a couple of books from his bag and sat back down. Alex settled back in his lap and looked to where his soon to be grandfather was pointing. He cried excitedly, "That's the tattoo Feli's aunt and mama have on their arms! Where does Feli have his?"

"His, like mine, is over our heart because he's next in line to be—uh, he's going to take over my position as head of our family when I retire."

"Is it the same as yours? The ones Ms. Nicola and Marzia have look a little different."

"That's because theirs are completed. He still needs to get his finished but I think he'll get it done soon. Now, look at this one." Romulus pointed to a black imperial eagle, "This one belongs to the Beilschmidts. They're a proud family that one, but I suppose you can expect that from Germans. Sometimes they work too hard and forget to stop and take a siesta." The Italian winked at Alex, "Sometimes they need one of us Vargas to make them enjoy the sun's warmth on their feathers."

"Why do you have a sun as a family crest?" Alex traced his index finger on the golden V in the center of the sun curiously before blushing, "Sorry. I know I'm asking a lot of questions."

Romulus waved the thought away, "Don't be. Why, Feli and my other grandchildren use to ask and ask. It's good to have an inquisitive young mind; especially one who is going to be a Vargas himself." Ruffling Alex's dark hair, Romulus answered his question, "The cute reason is because our personalities are bright but if someone crosses us, or harms one of our own, we are a force to be reckoned with. The other reason, well, I'll tell you when you're older to understand."

The two looked at the rest of the crests and Alex listened to a bit more of the history of Vargas, or rather the part that the family played in their country's history. Alex lowered his eyes bashfully. He still couldn't believe that someone as important as Feli wanted him for a son. Then he suddenly remembered what he and Daniel saw in the secret room, tears misted his eyes.
"What's wrong, little one?"

Not sure if he should mention what exactly he saw inside the room, Alex wiped his tears away with his sleeve, "Nothing."

"Come now, don't lie to me. Tell grandpa what's wrong."

"Well...it's— I found Feli's book from when he was young. He sounded so sad. He loved this boy but he couldn't be with him for some reason." The look on Romulus' face made him instantly regret telling him anything. Not that he looked angry, rather pained and uncomfortable.

It went away as soon as it came and replaced with a pleased grin, "I know! Here, this one is the most revered of books in the Vargas library." Romulus set aside the book on family crests and showed him a heavily decorated book with a thick leather strap and a lock. "This book holds the hearts of all of us Vargas because when we find the one, we write our story in it."

"Will I get to write my story in it too one day?"

"Of course! Do you have someone in mind?"

Alex blushed and shook his head no, "I'm only seven!"

The corners of Romulus' eyes crinkled, "Love has a funny way of striking you when you least expect it." He watched as Matron Megan opened the door and greeted Wolfgang, "and you'll find that it'll come from the most unexpected person ever. But when it does find you, you'll be so happy that it did. A certain joy that you weren't even aware that you could feel will take over and you'll feel disoriented. And then you'll feel like you can do anything because the love you get from them will awaken your hidden strength. The love that your heart has for your soul mate will trigger your courage and together—"

"And together you become an unstoppable pair that can take on whatever the world will throw at you," finished Wolfgang as he entered the living room. He bent down to receive his two kisses, the tips of his ears tingling red, and settled down in the chair across from them. "Did he tell you how the poor saps who end up falling head over heels for a Vargas will pledge their love?" When Alex shook head, Wolfgang chuckled, "I thought that'd be the first thing you'd tell him."

"Why don't you tell him, Wolfie."

"Well, they usually have to get a tattoo that signifies that they've been pledged to a Vargas but they don't get a sun. They get the moon and that's because—"

"Uh, Feli will explain that when he's older. Tell him the thing a Vargas' lover tells them."

Wolfgang's blush came down to his cheeks but his facial expression didn't change, "Right, um. Well, I believe it has something to do with how they are the suns to their life."

Alex hugged the book to his chest with one arm, "I don't understand."

"It has to do with the fact that a Vargas has a way of awakening something within their lovers, like finding this thing and shining light to it. They could be living day by day thinking that they have it all, and then a Vargas will come crashing into your life without your permission and send it into a state of chaos for which there is no recipe to rectify."

"Well, there isn't a recipe for love, Wolfie," cooed Romulus.
The boy looked between the two adults before hearing the door open again and hearing Feliciano's cheerful voice followed by Ludwig's deeper one. Alex hopped off and ran to greet them. Romulus and Wolfgang watched as Feli scooped him up into his arms and spun him around while Ludwig ruffled his hair.

"Do you regret meeting me, Wolfie," asked the older Italian as he and his companion continued to watch the heartwarming scene before them.

Wolfgang's braid fell to his face when he shook his head, "I regret a lot of things but meeting you isn't one of them." The brush of warm fingers on his skin as Romulus gently tucked the braid back pulled his attention away from his son to his friend.

"It makes me happy to hear that. I only hope our children have better luck than we did."

"Speaking of which…I'm going to need to give my son a talking to."

"Don't be hard on the boy. It wasn't entirely his fault you know."

"No, it's yours and that damn Vargas charm. Feli must've inherited it from his mother who no doubt inherited it from you."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I don't mean it like that and you know it. All I'm saying is that Ludwig should've at least had the decency to break things off with his fiancé if he's planning on starting a family so soon with Feliciano."

Romulus scoffed, "You can't possibly be upset with him. It's not his fault we paired him up with my adorable Feli. I told you this would happen. We Vargas men usually get what we want and Feli doesn't even know about Natalya."

"Hmph."

"Come on, don't be mad, bello." At Wolfgang's grumbles, Romulus poked at his friend's cheeks, "We knew the risks of putting them together. Our family has always found ways of entangling with one another."

"Ja and things never exactly work for either party's favor."

"Monika and Felicia are doing just fine. Maybe this is the universe’s way of saying that it's finally time for both families to permanently weave together. Would that be so bad?"

"Nein, it wouldn't be," admitted the German. He cleared his throat, "But we're going to do this the right way. There is still so much that needs to be done before they can be together."

"Talk to him then. Make plans to take care of it as soon as possible. If things go the way I'm hoping they will, I'd rather it be sooner than later."

Wolfgang's eyes softened at the sight of his son's easy smile, "I just hope that their love is strong enough to endure what's going to happen." He felt fingers brush at his, making his hand twitch to brush back.

"Ours did."

"Barely."
"But it still did and theirs will too. Hey, everything will be alright, ok? They're not going to hurt him. It's not in their best interest to hurt him."

"It's not my son I'm worried about."

Remembering Alex’s words, Romulus sighed and looked at Feli, “As much as it pains me, people are aware of Oswaldo’s... affection for Feliciano. He's not as good at hiding that as he likes to think and the ones that you should be worried about are aware of who he is and what he’s capable of. People know better than to provoke a Hellhound."

"Don't you think that you're underestimating your enemies?"

"No. I know for a fact that Ozzie would move mountains to keep Feliciano safe just as I know that the others would keep an eye on you and your family. It's going to be ok." Romulus laughed and punched Wolfgang lightly on the arm, "You worry too much."

"Someone has to."

"I think my daughters do that enough for me."

Wolfgang sighed, "Well, I'm off. I'll see you for New Years?"

"Of course, bello," purred Romulus with a wink making his friend roll his eyes.

Ludwig took a step back from Feli and Alex when he saw his father emerge from the sitting room. They didn't say anything to each other but the look his father gave him was enough to know that they were going to have a long discussion at dinner. A few moments later, Alfred and Arthur came out of Matron Megan's office hand in hand and in smiles.

"Thank you so much, ma'am," said Alfred as he reached out to shake her hand, "You have no idea how much this means to us."

Arthur nodded and shook her hand as well, "Quite right. We've been dreaming of this moment since we first saw them."

"I'm sure the boys will be very happy." Megan's chocolate eyes shone with happiness for the couple, "It'll take another three weeks for the paperwork to be finalized and for your adoption hearing at the court." With a final nod, she went to go check on lunch for the young ones.

The two embraced each other happily; Arthur had tears of joy rolling down his cheeks. Feli, Alex, and Ludwig watched as Daniel and Sam ran up to their adoptive parents to be. The toddler pounced on the American's back, "Daddy?"

Alfred giggled, "Yeah, buddy?"

"Is me and Danny gonna go live with you now?"

Ludwig frowned as Sammy lost his grip on Alfred's shirt and slipped, tugging the blue sweater down until Arthur plucked him and held him close with a chuckle. Black squiggles resembling the sun rays on Feli's tattoo peeked through but he quickly fixed his sweater and picked up Daniel. The boy smiled at him and gave a small wave to Ludwig and Feli before frowning sadly at Alex. He was happy that he and his brother finally found a couple willing to take them both. Not to mention they were wicked awesome! But... then there was Alex. He didn't want to leave him all alone. When he'd confessed this to him, Alex simply smiled and said that he was going to be adopted soon and that his dad was good friends with his dads so they'd still get to see each other.
Turning around, Alfred saw Ludwig with Feli and Alex and his smile fell. Ludwig knew he was going to say something so he kissed both Feli and Alex on their heads before walking over, "Hallo."

"Oh, hello there, mate." Arthur nodded at Ludwig before catching sight of Feliciano, "Ah, and Feli!" He took Daniel from Alfred and walked over to talk with his friend, "Why don't we go outside to let the children play?"

Feli glanced over at Ludwig who smiled softly at him, "Ve, okie dokie!"

When their respective partners left, Ludwig and Alfred turned to each other but before the American could get a word out, Ludwig beat him to it, "I want you to stop looking at us like that."

Alfred scoffed, "Like what?"

"Like Feliciano is some kind of home wrecker. It's bad enough that those stupid tabloids are calling him that, and thank god that he doesn't even glance at that crap. He doesn't deserve people thinking like that about him and he doesn't need you to make him feel bad himself."

"Jesus, are you hearing yourself? It's not my bro Feli I have a problem with; it's you! You're the one who's cheating on your fiancé with him. Why are you dragging him along? He isn't some cheap hooker you can have your way with and just toss aside when it's no longer convenient for you to have him in your bed."

Ludwig's jaw clenched at Alfred's words and he took a step forward, "I swear to god, if we weren't in a house filled with children…"

"What? What are you going to do? Punch me?"

"Don't tempt me."

"It's funny how it's the cheaters who always find a way to make themselves the victim."

"Stop talking about shi—er," Ludwig caught himself and waited until the two girls chasing each other ran into another room, "crap you have no idea about. I love him."

"Then end things with your fiancé. It's not fair to either of them but my thoughts are with Feliciano. He's my friend and Artie has a soft spot for him too. You better take care of your little problem before he finds out. Until you do, you and I aren't friends. Good day."

Ludwig growled lowly to himself and shook his head. He signed Alex out and picked up his jacket before going outside. Alfred and Arthur were busy talking with Feliciano while the little ones played around them. He cleared his throat to get his lover's attention. Feli glanced up and excused himself, calling Alex to him, they slid into Ludwig's car so that they could go.

When Feliciano and Ludwig arrived at the hospital with Alex for his checkup, they were met with a mob of reporters. The couple exchanged glances before Feli picked up the boy and placed him over his shoulders. He wasn't sure what these people wanted but the last thing he needed was for one of them to accidentally step on his future son. Ludwig pressed his hand against the small of his back and urged him forward.

"Mr. Ambassador," called one of the reporters, "when exactly was your daughter recovered? Why are you just now letting the public know that she was missing?"

The Australian ambassador cleared his throat, "There—," he froze at the sight of Feli and shoved
his way to him to shake his hand. The cameras followed him, "Thank you, mate! I can't thank you enough for your help with my daughter. If it hadn't been for you...she'd would've never made it."

He glanced up at Alex then at Ludwig and shook their hands too, "You are lucky to have this man in your lives. He's real special, this one."

Confused, Ludwig slowly shook his hand back. Feli had taken care of the ambassador's daughter? Where was he during this? He glanced at his lover in question and was surprised to see that his jaw was tight, "It wasn't...I didn't do anything, sir."

"But of course, you did. You saved her and you—"

"Please, Mr. Ambassador. Don't mention it. Ever. It was our honor to return your daughter to you. A father's greatest treasure is his offspring." Feli smiled and patted Alex's knee, "Now if you excuse us, we have an appointment to keep."

The Ambassador nodded in understanding and shook the Italian's hand again just as the cameras went off again making both Ludwig and Feli uncomfortable. Ludwig gently led his lover past the crowd praying that none of these pictures or footage would leave the tri state area. By the time they made it to the elevator, he couldn't handle his curiosity any longer, "How did you get to take care of the Ambassador's daughter? I wasn't even aware that she was here let alone that she'd been missing. Why didn't you tell me?"

"The group taking care of her wasn't supposed to let anyone know. You would've been assigned to her too but it was on a day you were off."

"Oh." Alex rested his hand on top of Feli's head and looked as Ludwig checked his phone.

Ludwig’s eyes widened a bit as his face paled. He pressed another number on the elevator, "Feli, I need to stop by my dad's office, you go on ahead."

"Everything ok?"

"Ja, I just—," he was cut off by his cell phone, "I need to take this, sorry." Ludwig stepped out and pressed the ignore icon on his phone just as soon as the elevator doors shut again. He didn't want to answer. This wasn't happening.

This wasn't happening!

A knot of dread clogged his throat the closer he got to his and Feli's office. Shaking his head, he stood a little taller, "Nein. This will just save me the trip. Mutti be with me..."

"Hello, Ludwig." The German froze, his entire blood supply frosting over at the sound of Ivan's cheerful voice.

"This...this isn't happening. You aren't here."

"Of course, I am, comrade." Ivan closed the door all the way and walked around to sit in Feli's chair, "My sister and I came to greet the New Year with you and our future family. As a matter of a fact, I just got back from talking to your father. Eduard was supposed to send out my machine but I thought to myself, why not take it down personally." The Russian swiveled, "It will be fun. That way you can offer your assistance to my sister for the wedding."

"Ivan...I'm not sure what my father told you but I'm not going to go through with this. I'm very sorry but I can't."

"You can't do what, amore," asked Feliciano from behind him.
The world was going to end. Ludwig's at least and that was exactly how he was feeling. The wonderful blue sky had skipped the grey and had gone straight to black. It was only a matter of time before the horsemen would appear and claim his soul. He tugged on his sweater, his heart dropping to his stomach. His life was over just as it was starting to mean something.

Feli stepped inside and tilted his head to the side in confusion, "Ivan?"

Ivan's smile fell, his brows coming together, "Feli?"

"Dio mio, it is you!" Feli let out a giggle and climbed over the desk and onto Ivan's lap who stood up with the Italian and spun him around in a hug. "It's been far too long, amico!"

"Da, it has comrade! How are you?" Ivan's smile reached his eyes, making them shine, "Look! I still have Pinocchio." He put Feli down to show him the little figurine he gave him in their time back in college.

"You've done a very good job in keeping him in pristine condition."

Ivan blushed, "Well, he means a lot to me. You gave him to me after all."

"What are you doing here?"

Ludwig watched the exchange in fear. Not only was Feli in the same room as his fiancé's brother, but apparently her brother was his lover's friend. All he wanted right now was for the ground to open up and swallow him whole. Was he still breathing?

Oh...he wasn't.

His vision went black and before he knew it, Ludwig was waking up in a hospital bed with his brothers hovering over him.

Gilbert, Roderich, and Berwald eyed him with concern before the oldest spoke up, "How are ya feeling, West?"

"Where's Feliciano," croaked Ludwig, his stomach felt like he had eaten burning coals. He tugged on Roderich's white coat, "Ivan! He and Natalya are here. What if they tell him? What if he hates me?!" His heart monitor was becoming erratic with every horrible outcome this could possibly have. "Where are they?!!"

"For heaven's sake, Ludwig," hissed Roderich as he tried to pry his brother's hands from his coat, "let go. Elizabeta took Natalya out for lunch. Ivan is with Feliciano right now."

"Why would you leave them alone together?"

"You need to calm down, Ludwig," said Gilbert. He reached for an injection of sedative, "Don't make me give you this, cause I will."

Ludwig glared at the albino, "How could you possibly expect me to calm down? My soul mate is out there with the brother of my fiancé! I can't—"

"It's ok, bruder. It's ok. They're just talking about the good old days. Did you know they went to school together?"

"Why am I the only one who understands the gravity of what's going on?!" Ludwig pulled out his I.V. and moved to stand. Berwald helped him up. "Danke, Bear. I have to go see if I can salvage
this." His brothers followed after him as he made his way down the hall and into the waiting room. Feli was sitting next to Ivan with the biggest grin he'd ever seen on his face. He slowly made his way towards them.

"Luddy," cried Feli as he jumped up to greet him. Ludwig instinctively wrapped his arms around his waist, his jaw tight as he carefully watched Ivan. To his surprise, the Russian didn't say anything. He just continued to smile. "Luddy, Ivan said that he's working with your father, isn't that nice? We're going to be seeing more of him from now on."

"Th-that's wonderful, Feli."

Feli glanced over his shoulder, "Would you like to have dinner with us? There's so much we still need to catch up on."

"Nyet." Ivan stood up and dusted his pants, "I have some things I need to take care of. Thank you so much for the invitation, Feli. Perhaps another time."

"Oh. Well, I'll see you around then."

"We'll be seeing each other real soon, comrade. Real soon."

"Ve, ciao, Ivan." Feli and Ludwig watched Ivan gather his bag and leave. The Italian turned to his boyfriend, "How are you feeling, Luddy?"

"One second. Hold on." Ludwig kissed Feli on his temple and ran after the Russian catching him before he stepped into his car. "Did…did you tell him anything?"

Ivan raised an eyebrow, "Excuse me?"

"Oh, you're asking me if I told the only friend I had in college, my best friend, that the man he seems to be over the moon for is already promised to my sweet little sister." Ivan smirked, "I did not. You still have a few months to carry out this…fantasy of yours."

"It's not a fantasy, Ivan. I'm not marrying Natalya. Give me a few days to get the money to pay the fine but I refuse to go another second without telling him that I love him. Please, Ivan."

Ivan took a step forward, "Please, don't tell him. Don't take this away from me. Please."

Ivan looked towards the sky in thought, "Hm. My company's success, or one man's happiness…"

"And the happiness of your best friend."

"He means more than that to me. The only reason I didn't pursue him, or let what we had blossom, is because of my mother's untimely death and because of the unhealthy state of my company. You marrying my sister will not only benefit me on a corporate level but on a personal one too. A broken hearted Feli will be sad but I'll be there to comfort him in ways that you couldn't possibly fathom." Ivan smiled again, "I wonder…does little Feli look as cute without clothes or does he look better? Oh, what am I talking about, of course he does. I guess the better question is does his skin melt on the tongue like I've always imagined it would?"

Shrugging, Ivan handed his bag to his driver, "I'll know soon enough. Nothing better than first hand knowled—" The tall Russian staggered back in shock. He brought his hand to his lip and withdrew it to see blood on his fingers.
Ludwig was breathing heavily in anger, "You stay the hell away from him. I'm not asking you now. I'm telling you. I am not going to marry Natalya."

"We'll see about that."

A strong body, slick with perspiration, was bound to the bed by their arms with thick cords of red leather. They shivered on the black satin sheets and their chest rose up and down with shallow breaths. A soft groan escaped lips bruised from rough kissing when a blade caressed the skin near his heart. Red trickled down the curvature of his chest but was quickly lapped up by a devious tongue until the tip was shoved into his mouth. He kissed back with equal enthusiasm, crying out when he finally felt himself release.

His partner whispered filthy words into his ear adding to his pleasure until his body was nothing more but a trembling mess. He felt warmth inside him from where his lover released and sighed, "M-may I see you, master?"

There was silence before he felt the bed shift and a hot body lie on top of his. He felt his blindfold fall from his face and his violet eyes met amber so rich that they were almost glowing red. Luciano regarded his lover's chest stoically before covering it up with his hand, "Does it hurt?"

"No, master," responded the blond, his eyes warming at his lover's concern.

"Hm." He leaned down to give the cut a kiss when he heard a familiar knock on his door.

Flavio entered without waiting to be invited and froze at the sight of his brother with a man. He let out a disgusted cry, "Again?!"

Luciano felt his lover tense underneath him and glared at his twin coldly, "What the hell do you want?"

"Mother is looking for you. She said that it's important that you see her right away." Sniffing, Flavio turned his nose up at the couple, "But seriously, fratello, him? Surely a lovely woman like my sweet Sophia would be better company."

"What I do or who I do is none of your concern. Leave."

"Oh, I'll leave alright. Wouldn't want your…pet to think I enjoy seeing him naked. Really, though, what would mother think if she knew that her favored son was a man-loving—gah!"

Luciano didn't even bother putting on pants. He had his brother by the throat against the wall and held a knife to his cheek, "You won't breathe a word to mother about Lutz do you understand me?"

"I-I hear you," wheezed Flavio.

"I know you heard me, idiota. I asked if you understood me."

"Heh, and what would you do if I do tell her? Better yet, what if I just take care of it so that she never finds out."

"I'll kill you."

Flavio smirked, "No, you won't. I'm your brother; you love me."
"I love him more," snarled Luciano as he released his brother and shoved him out of the room, "Tell her I'll be there in a few minutes."

The blond Italian straightened his suite and smoothed his hair back, "Right, I'll tell her that you need a few minutes to wipe the stench of man off of you—oh!" Flavio looked at the knife that had flown past his shoulder and was now wedged in the wall. He grinned at his brother, "You're losing your touch, Lucy. Ya missed!"

Scoffing, Luciano tugged the door closed but not before saying, "Go fuck yourself." He chuckled darkly when he heard his brother growl back that he was a bastard and that his suit had just returned from the tailor. He rubbed the red welts around the pale wrists before letting go, "You don't need to worry about him. He's not stupid enough to cross me."

"I…I never meant to be a problem," said Lutz as he ran a hand through his unruly blond hair.

"Who said you were a problem? Hey, if I didn't want you, I would've just sent you to go work with all of our other peasants, but you lucked out."

A sly smile made its way onto the man's face, "That's right, you love me~"

"Fuck off," hissed Luciano through a fit of laughter. He rolled onto his back, bringing his lover with him so that he could rest his head on his chest, "Don't make me regret having said that out loud."

"I love you too, you know."

Luciano's smile dimmed and he glanced down to meet Lutz's lavender eyes, "Don't."

"What?"

"Don't say it unless you mean it."

"No, really I do." Lutz kissed Luciano's pec before grinning up at him, "What? You think I just let anyone fuck me?"

"Well…"

"Luce!" Lutz rolled onto of him and nipped at Luciano's chest until he got the Italian to laugh again. When they settled, Lutz combed his fingers through Luciano's hair with a fond expression, "Alright, so maybe I was a bit of a manwhore."

"Tch."

"But! But, you should know, I've been pretty committed to you. First damn monogamous relationship I've ever been in and I must say, it's nice." Lutz looked down at the red lines on his own chest and softened his smile, "Plus, I wouldn't let you cut me if I didn't love and trust you not to scar me. I love you, Luciano."

"You know, funny thing that we're talking about love. My brother's told me that I'm incapable of it unless it's concerning my work. Mom says that I'm a heartless man."

"No you aren't" said Lutz softly. He traced a finger over his lover's chest and felt the heart underneath pulse with life, "You have my heart."
Luciano stared at Lutz before affectionately rolling his eyes, "You're such a dweeb! Heh ok, I love you, too." At the quiet huff from his lover, he chuckled and kissed his forehead, "I know I do, just as you should know that mine beats for you. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go see what the old lady wants."

Getting dressed in a simple crimson dress shirt left open at the top and a pair of black slacks, Luciano made his way to the horse track where his mother was watching the race. He plucked a handful of grapes and leaned against the marble pillar behind her chair, "What do you want?" Luciano waited for his mother to tear her gaze from the race before her.

The woman in white twisted her program irritably when her horse was surpassed by another. She regarded her son without looking away, "You are needed in Genovia. A shipment is arriving and I need you to be there to assure its safety."

"Why can't my useless brother go?"

"Because I want you to go that's why."

Luciano blinked before grinning, "Oh! Are you asking me to take care of someone?"

The woman in white finally looked at her son though she did so with a puzzled expression, "What?"

"Am I finally going to kill—"

"No!" The woman in white pursed her red lips, "We're not doing any of that. I just want you to make sure our merchandise arrives safely. And do try not to make a mess. Make some new friends and give the Vargas our regards, ok?" She waved her gloved hand dismissively and returned to her race.

Luciano watched his mother for a moment before going back to his hotel room to pack.

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Wolfgang eyed his fourth offspring as Ludwig sighed happily for the tenth time that evening. As usual, his other children were bickering about one thing or another with the exception of, of course, Berwald who had been stoically munching on his dinner listening to Lilly tell him about her day. His in-laws were busy either trying to control their spouses or too busy laughing about said bickering.

He watched as Ludwig played with his mashed potatoes while peeking at his cell phone under the table before grinning and typing something back. Now he was all for making sure his family was happy but he drew the line when it came to his rules about their dinner time. A parent was entitled to have a proper meal with their family after all. Wolfgang wiped his mouth with his napkin and cleared his throat, "Settle down, mein kinder. Gilbert, give your brother his glasses back. Vash, what have I told you about guns at the dinner table? Lilly, dear, I'm sorry that you didn't do well on your exam. Do you require a tutor? I'm sure one your brothers or sister will help you, isn't that right Elizabeta?"

The Hungarian reached over to place a gentle hand on her sister-in-law, "I was amazing in microbiology. I'll come around the bakery to help you study during your break, ok?"

Giving a pleased nod at the exchange, Wolfgang turned to Ludwig, "And you, son, who or what has your thoughts tonight that you continuously look down at your lap?" Gilbert was about to say something but Matthew squeezed his hand in warning.
"Vater, there is something I need to tell you." Ludwig tucked his phone away and met his father's eyes. "It's important."

Wolfgang wiped his mouth with a chuckle, "Well, if you're calling me vater instead of vati, I'm sure it is."

"I'm serious, Vati. I want to ask something very important." The rest of the family settled down and looked between the two Germans; Matthew and Tino exchanged glances. Ludwig took a deep breath before continuing, "Vati, I…I'm—"

"Forgive me, young master," said one of the maids bashfully, "but Dr. Beilschmidt has a visitor waiting for him in his office. It's um…it's Herr Vargas Senior."

Pink made its way onto the Beilschmidt's patriarch's cheeks, "It's just like that idiot to show up unannounced like this. I'm sure his grandson is the same, huh, Ludwig? Showing up at your abode without calling first; sometimes even showing up naked or getting into your bed without permission. Hugging and kissing you…saying they love you and trying to get you to make them pasta at ungodly hours of the night." Wolfgang continued to mutter to himself as he got up and made his way to his home office, unaware of the slack jaw faces his children were giving him as he walked away.

Vash shook his head before stabbing at his wurst, "I think Vati's drunk."

"I think it's cute," squealed Elizabeta, "My uncle Magyar was telling stories about them. It's been forever since I've last seen him blush like that. Not since…well, your mom."

Gilbert smiled, "Yeah, sure would be nice if the old man got himself someone nice. Mom always did tease him about the fellas."

"So that's what she meant," said Roderich, eyes wide with realization, "I always thought she was kidding about him being…you know."

"Bi. Th' word yer lookin' for is bi, bruder." Berwald took a swig of beer from his stein, "I always knew he was."

"Y-you guys don't mind, do ya," asked Matthew.

The Beilschmidt siblings shrugged in indifference, the youngest blushing at the thought of her father finding someone to love, "Do you think it's possible? Do you really think Vati and—" She was interrupted by her cellphone and she paled at the number, deciding to ignore the call instead of answering.

Vash gave her a side glance, "Who was that, Lil'?"

"N-nobody. Ah, is there any dessert for tonight?"

"I brought some chocolate cake," said Ludwig as he fiddled with his cell again. "Do you think Vati will mind if I go into his office right now? I really need to talk to him about something important and I don't want to wait anymore."

"Wow, West, you finally going to tell him that you're breaking up with Natalya," asked Gilbert teasingly.

Without looking up from his phone, Ludwig nodded, "Yup."
His family shared a look of surprise, Elizabeta, Mathew, and Tino even more so, but Gilbert simply grinned. He brought his arm around Matthew's shoulders and kissed his temple, "Guess, you were right, Birdie. That time away with Feli did make him see how much better off he is with him instead of that she-devil. Did you know that she came down looking for you?"

That got Ludwig's attention. Snapping his head up, the German stuttered out, "W-what?"

"Ja," spat Roderich irritably, "she came down to Victrola the night before we left for the capitol and practically harassed all of us at an ungodly hour looking for you. Did you know she was coming?"

"No, I didn't. She didn't say anything." Ludwig felt his stomach churn at what could've happened if he and Feli hadn't gone to Italy and she showed up at his doorstep. Not liking where that could've led, he set his napkin aside and stood up. "I'll be back. I need to talk to Vati now."

Ludwig scurried out of the dining room and all but ran into his father's office door startling both Romulus and Wolfgang. The Italian nodded to him in greeting. Ludwig nodded back as he stepped inside, "Vati?"

"What is it, Ludwig?" Wolfgang was sitting across from Romulus with a file in hand and glasses perched on his nose. He watched as his son balled his fists and tried to stand taller but his posture couldn't hide the fear in his eyes. Handing the file back over to Romulus, Wolfgang motioned for his son to sit in the other chair.

"Vater, there is something important I wish to discuss with you."

"I think that's my cue to leave," said Romulus, packing his files into a briefcase. "Forgive me for disrupting your dinner but it was important for you to read those."

Ludwig sat forward, "You don't have to go. Actually, I think it would be best if you stayed. I want you to hear this as well."

"Oh?"

"It's about Feliciano."

At that, Romulus lowered his briefcase. Uneasiness settled in the older man's heart as he thought about every possible thing Ludwig could say. That uneasiness must've been apparent because Ludwig waved his arms, "No, it's nothing like that, sir. He's fine, amazing actually. I had a really good time with him and the others in Italy. Feli's a wonderful man and I'm lucky to have him in my life." Stealing himself, Ludwig looked at his father, "Which is why I can't marry Natalya."

Despite all his mental preparation for this moment, all the outcomes this could've gone, Ludwig hadn't imagined that his father would calmly take a sip from his stein and nod, "Ok."

"Huh?"

"If that's what you want, we'll do it. Tomorrow we'll meet with Ivan to sever the deal and your engagement."

"...huh?"

Romulus chuckled, "I hope you have better conversational skills than that. My grandson can chew your ear off."
"Must take after his grandfather then," muttered Wolfgang before turning to address his son. "I'll arrange the funds to pay the fine. You're going to have to talk to Natalya though. I refuse to have any part with that. On the plus side, I suppose you'll be free to ask Feliciano to marry you. Are you going to want the glass cross your mother made for your other half?" The look of confusion on Ludwig's face made him sigh, "Did you honestly think I wouldn't notice that you two are an item? You haven't exactly been hiding it."

The German patriarch reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a stack of tabloid magazines featuring both Feli and Ludwig on the front pages, "The rest of us don't exactly have the luxury of ignoring gossip."

Placing a hand over Wolfgang's, Romulus murmured, "Wolfie, please…"

"I'm not upset, Romulus, I'm simply stating facts. I don't know why children think that we parents don't see what they're up to." Shaking his head, Wolfgang returned his attention to Ludwig, "You know that I would never stand in the way of your happiness. If you truly want to be with Feliciano, then be with him, but we really need to sever your relationship with Natalya."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, you can't help who you fall in love. You do love him do you not?"

This time Ludwig smiled freely, "With all my heart."

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Later that night Feli was on his stomach in Ludwig's bed as he watched the German read. He rested his head on his fists while he kicked his legs slowly up and down, "Why won't I be seeing you again?"

"I already told you, mein liebe," sighed Ludwig, pausing to kiss his boyfriend before bookmarking his place in the book, "my father has business and wants me to join him."

"Ve…"

"Don't be sad. I'll be done in time to spend New Year's with you and Alex."

"Hm."

"It's only going to be for a day or two. Please, don't cry."

"I can't help it. That's too long," mumbled Feli, tears swelling in his eyes. "I don't like being far from you."

"It's not like I'm leaving the city, Feli."

Feli sniffed and rolled over, the blanket covering him sliding down his hips. This wasn't a terrible thing per se. With Ludwig busy, he could use this time to get his hands a little dirty. There was still the matter of Lovi taking him around town to remark their territory, figure out who was behind Acidanthera and their crimes against his family, and most importantly figure out who exactly were the other heirs. If memory served his correctly, they may be a lot closer than he thought. It would certainly make what his grandfather told him a few months ago much more sense.

"What are you thinking about," asked Ludwig curiously. He traced his finger over Feli's tattoo lazily while propping his head up with his other hand.
"I have a lot of things I need to get done before our vacation is up. Maybe you going into these meetings will be a good thing after all."

Ludwig raised an eyebrow, "Are you trying to say that I'm a distraction?"

"Like I'm not," purred Feli, all trace of tears gone.

"Oh, I know you are."

"Do you mind?"

"Not anymore." Ludwig pulled Feli's face close to his and kissed him slowly, savoring the wine they'd been drinking earlier on Feli's tongue. He trailed his kisses along his lover's jaw while his hand dipped under the covers, "Can we? Please?" Feli grinned and kissed him back in response.

The next morning Feli and Ludwig ate breakfast before parting ways. Oswaldo came by to pick Feliciano up much to the German's dismay. The dark haired Italian grinned at his angel, "Woo! I finally get you all to myself!"

Feli grinned back, "Yup yup~"

"So, what's on the agenda for today?"

"I have a long list of things that need to get done before I have to go back to work," said Feli as he put his sunglasses on. He took his seat on the passenger side of the car and pulled out his phone, "Lovino said that there was a train coming in from Spain?"

"Yes, but he and Marcello are going to check it out." Shifting the gears, Oswaldo pulled out of their parking spot and merged into the lane, "He asked me to do the weekly rounds around the city to enforce our dominance."

"Can I go with you?"

"If you want. I need to get you a gun though."

"I already have one…I just don't use it. Truth be told the last time I held it was when Feliks and I used to live in that old apartment of ours."

"And as long as you have me by your side you won't need it either." Oswaldo reached over and squeezed his hand, "Let's go to your mother's first. My dad is already there to do some damage control. Ezio took his new hubby to meet mama." He chuckled at the look of horror on Feli's face.

The two arrived at Nicola's house in time to see her chasing her brother with a bowl full of tomatoes. Paulo's green eyes were wide as he dodged another ripe fruit crying out in Italian, "I swear, I didn't know! Big sis, stop!" The rest of the family watched on in amusement, save Lovino who was actually physically restraining himself from attempting to save those precious tomatoes.

Nicola's own emerald eyes held fire as she threw another, "The hell you didn't, you little shit! You knew the instant my little baby stepped foot inside the damn jewelers!"

"Mama, please," whined her youngest, "You're embarrassing me in front of Willem…"

His mother's hand froze mid throw, tomato pulp oozed between her fingers from holding it too tight. Nicola slowly turned around to face Ezio, "E-embarrassing you? I—do you have any idea how I feel right now, knowing that one of my precious baby boys got married behind my back?!"
She directed her anger towards her son, angry tears rolling down her cheeks, "I wanted to be there for your special day. For all of your special days. I wanted to help you plan the meal and help pick your flowers and dishes. And maybe even your suit. Who did you wear?"

Ezio blushed, "I… I just wore some jeans and—" He was interrupted by his mother's wails, "Mommy, we just eloped! It—we can get married again through whatever church will be willing to marry us." Rushing to his mother's side, the young Vargas wiped her tears away, "I love him, mama. I swear I didn't do it to hurt you. He knows me. He knows us."

"You told him?"

Willem stood and took her hand, "He did… but I won't say anything, ma'am. I swear I won't." He gently nudged her into a chair and knelt before her, "We are so sorry for upsetting you."

Nicola dropped her bowl and the remains of the tomato with a sigh, "I know. It's just, I wanted to be there. Just like I want to be there when Antonio finally makes an honest man out of my adorable little Lovi or when Feli takes Ludwig as his. I want to die knowing that I have seen my babies off to respectable men who will love and cherish them like their papa cherished and loved me."

Lovi, Feli, and Ezio gasped when their mother brought her legs up to the chair to bury her face in her knees in sobs. They ran to Nicola and hugged her in tears themselves, "Mama, don't cry!"

"Yeah," croaked Lovino, "Besides who the hell said you were going to die so soon anyway? You're still young and we're young too."

"With the way things are going out there, with the kind of lives we lead, who knows when our time on this planet will end."

Taking a seat on the chair's armrest, Feli fixed his mother's sun hair pendant, "Why are you saying that, mama? You always told me that God tells us when our time is over and that even then, we have the ultimate say so. I know it's scary, believe me I know. I'm scared too but I promise you, mama, I promise that we'll find out who's behind everything that's happened."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm going to be what grandpa wants me to be. What I was born to be."

Paulo wiped the tomato pulp from his face and smiled down at his nephew, "This is great! I can't wait to teach you all I know."

"He is not going to be an enforcer," growled Oswaldo, startling the others in the room. "I'm sorry dad, but with all due respect, this is why he has me—us! This is why he has us," he corrected while running his hand through his hair. He licked his lips and glanced up at his dad, "Papa, he doesn't have to do what we do. He's a prince; all he has to do for now is strut his power to the lesser punks and look pretty."

"I'm more than a pretty face, Ozzie," said Feli with a frown. "Grandpa does more and I want to do more. I can help put pieces of the puzzle together. I'm not stupid you know."

"I know you're not, angelo. That's not what I'm saying. All I'm saying is that you don't need to know how to kill or torture a man because that's what we're here for. Isn't that right, Greyhound?"

Lovi nodded, "Speaking of which, you're going to need to meet the boys."

"Like the gangs and stuff," asked Feli.
"No. You're the prince and princes don't meet with the riffraff. I don't do it unless they undermine me directly. That's what our Hounds are for."

"Ok…so do I at least get to meet any of the other heirs? Grandpa said I know them but…"

"Consider it done, fratello. I'll arrange a small dinner for you."

"Yay!"

Their day brightened up a bit after that. Nicola dragged Ezio out to the mall with Marzia and Felicia to Monika's boutique so that they could start a suit for his wedding. Willem returned to his brother and sister's apartment while the others took Feli out for a drive around town to explain how their territories worked.

It was so much colder in Olympia than Ludwig expected it to be. Why a hotel building would be kept at such cool temperatures was beyond him but he didn't mind. The fact that he was there to sever ties with the ball-and-chain that kept him from being with Feli only served to provide enough warmth to put a skip in his step. His father kept his face neutral as he stepped into the elevator. Ludwig sent a quick reply to his boyfriend before pressing the button for the twentieth floor.

During the drive, the two Germans discussed how to go about handling their contract. At first, Ludwig had been confused, hoping to just go in and spare Feli's involvement but for some reason his father had been adamant that he confess that he'd been in a relationship and that he had in fact fallen in love with the Italian. Well, his father did know best. He didn't care how it happened, but if it granted him freedom Ludwig decided to go along with it.

The elevator finally stopped and they stepped into Ivan's impressive room where the man himself was waiting for them at the door with Natalya. The Russians both greeted their guests and led them inside, Natalya tried to loop her arm through Ludwig's but he brushed her off. She rolled her eyes and instead laced her arm through her brother's.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit," asked Ivan cheerfully, "I was surprised when you called me last night."

The older German shrugged, "Forgive us for showing up unexpectedly but I'm afraid that this matter couldn't wait."

"If this is about the medicine my sister developed, my brother-in-law is sending it on the first train out. It should be in Genovia within a few weeks. A few days if he put it on the fast rail." Ivan led them to the sitting room where he offered them some vodka.

"No, thank you. We're here on a different matter. The agreement we had."

"Ah, yes. And I'm very grateful for this opportunity."

"I'm afraid that there is a change of plans."

Ivan was silent for a moment, his smile faltering, "Excuse me?"

"The deal we had. It's over. Done."

"Vater," whispered Ludwig in horror. He knew they were going to cut to the chase but he didn't
think that his dad was going to be so blunt.

Wolfgang ignored him and pulled out some documents, "I've had my lawyer look over everything and he agrees that this is far more than a generous sum. As you can see, I've added a clause that forbids you from using my name in any future deals you attempt to have."

"Why are you doing this," asked Ivan as he looked through the documents. "We didn't do anything wrong."

"I wish I could say that it was just business but I'm afraid that it is personal. You see, my son fell in love with someone else and nothing and no one is above his happiness. Simple as that."

Ivan smiled, "Sister, why don't you and Ludwig step outside for a moment? Go down to the bar or something."

"As you wish brother." Natalya tugged Ludwig out of his chair and did as she was told, leaving behind the two gentlemen to discuss what was occurring. She all but threw her fiancé into the elevator, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Oh, please," growled Ludwig not at all appreciating how he was being manhandled by the petite woman. "Don't pretend like you were thrilled at the prospect of being married to me."

Natalya narrowed her eyes and shoved her finger into his chest, "You don't raise your voice at me, Beilschmidt. You don't get to be angry."

"I do and I will. Bullshit me all you want but I draw the line when it comes to my family. They told me that you all but harassed and insulted them while I was away."

"Yeah, away fucking your whore of a mistress—"

"Feliciano is not a whore! He doesn't even know that I'm engaged." Ludwig ran his hand through his gelled hair, "He's innocent."

"Ha!" The Russian doubled over in laughter, clutching her sides. "He's i-innocent? He's innocent! Oh, that is rich, Ludwig. This Feliciano person has you eating out of his blood stained hands like fool. But that's ok 'cause big brother is going to talk your father back into the deal and soon you'll be liberated. You can eat out of my hands instead."

Ludwig's eye twitched in annoyance, "I don't know what you're talking about but I do know that that is never going to happen."

"Yes. It. Is. Listen, I know we've had our… moments but I can overlook the fact that you would rather stick yourself inside another man's ass. Hell, I can even overlook the fact that you cheated on me—"

"We had an agreement," hissed Ludwig, face red.

"But I cannot and will not overlook the fact that breaking off our engagement will ruin my brother." She stepped into his space and despite the height difference, wasn't intimidated, "I won't allow it. So, this is what's going to happen. We're going to kiss, I'm going to run my hands through that ridiculous hair of yours and then we'll go back to my brother's room and you're going to tell your father that you changed your mind. Then, you're going to ensure that my sister's drug comes to Victrola so that you and your little doctor buddies can distribute them. Of course, not before you end things with that little Italian of yours."
Deep dark rumbles escaped Ludwig's throat until he was the one doubling over with laughter. He coughed into his scarf before chuckling a few more times, "Wow, ok. If I didn't know before that I didn't want to marry you, that little speech would've done it. Thank you, Natalya, for that sample of married life—"

"I did give you a sample of married life and if I recall you didn't complain at all." Natalya leaned against the glass wall and smirked. She fiddled with her tiny jeweled egg pendant before glancing up through her lashes, "I bet if I had just stayed in Victrola and continued to allow you to sample, we wouldn't be here right now."

"What the hell are you talking about now?" The German suddenly felt horrible as he'd swallowed a lump of ice and it was slowly traveling down his body.

Natalya dropped her necklace and played with the lapels on Ludwig's coat, "You know what, darling. It was after all why you agreed to marry me to begin with."

Shoving her off of him, Ludwig got as far away from her as the elevator allowed, "That was once and it was the biggest mistake I've ever made. And it certainly wasn't why I agreed to marry you."

"Ah, yes. You did it to spare your trigger happy prude of a brother."

"Don't call him that." Growling and desperately trying to shake the guilt away, Ludwig stood taller, "Never mind what may have happened in the past doesn't change what's going to happen in my future. So, let me tell you what is going to happen. We're going to go back and tell your brother that you have agreed to break off the engagement just like you have always wanted to. What my dad wants to do in regards to your sister's drugs is his business, but as for me, when all of this is completely over and done with, I'm going to home and make love to Feli and finally tell him that I love him, too. We're going to move forward and then I'm going to ask him to marry me. When that's over and done with, we'll finalize the paperwork for our son." The cold evaporated with every detail he added to his to-do list in regards of Feliciano and Alexander leaving behind a warm joy.

As Ludwig allowed himself to bask in his future's sunrays, Natalya could tell that the gap between fixing what her brother entrusted her with was growing far too large. She bit her lip in thought. Oh! There was one last thing she could do… Reaching up, she wrapped her arms around Ludwig and forced their lips together.

Immediately, Ludwig shoved her away, "What the hell are you doing?!"

"Trying to save what you've broken! Let me kiss you damn it!"

"Nein, I won't! I won't be unfaithful to Feli. Stop!"

"Unfaithful," asked the Russian. She blinked slowly as she tried to wrap her mind around what Ludwig said, "You...don't want to be...unfaithful to...Feli." Narrowing her eyes, she slapped him, "You fucking bastard! He doesn't get that; he's the fucking mistress or whatever the hell a male homewrecker is called. He doesn't get to have you and your code of ethics!"

"Don't you understand," cried Ludwig, beginning to lose the last few shreds of patience, "I never loved you and you never loved me! What does it matter to you? You should be happy that you're free."

"You're a fool, Ludwig, if you think being with him will set either of us free. He's going to place heavier bonds around you like you've never imagined."

"Let him! As long as he's holding the other end, I don't care."
Natalya stared at the man before her. She wanted to scream and hurt him. "What the fuck did he do to you? Because I know for a fact that the Ludwig I know would never say something so damn cheesy." Was it really love that had changed him? If so, she was fighting an uphill battle. What was she going to do now? Eduard had promised that he'd help her and so far she hadn't seen any progress. Oh, wait! He did tell her something important.

When the elevator finally reached their floor, Ludwig turned on his heel to leave, the Russian reached out and grabbed his arm, "Wait a minute! You can't be with him."

"You'll find that I can and will."

"If you value your life and those of your family, you won't. Being with him will hurt you in more ways than you can imagine."

Ludwig exhaled through his nose, "I swear to god, Natalya, if you're threatening me—"

"I'm not! I-I didn't want you to find out like this but you have to know something about Feliciano Vargas." She paused to recall everything Eduard told her before relaying the information, "He's bad news. His family are mobsters so dangerous that most organized crime clans around the world bow to their power; their name alone strikes fear. He's an heir right? Didn't you ever wonder heir to what? He's got so much blood on his hands! His whole family has blood on their hands."

"I don't believe you," said Ludwig quietly as he thought about what she said. Shaking his head, he narrowed his eyes, "I can't believe you would go through such lengths to make such lies about him. Feliciano, a mob boss?"

"Don. He's going to be the Don. That's the boss of all bosses."

"I know what a Don is," he snapped back, "I just can't believe that you think I'll buy your lies."

"They're not lies! Ask him, ask anyone. Could you really love him as he is? Think about all the blood money he's rolling in. Think about the humans his family has sold to slavery and the drugs they've allowed taint our societies."

Outside, the snow had picked up as they stood in silence. Ludwig glared at the Vargas' crest on the marbled floor in thought. With every second that ticked by, and Ludwig's brow furrowing even more, the Russian thought she was winning him over. That is until his face relaxed, "I don't believe you but even if his family had done that, I wouldn't care. Nice try but my mind's made up."

He shoved his hands in his coat and walked out quickly in attempt to get away from her but she followed him anyway.

To his surprise, his father was walking out of the elevator next to them with the tall Russian moving stiffly behind him as well, "I'm…sorry that things didn't work out for us, Dr. Beilschmidt."

Wolfgang patted him on the shoulder, "I'm sure you'll put my money to good use. You're a smart boy, Ivan. You'll be just fine."

"And you're positive that I can't persuade you?"

"My son's happiness comes first. If he hadn't met Feliciano, maybe things would've been different."

Ivan's head shot up at the name, "Feliciano?"

"Ja," interjected Ludwig with a warning glare. The memory of what happened yesterday was still
very fresh in his mind, "What of it?"

Ivan smiled and shook his head, "Nothing. Have a wonderful evening. Perhaps I'll think of something else that might interest you Dr. Beilschmidt."

"I don't doubt it," said Wolfgang before taking his leave with his son close behind.

As soon as they were out of sight, the smile on Ivan's face fell. His eyes darkened in anger, "I only asked one thing of you, Natalya, and you couldn't even do that." He went back inside the elevator so that they could go to their room.

"I-I tried, big broth—," she was cut off with a sudden gasp when Ivan slammed his hand on the wall behind her.

"You didn't try hard enough," he roared, "Do you realize that you marrying that Kraut bastard was this company's only chance of survival?! Without your marriage, our presence in Genovia will be unwelcomed. Without our presence in Genovia and without Wolfgang's support, our mother's company is finished!"

Ivan glared at his little sister, "I am very upset with you and now I'm going to have to figure something out in order to salvage this wreck." Shoving his sister's comforting hand off his shoulder, Ivan pulled out his tablet and called Eduard via video chat.

"I've canceled all shipments going into Genovia," he barked as soon as his brother-in-law picked up, "Collect them as soon as possible and bring them back."

"W-wait, wha?!" Eduard's eyes widened, "But, Ivan, I worked v-very hard to get that done so that they would arrive on time."

"Then work just as hard to retrieve them. It's been done so do as you're told." With one last glare he ended the call walked back into his room, slamming the door shut in his sister's face.

Natalya wiped her tears and drew out her own key so that she could go to her room. As soon as she was inside, she answered a video call via her laptop, "You lying sack of shit! You promised that he would stay with me if he knew of Feliciano's lineage. You said that he'd leave him and marry me!"

Eduard fiddled with his hands nervously, "Y-you told him?"

"I did and all it gained me was him proclaiming his disgusting love for his stupid Italian. He didn't care because apparently it was in the past!" Natalya's shoulders trembled underneath her lavender cashmere sweater as she buried her face in her arms, angry tears rolling down her flushed cheeks. Life was so unfair! All she wanted was to please her brother. Lord knew he deserved all the happiness in the world. And she was determined to be the one to restore the hope in his eyes.

"I…I have an idea if you're willing to hear me out," said Eduard as he eyed his sister-in-law warily. She lifted her head and nearly scared the wits out of him with the glare she gave him.

"Y-ya said that Ludwig thinks it's in the past, right? W-w-what if—please, Nat! Please put that letter opener down! I have a baby brother I'm watching over, remember? A-and a baby on the way, please!" Upon realizing that there were thousands of miles between them and Natalya couldn't actually hurt him, Eduard blushed.

Natalya slowly lowered her weapon and looked out the window in thought, "Did my sister ever tell you why my father left my mother?"
"No, she didn't."

"We had a baby brother and my mother was careless."

"I-I see…" Eduard was sweating bullets, not at all liking how his night had turned out. He fiddled with the top of his heavy silver pen, "I need to get back to work, Natalya."

The girl ignored him and continued, "I didn't know Nathaniel very well but I do know that his death was the reason why my dad left us. Funny isn't it? How much of an impact the death of a child can have on a parent. It's enough to drive them apart."

"I'm afraid I don't follow. Why are you saying this?"

"No, reason. Now, what was it you were saying?"

"I was simply saying that…well, if Ludwig were to see that Feliciano and his family are still involved in their dirty business, maybe he'd see things differently."

"No. He said he didn't care."

"It's easy to say such things so easily when it's only a hypothetical scenario in your head and something completely different when there is concrete evidence."

Natalya rolled her eyes to glance at Eduard, "How the hell am I supposed to find him concrete evidence?"

"I need your help first, sister dearest."

"Don't call me that."

"Natasha worked very hard on her medicine. Please," begged Eduard, "Please help me send it to Victrola. I know that there are other hospitals that would be more than happy to try them. But I can't move them without Ivan's signature."

"Big brother said not to move them." Natalya narrowed her eyes suspiciously, "Why would I help you disobey a direct order from him when he's already pissed off at me as it is?"

"He'll be happy you did with what I'm going to give you. I asked you to trust me, Nat, and you said you would, remember?" When she said nothing, Eduard huffed in thought, "Listen, I know I can help save the company but you have to do this for me in return. I'm your brother too and I'd do anything to make all of you happy."

Natalya eyed the documents the Estonian pushed in front of the camera and he knew that she was slowly warming up to him. "Forge his signature, Nat, and I'll make Ludwig see that Feliciano Vargas is the lowest form of scum known to man. He and his father will come running to you, I know it!"

Picking up her pen, Natalya found the documents that her brother-in-law showed her in her briefcase, signing Ivan's name on the documents along with hers next to it. She faxed them to him, "You better not be lying to me."

"Thank you, Nat, thank you! I swear I won't let you down." Eduard took the documents from his side of the fax and shoved them in a leather folder before ending the call.

The Russian swiveled in her chair for a moment before picking up her cell, "I can't leave my fate in the hands of that idiot." A few rings later, her contact in Victrola answered, "Hello, Dimitri…yes, I'm doing fine. Listen, I need a favor. My brother and I are in town on business and I need you to
do something for me… unfortunately, yes, the rumors are true but hopefully with your help I can fix that….yes, thank you. Until then.” Shutting her phone, Natalya stood up and stretched, "We'll see how long your little love story lasts, Ludwig."

Pasta had always been Feli's go-to food no matter the occasion but he especially ate it when he was happy. When he was nervous, however, he enjoyed eating chocolate covered strawberries. Feli had spent his entire day with his brother checking out their territories and learning all about what drugs were being sold where and who kept the gangs in those locations in check on their behalf. He'd even gone to their headquarters where he met his brother's men. They'd all been so friendly and fun. One even gave him his own nickname like his brother, Alpha Greyhound. It had been… thrilling to say the least, but now the most exciting part was going to take place in no other than Marcello's Den of Iniquity

He and his brother were on their way there while his cousins and Antonio trailed behind them. Their grandfather was going to be there as well to introduce him to the other bosses who happened to be in Genovia; some were genuine allies while others were more reluctant. Feli's stomach grumbled in both hunger and nerves. If memory served him correctly, he was about to dine with some of the most notorious gangsters of his lifetime.

Feli plucked the last strawberry from his box and bit into it while leaning his head against his window with a deep sigh. His eyes glanced up to the stars above in hopes to find some solace in the glittering lights. Thrilling day aside with his brother, he found that he couldn't do anything to keep from feeling gloomy. It was silly, he knew, to feel such ache when Ludwig was around the city himself. Feli had tried counting down the hours until he saw his lover again but it only made the day seem to drag out longer. No matter. Ludwig was sure to call any minute now to wish him good night and he'd finally be able to look into his baby blues. Hopefully they would sate his desire to be by his side until he actually had the chance to be.

His musing was short lived when his cell phone decided to go off at that moment making him jump in surprise. His pet name for Ludwig flashed on the screen indicating that he wanted to do a video chat with him. Feli glanced at the rear view mirror and saw Lovino roll his eyes before raising the partition between the front and back cabins. As soon as it was shut, Feli answered cheerfully, "Ciao, bello~"

"Hallo, Liebling." Ludwig fidgeted with his laptop until he finally settled down on his bed. He was dressed in his night clothes, which was a simple green t-shirt from medical school and his boxers. Ludwig smiled tiredly, "How was your day?"

The Italian thought about all the adventures he had that day and decided that it was best not to tell his love everything that he'd done. "Ve, it was ok," said Feli finally with a pout, "just not the same without you here to hold me in your strong muscles. I miss you."

Ludwig sighed, "I know what you mean but you'll see me tomorrow so don't be sad, ok?"

"I can't help it… I'm missing you when I should be kissing you bunches! And making love to you."

"F-Feliciano! I'm… my brothers are over—hold on, I'm going to get some headphones." Ludwig glanced over at his door to make sure Gilbert wasn't listening before going over to lock it for good measure. He hooked up his headphones to his laptop. "Ok. We made love last night… did I not satisfy you?"

"Ve, it's not that. If it were up to me I'd have you tied to the bed so that you'd never get out and I could do so many naughty things to you all day long."
Ludwig blushed but didn't deny that he found the idea of being tied to his bed thrilling. "What about work?"

"Please, Luddy, I'm rich enough to take care of us both along with our kitties, and your puppies and our Alex."

"I don't want to be a free-loader."

Feli pursed his lips cutely, "Fine, I'll let you go so you can bake but then it's back to bed mister!"

"I'll get fat if all I'm doing is baking and lying in bed."

"No, you won't. We'll do exercise together every night."

Ludwig shook his head with a laugh. He'd missed Feli's antics. It was a shame that he couldn't be there with him.

When they both stopped giggling, Feli leaned back with a sigh, "Ve, do you really want me to tell you how I felt today?"

"I do."

"I felt like the sun wasn't shining today, and as silly as it sounds, I've been counting the minutes until I see you again."

Ludwig smiled at him again, "You'll see me tomorrow."

"I know…I'm lame, aren't I? Lovi says I am."

"You're not," he cried suddenly startling Feli. Ludwig blushed and shrunk in on himself when he said in a quieter voice, "I feel that way too. I…I lov—"

"Fratello," interrupted Lovi as he lowered the divider, "we're almost there."

"Where are you going," asked Ludwig suddenly relieved that he didn't tell Feli that he loved him via a phone call.

Feli sighed again, "I'm going to meet with some of my family's business partners. I'm sorry, Luddy, I'd promise to call but I'm not sure what time I'll be done and I know it's late."

"It's ok, Liebling. I'll see you tomorrow night at my apartment, ok?"

"Ve, okie dokie! I'll have dinner ready for you. Don't make me stay away from you too long," he added with a wink, "I love you. Night night." He hung up after blowing a kiss to the camera and pocketed his phone. His door was opened for him and Oswaldo offered him his hand.

"You ready for this," he asked Feli quietly.

"As ready as I'll ever be." Feli took his Ozzie’s hand and got out of the car, "We won't be killing anyone, right?"

"Depends," answered Ozzie with a shrug. "If no one's in the mood to die, we'll spare them."

"Ha. Ha."

"It's going to be fine, angelo."
"Hm...it's not that. Ludwig just called me and I feel a little weird about this now."

Reaching out to stop his angel from walking, Oswaldo leaned in and whispered into his ear, "Don't feel guilty about what we do or who we are. We're from a different world as he is, but that doesn't make us bad people." Leaning back, the older Italian glanced over Feli, "You have something on your face."

Feli swiped at his cheek, "Did I get it?"

"No, its—here let me." Carefully, Oswaldo used his thumb to brush away some chocolate from the corner of Feli's lip. "I wish I saw you more today," he whispered, "Stupid train dad made me check out was clean." He growled in annoyance when Bernardo jumped on his back, "The fuck, Ber?!"

"Not to interrupt your flirting, Oz, but grandpa and our old man are waiting for us upstairs."

Bernardo hopped off and straightened his coat, "You ready for this, Feli?"

"Ready or not, we're doing this," said Lovino.

Closing his eyes, Feli took a deep breath and exhaled slowly to let his worry slip free. Relaxed, knowing that he wasn't alone, he smiled, "Let's not keep them waiting." He shoved his hands in his pockets lazily and made his way inside with Oswaldo at his right and Lovino to his left. The others followed closely behind him. Marcello lead them to the highest floor of his establishment, nodding a greeting to the patrons that were able to afford to party on that level as they parted for them.

Cerberus discreetly glanced around the room and made note of what was going on and who was present as they walked towards the V.I.P room. Though they had to give Marcello their phones, he hadn't made them surrender their weapons. Seraph recognized the patrons as entourage for the men and women waiting for them. He winked at one while Bernard blew a kiss to another. Oswaldo openly glared at one who shamelessly checked Feliciano out but that was short lived as soon as they made it across.

Feli let the door scan his iris before stepping inside with Oswaldo, his brother, and Antonio while the rest waited outside. His grandfather stood up and hugged him, "Welcome, nipoti, a bit tardy though aren't you?"

"He's a spoiled prince, isn't he," teased a familiar voice. Lukas nodded to Feli in acknowledgment and took a sip from his tea, "How's my brother?"

"Blissfully married," said Feliciano as he reached over to kiss him on his cheeks.

Lukas allowed it, "That's good." He motioned the empty seat next to him and Feli happily took it. The others eyed him, measuring his worth.

Romulus clapped his hands eagerly, "Now that we're all here, let them bring in our meal." His son watched as waiters brought in silver platters for them as well as refilled their wine glasses. As is customary, the body guards tasted their charge's meals. Paulo took a sip of wine and tasted his dad's food while Oswaldo and Antonio did the same for Feli and Lovi respectively. When it was deemed safe, everyone dug in while talking animatedly about their endeavors.

The King raised his hand, "Please feel free to enjoy your meal as I speak. As you know, I'm getting to that age when the sun will set on my time as leader and rise with Feliciano as your new King." The younger Italian couldn't help but blush at the title. It was ridiculous really but hey, his grandfather said it helped with appearances.

A polite applause for him did little to make him feel more confident that nobody would challenge
him for that position when his grandfather retired. It wouldn't do at all if a mob war suddenly broke out because they didn't want him as their leader and that wouldn't bode well at all for the others who counted on them to keep the balance. Of course, that didn't mean that they weren't just sucking up to his grandfather. Playing their role as obedient followers so that he doesn't suspect and strike as soon as his back is turned. No, Feliciano wouldn't put it past them at all.

He lifted his head towards Oswaldo so that he could lend him his ear, "Ozzie, I thought you said that I would meet with the heirs. Aside from Lukas, I don't know any of these people."

To his surprise Ozzie simply chuckled, "Some couldn't make it but I assure you that their families are represented here. Some of these people are friends and will gladly fight beside us for our cause as would we for theirs." He nodded towards a woman with short curly blond hair who was wearing glasses munching on a hamburger, "She's works with my dad in America and her husband does damage control with the media. He's not here at the moment because he had to do something in Canada. That's Lady Fernandez, Antonio's grandmother on his mother's side."

Motioning to a few others, Oswaldo added, "That one is Vladimir's father and the woman next to him is Milen's mother, neutral allies the both of them. You have a distant cousin that works with you at the hospital, Heracles I believe his name is, well that woman right there is his mother. Her allegiance to our family is on par with Lukas here. It's a shame that we don't hang with him more often."

"Ve," breathed Feli as he took a sip of his wine, "I see. Well in our defense, he prefers the company of my good friend Kiku and his cats." Oswaldo laughed quietly and stood back.

When their meeting was concluded they dispersed into the night. Antonio chased after his grandmother, "Abuela, wait, I wanted to talk to you about something important." He kissed Lovino good bye and promised to see him at home before getting into his grandmother's limo. Feli sighed and checked the time; it was far too late to call Ludwig back so he decided to go home. His brother offered him a ride before Oswaldo got a chance.

The dark haired Italian watched his cousin and Feli drive off sadly, "Damn it."

"Relax," said Seraph with a yawn, "You'll see him again tomorrow I'm sure. Right now, we need to go do a drive by the orphanage to get a status report. Afterwards, we need to get back to HQ and debrief with grandpa." Smiling softly, he tugged his brother along.

Meanwhile in the darkest corners of their city, where those visited by the Vargas were still licking their wounded prides, a dark car rolled up to a tire shop that had a tiny red flower painted next to the door. The window rolled down and a lone envelope was tossed down the gang leader's feet. Inside were instructions to gather the town's best and meet at Magyar's Park.

The park was named after one of Victrola's senators and Elizabeta's uncle. It was a dream during the day, filled with families playing and picnicking. During the night, it was only this way shy of dangerous if the dogs were staying in their doghouse for the evening. A night such as tonight.

It hadn't taken long at all for small groups of men and a single woman to answer the call. They lingered in the trees while a brunette appeared with another envelope. He emptied the contents onto a table, "There is more where this came from but first we need to pay a little visit to the wonderful children staying with the Vargas."

One of the men stood up and walked away, "I may be a thug but I'm above hurting innocent children." He didn't make it far. A bullet pierced right through his heart and he fell limply onto the snow.
Behind him, the brunette holstered his gun and shoved his hands into his pockets, "Right, well, as I was saying, we're going to visit them and give the Vargas a little preview of the New Year's celebration."

"Someone already did that," said one with wispy dark hair, "And last time I checked, whenever someone fucks with the Vargas, they end up dead."

Another, this one a woman, scoffed, "No kidding. Look at how those guys who did it last time ended up in Shanghai, how their great uncle ended up. Don Romulus himself killed his own brother for snitching on their dirty business."

"People," called the brunette, "aren't you tired of living in fear of the Vargas? This is your chance to rise up and show them that you will not be oppressed by their sun rays. Fight back and take back this city. Start with that godly house of theirs. It's an eyesore to the rest of the city; a reminder of a past long forgotten." He pulled out another envelope, this one contained a blueprint showing where guards were posted. He saw some grip their weapons as he explained their plan of attack.

"Oh, and another thing, we must use fire to purge. My mistress was very clear about that. Something about it took someone important to her so it would only be fitting."

~.~

Feli went to go visit with Alex the next day. While there, he arranged for someone to come and check his apartment to make sure they were in perfect conditions for a child to live in. Of course, he'd look into buying an actual home but as far as the social worker was concerned, his apartment was lovely.

Alex showed him the books Romulus left for him to read, "And this one has a bunch of love stories. Daniel doesn't really like romance but Ms. Nicola and Ms. Marzia love reading them with me." The boy nestled his head under Feli's chin and cuddled his stuffed bee close, "Are you going to write your story in here too?"

"I am, bambino," said Feli as he nuzzled his future son's soft black hair, "When my story ends, I'll write it down."

"But I thought you already have someone you love. Don't you love Ludwig?"

"With just about all my heart." At Alex's puzzled expression, he added, "You hold the rest of it along with my brothers and mom and dad and uncle and aunt and my cousins and grandpa and—"

"O?"

"Hm?"

"I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. Where did you hear about 'O'?"

Alex stood up and tugged Feli towards the secret room he found, not noticing how the Italian was tensing as they drew closer. When the boy pushed the chest away and opened the little slide door, Feli smiled grimly, "I guess you know about...did you read the diaries?"

"I-I'm sorry!"

"No, it's ok. I'm the one who should be sorry. I thought this place was sealed off ages ago. Bet they
"scared you, huh?" Feli crawled into the space the best he could and ran his hand on the carvings on the wall, "I haven't been in here in years…"

"What happened? That is to say, if you don't mind talking about it."

"I'll tell you when you're older, piccolino. My story is sad but so far it's gotten so much happier." He ruffled Alex's hair affectionately. "Say, I remember something cool about this one. Look, if you press on this shelf here the whole wall slides open." Feli showed the boy how to reveal the secret door, "This takes you out to the shed but don't use it unless it's an emergency, ok?"

"Ok."

Feli left later that afternoon with the promise of coming back with Ludwig for the New Year's celebration. He got a text from Ludwig telling him that he and his father had entered their meeting and that he'd see him later that evening. It was enough to put a skip in his step as Feli excitedly went to the groceries to pick up a few things for their dinner.

When he got back to his building, he bumped into Oswaldo's chest as he entered the elevator, "Sorry!"

"It's ok, angel," said Ozzie with a grin, "You coming from the market? That's great! I brought some video games. Figured we can have a guy's night with Feliks."

Feliciano's smile fell, "I'm sorry, Oz. I wish we could but I'm about to make some dinner for Ludwig so he can have something warm to eat when he gets back from his meeting." He pulled out a black box from his vest pocket, "I'm about to clean right now 'cause I want things to be perfect."

"Is that," Oswaldo licked his lips and met his Feli's eyes, "is that what I think it is? Are you…"

"I know it hasn't been that long, but I really love him… Is it stupid of me to—"

"No! No, it's…it's not stupid. Did you make it?"

Blushing, Feli nodded, "It's not perfect but I hope he'll like it."

"I know he will. Listen, is it ok if I crash at your place tonight? I don't want to go with my brothers right now. Seraph still hasn't found a place for us and I'm afraid that if I stay another night with them stuck in that damn hotel room, I'll lose it."

"Sure! I don't mind." Feli pocketed the ring and handed over his key, "You can sleep in my room if you want. Welp, I'll see you later, kk?" Heading back to Ludwig's penthouse, the Italian set to work.

Emil sighed as he tossed his phone on the bed, "That was the fiftieth time Lilly has ignored my calls, Mathias. Why?"

"What'cha do to her?" Mathias looked up from his own cell phone with a questioning gaze at his little brother.

"Nothing that I'm aware of. The last thing I remember was that she hasn't spoken to me since the day after finals." Emil rolled over on his back, "I'm…I'm worried, big brother. What if she wants to break up with me?"
Mathias sighed, "I'm sure it's nothing. It's only been, what, like four days? She'll come around. In the meantime, we've got bigger problems."

"What's wrong?"

"Remember that fire a few months back? The one on Sacred Hearts Orphanage? Well, Cerberus found out who it was and when they had one of them, he was shot using a thermo-vision sniper rifle. Do you know what that means?"

"Someone didn't want him to talk. Was it one of ours?"

"No. Lukas has them all on a tight leash, but this is serious though. He was approached twice by different people. The first was a man and the second a woman."

Emil sat up with a frown, "Does he know who they were?"

"Man, that's the crazy part. He was approached recently by the chick but he thinks that it's the same party. After all, it was to attack the Vargas again."

"Two hits so close to each other? Why?"

"Well, if ya want my personal opinion, I think it's because Francis recently stopped a train carrying drugs to France. That's why he didn't go down to Italy with the rest of them for the holidays."

"An enforcer's job is never finished I guess," murmured Emil as he flipped through his cell again.

"For the love of– stop texting her! If she ain't sick of ya yet, she will be if you keep bothering her."

Emil sat up again abruptly, "You said someone tried to hire him? For a hit right?"

Mathias rolled his eyes, "No, for a house call. Yes, for a hit!"

"When?"

"Today apparently, why what's up?"

"Yesterday when the Australian ambassador was on TV, the cameras caught Ludwig and Feliciano with this kid. They didn't exactly hide the fact that they're an item."

Frowning pensively, Mathias wondered out loud, "You don't think…"

"What if Ivan or Natalya had someone call Lukas to take care of Feli," asked Emil. "It would make sense, right? Get Feliciano out of the picture so that the deal can stay on the table."

Mathias chewed his lip before saying, "I don't…I don't think someone would risk taking out someone as important as Feli. Not only would they risk the wrath of the entire Vargas family but those of their allies too. I hate to imagine the kind of monster Oswaldo would turn into to avenge him."

"Then what about the boy? When Feli talked about him, he kind of sounded like he was his son. Hurt the kid, you hurt the father."

"No. You hurt the kid, you piss off the father."

"Now imagine what kind of anger and destruction the father could cause if he also happened to be raised by a crime family."
"Yeah, but a lot of stuff happened to him. I don't think that he'd go that far."

"It doesn't matter if you have given your sworn oath to protect lives and not take," argued Emil, "If someone hurts your kid or someone just as close to you, you will be out for blood. Everyone has a limit, Mathias. I don't think Feli is that different. He's still a man you know."

"So…you think someone wants to hire Lukas to attack the new orphanage to make Feli angry enough to do something mob-like, for what? So that Ludwig sees what he's capable of and run back into the waiting arms of Natalya?" At Emil's nod, Mathias dialed Lovino, "If you're right about this, then we should let them know so that they can put some more security. You know, you really missed your calling. I bet Cerberus would've loved to have taken you under their paw."

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Lovino was busy going through the audio transcripts Feli's bugs transmitted off of Godfrey and Collins when he got a call from Mathias. Sighing, he pulled off his glasses and answered his phone, "Pronto…What the hell do you want?…What? Wait, how did you figure this?...No, Lukas hasn't called me yet…I see…No, I'm not mad. He probably called my grandpa or uncle…" He checked his watch and frowned. Antonio hadn't returned yet, "Uh-huh."

He kept his sigh in check until Mathias said something that made his blood go cold, "What?" Lovi stood up to get his shoes, "No, no. I'm going to put some more men out there at once. Why didn't you start with that, you bastard? My future nephew's life could be in danger! Listen, thanks for the information. Tell Emil that our offer still stands. The organization will be glad to have him…yes, ciao."

Grabbing his keys, Lovi sent a text out to his lover, "Where the hell are you, Tonio?" As soon as he did that, he called his Cerberus. If anyone would protect those kids, it would be them.

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Meanwhile at the Olympian hotel, Ludwig sat stiffly at the bar as he waited for Natalya to show up. He just wanted to get this stuff out of the way and be done with it. Never have to deal with it again.

A tap to his shoulder pulled him out of his musings and he nodded at Natalya as the Russian sat next to him, "Hello."

"Hello," she muttered back. She pulled out a leather folder and sighed, "Here. It's the paperwork that shows that we're going to go through with breaking the engagement off."

Ludwig eyed it suspiciously, "Really? After all that grief you gave me at the hotel, you're just letting it go? Just like that?"

"It's what you want isn't it," she snapped. "Truth be told I wasn't exactly leaping at the prospect of marrying you either. My brother wanted me to do it so I was."

"What changed?"

"Why go through the trouble of pretenses? Here, take it and give me what I need so we'll be done with it." Ludwig did as he was told and shoved the folder into his bag before getting up. "Wait, where are you going?"
"Home. Tomorrow is New Years and I want to get some rest in before the activities." He pulled on his coat before stepping onto the street when he felt a tug on his sleeve. "What?"

Natalya outstretched her arms, "The least we can do for each other for our troubles."

"Oh." Ludwig awkwardly stepped into the hug and returned it, gasping when she suddenly pulled his face down for a kiss. He pushed her away with a scowl and wiped his lips with his gloved hand, "Damn it! What did I say?!"

"Hm. That's the least you owe me. The very least." Natalya stepped into her car and left a disgruntled Ludwig behind. Pulling out her phone she dialed Eduard, "It's done. Now what?...Are you sure this is going to work?...What if the little idiot doesn't leave him?...Ok. Yes, I trust you… goodnight."

Feli was happily humming to himself as he bustled about Ludwig's abode.

By the time eight o'clock rolled around, he'd had already dusted, vacuumed, and wiped every surface imaginable. Dinner was slow cooking in the oven and he'd already set tiramisu in the fridge to chill. He'd also showered thoroughly and pulled on a simple pair of dark jeans and a thin blue long sleeve that allowed the sun rays of his tattoo to peek through. Ludwig didn't care for having shoes inside his house so he just pulled on a pair of black socks and left it at that.

Breathing in the herb scented air, he put away the last book that they managed to knock over before checking on the calzones.

"Ve, just about done," he said with a grin. He lowered the temperature and checked the kitchen drawers for a lighter. "Aww, maybe Luddy has one in his bedroom. Oh! That's right, he has one in his jewelry box." Happy that he remembered that Ludwig always kept a spare there, Feli jogged to his boyfriend's room and went straight to the wooden box.

Ludwig didn't have much in there aside from a few watches, a pair of cufflinks, his iron cross necklace, and an engagement ring…wait. Feli blinked a few times before blushing and sputtering out in Italian, "Oh my God, he's going to propose to me!" Grinning he took the lighter and the engagement ring before rushing across the hall back to his apartment and knocked rapidly on the door. He could hardly keep himself from bouncing on the balls of his feet as he waited for Feliks to open up. As soon as he did, Feli shoved the ring to his face, "Ludwig is going to propose to me, Fe!"

Feliks blinked at the ring then at Feli then back again. When he didn't respond, Feli's smile slowly faltered, "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Broski," said Feliks finally, "I think—I think you should come inside. There's something you need to see."

"What's wrong?"

Feliks bit his lip before smiling wryly, "You know what? Never mind, I'm happy for you, Fe."

"Feliks," Feliciano wasn't smiling anymore, "Tell me what's wrong. What do I need to see?"

"M-my new designs! I've been working on it since Toris totally disappeared on me. Can you believe that he hasn't texted or called? I mean, who tells you that he loves you and then pulls a
stunt like that? Ugh, like, whatever. His loss."

Feli studied his best friend for a moment as he tried to figure out whether he was being completely honest with him. Last he heard, which was a few days ago, things were going just great with the Lithuanian. There had even been talk about love. He asked, "What happened?"

"Not sure. Things were fine until he got a call from his brother and he just disappeared."

"I'm sorry, Fe." The Italian pulled his friend in for a hug.

"It's fine. Come on," Feliks tugged Feli inside their apartment, "L-let me show you what I've been working on."

Feliks scurried to the office area turned art studio to bring out his creations. In the meantime, Feli looked through his wine selection for a bottle to accompany his dinner with Ludwig. On the fridge, next to the wine chiller, were a few pictures of Feliks and Feli from his graduation along with a few more of their adventures together. They made him feel a bit nostalgic. It had been a while since he'd spent any quality time with his best friend... he would have to make it up to him. Maybe they could hang out sometime in the near future. There was nice spa that they could—a ding from Felik's pink laptop alerted him of a new message.

Curious, Feli forgot about the wine and checked it out. Oh. It was from one of those gossip blogs. He chuckled softly. Of course Feliks would subscribe to them. Personally, those kinds of things weren't appealing to him seeing as though they weren't always true and tended to cause more harm than not. This particular blog had to do with the couples of Victrola. Feli glanced around him to see if Feliks was still busy before he clicked it open. It was probable that it was of him and—

"Here," cried Feliks as he shoved a dress in Feli's face, "looks isn't it, like totes fab?!" Slamming his computer shut, he tried his best to smile at his friend's startled face. "Like, it isn't cool for you to be checking out my laptop like that. I could've had porn on that."

"O-oh! I'm sorry, you got a message from one of those couple gossip things and I thought..." Feli trailed off in embarrassment, "Porn, huh? I thought you didn't like that sort of thing."

Feliks blushed as he picked at his dress, "Toris hasn't been around, remember?"

"Right—erm—the dress is beautiful, Fe. You're extremely talented."

"Thanks." Feliks looked at the clock and sighed, "I think you should head on over to your man's. Have fun, broski."

"I'll see you in the morning." Kissing both of his friend's cheeks, Feli took his bottle of wine and skipped over to Ludwig's apartment. When the door closed, Feliks went back inside and opened his laptop again. The message was a picture of Ludwig and Natalya embracing with another below it of them kissing and the caption reading 'Victrola's Golden Boy With Fiancé: Finally caught on film after years of engagement.'

Feliks shook his head in anger, "Fucking knew it. Like, I knew he was going to hurt him."

"That was a close one." Feliks jumped at the sound of Oswaldo's voice making the dark haired Italian chuckle, "Sorry, man, didn't mean to give you a scare."

"I don't like this."

"And you think I do?" Oswaldo looked at the screen without expression, "I swear...that asshole
better not be playing with him. I'll fucking kill him." Feliks giggled nervously but stopped at the face Ozzie made, "I'm serious, Feliks. My Feli better come out of this unscathed or there will be hell to pay." He was about to make himself comfortable on the couch with a game controller when his phone buzzed. Ozzie checked his cell and rolled his eyes, tossing the controller back on the table before getting up and muttering, "Guess there isn't rest for the wicked after all."

"Are you leaving?"

"Yeah," he sighed, "Lovis wants me and my brothers to watch over the kids staying at the house. See ya later, cutie." Ozzie winked at Feliks before heading out, "Oh, hey! Want me to take care of this Toris guy?"

Feliks blanched, "Uh, like, no thanks. I'm sure it's nothing."

"Hm. Well, if you change your mind, I'll knock some sense into him." Oswaldo shrugged and left, shutting the door behind him. He pulled his hoodie on and felt his pocket to make sure he had the keys to his motorcycle on him.

Back in Ludwig's apartment, Feli was putting the finishing touches on the table when his laptop alerted him that Tino was calling. Feli immediately answered the video chat, "Tino?"

"Hiya, Feli," chirped the Nordic cheerfully. He took a sip from his light blue reindeer mug, "What's up?"

"Oh! Um, I'm just making dinner for Ludwig, why? Do I need to go to the hospital?"

"No no, nothing like that! I just wanted to say that...well, that I'm sorry that I didn't approach you sooner."

"Ve?"

Tino sighed and shrugged out of his scrubs and white long sleeve. On his arm were the tattoos Feli had thought he'd seen in the shower. He smiled apologetically, "I'm sorry we didn't show up for the dinner. Lukas told me though, said that everyone seemed to like you ok. That's good!"

"It's ok. I know you're not a part of what we do anymore."

"Seems I got out when you just got in. Pity, it would've been a pleasure to serve under you." Tino's smile fell and his eyes grew serious, "But should something ever happen, god forbid something like a war, I will come back. We all would in a heartbeat."

"No, it's ok. We wouldn't ask that of you and you don't need to do that."

"Don't misunderstand us, Feli. It's not duty that would call us back to service rather than loyalty." The corners of Tino's eyes crinkled in delight, "Well, I'm happy to finally get that off my chest. Oh! One more thing. Jessica said that someone kept calling for you."

"Did they leave a message?"

"No, just a number. Apparently, it was a patient of yours who wanted to ask you something."

"Odd...why didn't they just ask one of you guys? I'm just a resident."

Tino shrugged, "Beats me. She gave me their number so you could call them back. I'll text it to you."
"Thanks." Feli was about to tell his friend that he needed to get back to his dinner when he remembered, "Oh, Tino?"

"Hm?"

"I was just wondering if you knew of a family ring the Beilschmidts might have. An engagement ring?"

Tapping his chin in thought, Tino gasped, "Oh yes! I do; they have an heirloom ring with something written on the inside. It's a real nice ring too, modern looking given its age."

Feli released a sigh and smiled, "Ve~ you have no idea how happy that makes me! Thank you!"

"Haha, no problem; anything for you!" Tino glanced behind his shoulder and whispered, "Between you and me, Matthew is really lucky."

"Ve?"

"That's right, Matthew was the lucky son of a gun who got to have the ring what with Gilbert being the eldest Beilschmidt and all. AH! Not that I'm not happy with my ring, Teddy Bear, I love it so much," he shouted over his shoulder with a nervous giggle, "Listen, I have to—Feli? Are you alright?"

"D-does the ring have initials written inside it?"

"Mm…no, I don't think so. It has something written in German and has a few gems in it. Why?"

"No, reason. Thanks again, for all the help." He switched off the call and leaned back in his chair, his mind swirling with questions.

'You always knew,' purred a dark voice in his mind, 'that what you had with him was too good to be true.'

Feli gasped, "Th-that's not...you're lying."

'I'm only speaking the truth.' Shaking his head violently, Feliciano opened up a browser. He needed answers and there was only one place to get them. The voice giggled, 'When in doubt, Google it.'

Oswaldo hovered next to his colleague, "Come on, Beagle, it shouldn't take this fucking long to access those damn cameras I put in the Beilschmidt's house.

Unimpressed hazel eyes glanced over his shoulder. Beagle shook his head, "Cerberus, if it weren't the fact that I know better, I would say you're a damn pervert. Why do ya want me to access them anyway?"

"I need to see what Alpha Pup is up to."

"Is he a threat to the cause?"

"Fuck the cause. I need to make sure that he isn't a threat to himself." The screen in front of them suddenly came alive with live feed from Ludwig's office.

"God, you even put one in the dude's bedroom? The hell's wrong with you?"
Oswaldo rolled his chair next to his friend, "Shut up and go get a doughnut or something." Lowering his voice, he zoomed the picture in hopes to see what Feli was looking up. "Is there any way you can remote access his computer so we can see what he's seeing?"

"Um…yeah but we'd need his permission for that."

"Bullshit, I know you can get in through a back door."

"He's going to be my alpha, man, I can't just—"

"Please. I need to see what he's looking at." Beagle studied him for a second before shrugging and fired up another computer to do as he was told.

Feli's fingers flew over the keyboard but each movement felt like he was fighting against sludge. The pads were slippery and his hands felt cold. His stomach was heavy and churning with worry. He typed out Ludwig's full name along with the other set of initials in the ring but paused before hitting enter.

"Got it, chief," cried Beagle triumphantly. He squinted at the screen and pursed his lips, "Ain't that the name of the dude who…"

"Yeah."

"And that's—"

"Yeah."

"That's going to kill him!"

"Yeah, no shit!" Oswaldo looked between the screens angrily, "Get rid of what comes up!"

Beagle looked at him incredulously, "I can't do that. Do you have any idea how many links that will bring up?"

"Well, shut off their internet!"

"Lord Jesus, the things I do for you."

Oswaldo bit down on his lip and prayed that Feli reconsidered what he was about to do, cursing himself to the depths of hell for not just telling his angel the truth about what was happening.

The Italian's leg thumped up and down as he stared at what he wrote while chewing on his thumbnail. He wanted to know that it was all lies. That perhaps Tino was thinking about the wrong ring…that maybe Ludwig had gotten another one but the notion was so farfetched. And he wasn't stupid.

"I'm not stupid," he murmured to himself as he pressed enter. The first thing that came up was a
"God damn it, Beagle," growled Oswaldo, "Fucking do something!"

His comrade shook his head, "I can't! It's not letting me."

Clicking on it, Feli wasn't sure what he was expecting to see. And if he were honest with himself, he thought he knew pain already given the fact that he'd witnessed his father's torture and murder and only had a thin glass between him and the corpse. Then, there had been that time when his mind had been lost in the darkness. And then there was now.

The ring fell from his hand landing with an echoing thump on the hardwood floor. It was suddenly hard to breath, his throat was clogging up. To see, his eyes were filling to the brim. To move, he tried to stand up but ended up falling on weak legs.

His heart twisted in his chest as he scrolled past pictures of Ludwig and a beautiful blonde woman hand in hand, candid pictures of the two on dates. Headlines like 'Our Beloved City's Golden Boy and His Blushing Bride to Be' and, this one in particular broke his heart more than he thought was possible, 'Vargas Think They Can Have It All: City's Very Own Sun Child Is a Homewrecker!' Pictures of him and Ludwig on dates were mixed in with the ones of Ludwig and his fiancé and the ones with him always had mean things to accompany it.

But the one that took the cake was a more recent one, uploaded not a few minutes ago. Ludwig and that same blonde were embracing with another below it of them kissing and the caption reading 'Victrola's Golden Boy with Fiancé: Finally caught on film after years of engagement.'

Oswaldo reached out to the screen wishing that he could be there to hold his precious cousin as he fell apart before his eyes. Beside him, Beagle was working his hardest to get into the site. "It doesn't matter anymore," whispered the Italian. "He knows."

"I'm sorry, Cerberus. I really am." Beagle frowned, "Why the hell was this shit even up? Wasn't there someone who was going to take care of this?"

Sniffing, Oswaldo wiped his eyes and shook his head, "No. Whether they stay a couple or not wasn't—he—they weren't supposed to even fall in love."

"Does he know what's going on?"

"No...I don't know."

"Where are you going?"

"I need to go see him. He needs me."

"I don't think so, man. Alpha Pup seems stronger than he appears. Look."

The Italian sat back down and saw that Feliciano had straightened himself out and was shutting
down the laptop. Gathering the documents he printed out in a stack, he made his way to the kitchen where he pulled out the casserole from the oven and continued to set up for his dinner with Ludwig.

It was embarrassing, truly it was, how excited Ludwig was to be back home. His father chuckled at him and bade him a goodnight as he all but jumped out of the car. Wolfgang pulled out his cell phone as he watched in amusement as Ludwig dashed inside. He dialed Romulus, "Hallo…We just got back a few minutes ago…Yes, it is done…And now is the waiting period, ja?…Hm..I suppose I can come over for a few minutes…I'll see you soon."

Ludwig eagerly walked out of the elevator, unable to contain his smile. He was finally free! Free to hold his angel of a boyfriend to his heart's content whenever they were out on dates. Personally, he wasn't much of a PDA fan but for Feli—for them—he'd do it as much as it took until everyone in Victrola, no, the Genovia, knew how happy Feliciano made him. After all, there was absolutely nothing he wouldn't do for him at this point. As he reached for his keys, he briefly wondered what would be considered too early to talk about marriage. Hell, Gilbert asked Matthew after only a few months of knowing him. He's known Feli longer than that.

Shaking his head, Ludwig entered his home, braced to be welcomed by his Feli's warm smile and kisses and—darkness? All the lights were turned off save for the two candles on the dinner table where a casserole dish and other side dishes were waiting to be consumed. In a pail was melted ice but the bottle of wine was missing. The most disheartening of all though was the fact that there was no sign of his sweet Italian fox. Putting his coat in the closet and rolling his case in there as well, he'd sort his paperwork out later, he called out for Feliciano, "Liebling, I'm home."

"Liebling?" Ludwig checked his room but there was no sign of his boyfriend. He felt a sudden chill and worry when he saw that his jewelry box was slightly skewed. Fixing it, the German walked back out to the main room, "Feli, where are—Feliciano!"

Ludwig narrowed his eyes disapprovingly when he saw the man he was looking for was outside on the balcony in nothing more than a thin blue long sleeved shirt, jeans, and socks. He whispered to himself with exasperated fondness, "Oh, Feli, what am I going to do with you." Tugging a warm blanket from the couch he tsked as he opened the door, "Why the hell are you out here in the cold?"

Feli breathed in deeply and removed his cigarette from his mouth, holding the minty smoke before releasing it in a cloud of white. He brought his other hand up to finish off his bottle of wine before setting it aside. Sniffing, he took another drag, "What does it look like I'm doing?"

The German shook his head, "You know I don't mind when you smoke every now and then so long as you do it in a place where you won't catch your death." He placed the blanket around Feli's shoulders and tried to hug him but was quickly shoved away.

Feli refused to meet Ludwig's eyes as he asked coldly, "What?" He put out his cigarette, "Don't want your fuck buddy getting sick on you? It's ok. I'm stronger than I look." Grabbing the empty bottle, he went back inside. Hurt, Ludwig stared after him in confusion before following him in. He didn't even scold him for dropping the blanket on the floor.

"Liebe, are you upset with me?" Ludwig followed him to the dining table. He took Feli's hand in his, "Liebling, is it because I took a little longer to come back? The meeting went on longer than usual. I tried calling you but you didn't answer." Smiling softly, Ludwig kissed the tops of Feli's
hands, "You must've forgotten to charge it," he murmured into Feli's skin as he kissed his cloth hidden arms, "But it's ok now because I've...I've come home to you—"

The Italian pulled his arms away and licked his lips. His eyes red from his earlier crying were only getting redder in his effort not to start again. Sniffling, his chin quivered, "Don't." It hurt him, to push Ludwig away as he was but he had to keep a clear head if he wanted to get real answers out of him. It wasn't fair, he knew, and it was killing him to be the reason that his kind Ludwig's smile kept slipping from his face. Motioning to the seat next to his, Feli wiped a rouge tear away, "W-why don't you eat? You must be starving. I think you'll like it; I've worked very hard."

"That's an expiration date."
"...for what?"
"Us."

Ludwig's heart did something funny at that moment. It slowed down and sped up all at once. It felt horrible, "What are you—"

"Why don't you eat, amore? You look very hungry." The German glanced down at his plate and paled noticeably by what else he found inside. Pictures of himself and Natalya and Feli with cruel captions highlighted in the ones Feliciano was in along with his engagement ring. His breathing increased as he tried in vain to swallow the lump of cotton that had suddenly formed in his throat. He turned in his seat and looked at his beloved with wide eyes, "I-I can explain this, Feli."

"Explain? What's there to explain?! Y-you lied to me! You didn't go to some fucking meeting; you went to go see her. You're engaged." Feli clinched his hands into tight fists and the tears fall, "Why didn't you just tell me at the beginning? I wouldn't have bothered you the way I did. I made a total fool of myself!"

"You didn't—"

"I did," shouted Feli, unable to control himself, "You didn't want to be with me because you already had someone. That's why you haven't said you loved me, isn't it? It's because you don't, because your heart is already promised to someone else!" Feliciano wiped his eyes angrily, "But I don't blame you for this, Dr. Beilschmidt. This was my fault. I forced you into a relationship that you clearly didn't want."

Ludwig stared at his boyfriend with a slack jaw. He'd never seen him so distraught and it was breaking his heart, "Liebling, that's not true. I do want to be in a relationship with you. I've always wanted to be in a relationship with you."

"Liar! There was a time you were cold to me, but me being the idiot that I am, insisted." Feli gave up trying to tie his shoes and stood up, "Well, don't let me stand in the way of your true happiness, Dr. Beilschmidt. I'll submit my forms of resignation in the morning."

Panic and realization filled the German as he stumbled to get up, "No, wait! Don't go, please let me explain. Please!" He couldn't let him get away. Not like this. "Please, give me a chance to explain."
"Let go of me."

"No! Not until you promise me that you'll give me a chance to explain."

Feli ripped his arm away and slammed the door shut leaving Ludwig behind with his heart shattering to bits. What the fuck had he been thinking?! He could feel tears sting his eyes as he thought about how his entire future had just evaporated before his eyes leaving him feeling cold, empty, and sick. He felt himself breaking down, his breath quickening and short silent sobs crawling up his throat. The strength in his legs seemed to abandon him just like Feli had and he was falling to his knees. He lost it. All of it.

But before he could let the sob that was threatening to come out, the door opened again. "Why are you on the floor?"

Ludwig sharply glanced up to see Feli looking at him in confusion with Berlitz in his arms. The German shot up and pulled him into an embrace, "I thought—"

"I love you."

"What?"

Removing one arm from the puppy, Feli used it to return the hug as he buried his face in Ludwig’s chest, "I love you so much."

"But you left."

"I know," said Feli, his voice cracking, "And every step I took away from you felt like I was ripping something that was attached to my soul. I brought your puppy. I figured we could use his cuteness to help calm us while we sort this out. Come on." Feli gently led Ludwig to his bed and laid down with him, "Now, explain, please."

Ludwig latched on and didn't let go of him as he started to explain that he had agreed to marry Natalya because if he didn't, Vash would've had to. Given that his brother identified himself as an asexual and was relatively young, he took it upon himself to do the deed. He explained that there was absolutely no love between him and Natalya and that it was only for business purposes, that Genovia would be more acceptable of Ivan and his company if there was something more binding the two families other than business. Ludwig further went to explain how things were no longer that simple when Feli started to court him and that he was growing more and more hesitant in completing that part of the deal with Natalya until recently when he just broke things off.

"I never meant to hurt you like this," whispered Ludwig while pressing kisses against Feli’s temple

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Because I was selfish. I wanted to enjoy you for as long as I could." Seeing Feli's disappointed face, Ludwig quickly corrected himself, "The sex is good but I meant you and the love you give me. I enjoy that the best. My sense of duty was overshadowing my own feelings but when we first made love, and during our time in the cabin in Italy, I realized that I couldn't go through with it. I only now got the courage to tell my dad."

"And that's why you met with her…"

"Ja. But then she kissed me...she kissed me twice but I pushed her away. I guess she thought that it would get me to reconsider but I don't want that." Shaking his head, Ludwig buried his face into Feli’s hair, "I'm free now and all yours...if you'll still have me."
Feli blinked up at his lover, "You are no longer bound to Natalya?" When Ludwig shook his head, he allowed a small smile to blossom onto his face. "Then of course I'll have you. You have to promise me something though."

"Anything."

"If you ever feel that you don't care for me the same way I care for you, please just leave me. I'd rather that than for you to deceive me."

"Feliciano, look at me. I'm not going anywhere. I don't want to go anywhere unless you're there with me. I know that it's going to take a while to earn your complete forgiveness but please give me the opportunity to try. If you want, I can tell you everything that ever happened between Natalya and me."

"Th-that's not necessary."

"Yes, it is, because I don't want you to hear it from anyone but me." Ludwig pulled the Italian tighter against him as if he were afraid that he'd leave him upon hearing what he had to say. Given how fast his heart was beating, Feli would bet that his love was terrified of losing him. It shouldn't have calmed his nerves but he would be lying if he were to say it didn't. "I wasn't completely a virgin when I met you. I mean, I was because I've never done it with a man but…I didn't feel like she took my virginity. It wasn't like when you and I made love for the first time because there wasn't any spark between us, let alone love. As a matter of a fact, I couldn't even get it up all the way and I didn't even have an or—I…she made me feel terrible for that."

"Oh, Luddy…" Feli hugged him tightly, "I'm sorry your first time had to be like that. You didn't have to lie about that, tesoro. If you felt like a virgin when you were with me, then you were. I'm not going to judge you for any past lovers you may have had. But I'm not going to say that I'm not upset that you kept your engagement from me. Those stupid gossip things were right…I am a homewrecker."

"No! No, you're not because she and I didn't even have a home. You didn't wreck anything aside from my stupid sense of responsibility to something that didn't even make me happy."

"I shouldn't have yelled at you like that."

"You had every right to."

Feli stayed quiet and shook his head, his heart now heavy with the burden of his own secrets, "No, I don't. I have secrets of my own, remember?"

Rubbing small circles underneath Feli's shirt, Ludwig quietly said, "I already know about you and Oswaldo." He kissed his lover's forehead when he felt him tense under his hand, "It's ok. I know you and him only kissed."

"...Who told you?"

"His brother, Seraph."

"I see."

"Hm. It was on Christmas morning when you two were fooling around in the gym. I was watching him trying to teach you how to do a pull up and…and I got a little jealous watching you have so much fun with him. Not to mention I didn't like how he was looking at you."
Feli rose an eyebrow, "And how was he looking at me?"

"With heart eyes; like you were something precious to him, a gift. Like if you were to disappear suddenly then life wouldn't have meaning anymore."

"You look at me like that."

Ludwig blushed, "Well, yeah but I'm your boyfriend. It's normal for me to look at you like that. He loves you, you know?"

"I know."

"...And?"

"And what?"

"H-how do you feel about that?"

"Happy I guess, he and I have history."

"What about now, though? Do you...feel the same?" Ludwig lowered his eyes when Feli didn't say anything. "I'm sorry it's just that, with the way Seraph was talking, you would be with him if you two weren't cousins."

Feli rolled onto his back, "Ludwig, Oswaldo is... He's very dear to me. I can't compare my love for you to what I feel for him no more than I can compare it to how I feel for Alex or anyone else important to me. Ah! That's not to say that what I feel for you isn't special, 'cause it is. It is..."

"He's not the one who I want to hold," Feli continued as he stood on his knees and took his hands in his, "He's not the one who I want to kiss. Not the one who rules my heart nor consumes my thoughts."

Ludwig's heart slowly picked up speed with every word his Italian uttered. His voice was like the warm mist from the waterfall at his cabin; it draped itself over him like a blanket. The fact that Feli was now unbuckling his pants wasn't exactly helping either. Not that he was complaining.

Ludwig's eyes grew heavy with affection and lust as he felt Feli make their fingers dance over his jean clad crotch.

With his eyes not leaving Ludwig's, Feli made their joined hands stroke him harder, a light blush graced both of their cheeks, "He's not the one I think about when I touch myself." He smiled at his boyfriend's blush and pulled their hands away. He draped his arm over his head; his smile turning wistful, "He's not the man I see in my dreams who is busy baking in the kitchen worrying over recipes. He's not the one I come home to or the one who chases after me to make sure I'm wearing clothes. Or the one who cuddles next to Alex when I'm reading a bedtime story."

Dropping his hand, Feli reached behind him and pulled out a box. Ludwig's eyes widened as he sat up, "F-Feli, is that what I think that is?"

"Oswaldo isn't the one who I want to make love to or lights my darkest nights," continued Feli ignoring the question for now. "But do you know who is?"

Licking his lips, Ludwig breathed out, "Tell me."

"You," whispered Feli as he opened the box to reveal a black ring. Wedged in between the metal was a silver wire and anchoring it were four blue diamonds that reflected beautiful colors when the
candle light hit them just so. Feliciano blushed, "I… I asked your brothers and dad… told them that I was making the ring." He carefully removed it from its bed of velvet and held it to Ludwig so that he could get a closer look. "I asked for something special I could use to incorporate to the ring. The diamonds I bought but the metal came from my dad's satellite telescope; I kept some of it before sending it back up there. The wire is from your mom's whisk."

For the second time that night, tears misted over Ludwig's eyes. He didn't deserve this angel of a man but somehow his mother seemed to have convinced God to allow him this blessing. The German pulled Feli until he was sitting on his lap, "Are you asking me to marry you?"

"Si."

"Then my answer is, ja! I want to!" The German slid on the ring proudly then moved to kiss his beloved but Feli stopped him.

"Wait, Luddy, don't wear it unless you're absolutely sure you want to marry me."

Ludwig grinned, "I'm sure."

"No, Ludwig, you can't be sure until you know a few more things about me."

Sighing, Ludwig gently removed Feli from his lap so that he could start removing his own clothes. "Are you going to tell me that you come from a line of mobsters?" He didn't see the look of cold panic on Feli's face as he pulled his shirt over his head. Tugging on his pants, Ludwig shrugged, "Because I honestly don't care what kind of stains are on your ancestral line. Mine isn't exactly spotless either. My great-great-grandfather was a fucking Nazi as were a handful of his kin. I have a bastard uncle who used to abuse Monika because she's a lesbian. He's borderline Nazi himself as well, but that doesn't mean that my dad or siblings are Nazis. As a matter of a fact, that doesn't even make me a Nazi and I'd make a perfect specimen in their eyes if it weren't for two things."

Feli's eyes darkened as Ludwig worked on his pants as well, "Oh?"

"Mhm. One, I don't have their disgusting mentality to put it very kindly, and two, I'm hopelessly, entirely, and crazy in love with another man."

"Tell me." Feli's darkened eyes burned into Ludwig's as he echoed his words from earlier, "Tell me who do you love."

Instead of answering verbally, Ludwig dove in for a kiss, slowly pushing Feli onto his back and hovering over him as he deepened it. When he pulled away, he nuzzled the Italian's jaw, reveling in the small amount of stubble beginning to grow. "You."

"Ve~"

"So, you see liebling, it doesn't matter what kind of people are in our ancestry line because we aren't them, right? I'm not a Nazi scumbag and you aren't some lowlife mafioso." Ludwig lifted his face to look Feli right in the eye, his soft blue bearing into Feli's amber, "Right?"

The Italian stared back before nodding slowly, his heart beating erratically in his chest, "…r-right."

Ludwig gave a pleased hum, "I'm not as good as you are when it comes to talking about my feelings. Truth be told, I don't know how you can deal with my romantic ineptitude."

"Because it's you." Feli kissed him on the nose, "Besides, you're not as bad at romance as you think."
"Hmm, maybe…but I'm a lot better at showing you." Ludwig returned the kiss and peppered a few more on his lover's cheeks, "May I? Please?" His Italian nodded and arched his neck to encourage Ludwig's lips down his jaw to his pulse point. He trailed kisses down Feliciano's warm neck, pausing only to nibble on his delectable collarbone before a tongue came out to trace the corners of a sun ray on his tattoo.

Oswaldo fiddled with his phone. It'd been a while since that incident with Feliciano and Ludwig had already come home. He wondered what happened after he shut off his monitors. A part of him was worried that Feli was crying in his apartment alone. He furrowed his brow, "If that's the case, I should be there to comfort him."

"He doesn't need you right now, Oz." Seraph rolled out the seat next to him and sat down not looking away from a book on flora. "Ludwig's taking care of him."

"So, he did confront him?" At his brother's nod, Oswaldo stood up, "Then how could Feliciano possibly be alright let alone let that bastard take care of him?"

Bernardo groaned, "Shut up, Ozzie. Dad's here so you better keep your feelings in check. We may be ok with it but I know he won't." The middle triplet grimaced at the look his brother gave him, "I'm sorry, man, but it's for your own good. Come on, we came to get you."

"I don't feel like going anywhere."

"It's a job. Lovi wants us to go look after the little ones."

"Why? I thought he already had men over there."

Seraph shrugged, "Beats me."

Oswaldo heaved a sigh before turning around in his seat to turn on the monitors, "Alright. Just let me shut these down properly else Beagle will chew me out and—oh dio mio!" The Italian stared at the screen with his mouth parted. He felt his two brothers scoot closer to look over his shoulder. On the screen, Feliciano's face was twisted in pleasure and back arched while combing his fingers through Ludwig's hair as the German's mouth had its way with him.

"Dude…"

The eldest glanced over at Oswaldo sympathetically, "I'm sorry, bro."

"Man, that Ludwig is going to town on Feli! Fuck, do guys really suck dick like that? If so, I've been missing out."

Seraph rolled his eyes, "Jesus Christ, Ber, really? Come on, Ozzie, shut it down." The oldest waited but his brother seemed frozen in shock. Sighing, he tried to close out of it but the movement seemed to awaken Oswaldo from his state.

Hands went to cover the screen as Oswaldo jumped from his chair, "Don't look!"

Bernardo bounced on the balls of his feet, "Aww, why not?"

"Because I fucking said so. This is bullshit," grumbled Oswaldo as he exited the feed and shut down the computers. "Fucking asshole does a thing like this to upset his fragile little heart and he
goes and spreads his legs for him."

His two older brothers had to bite their tongue from saying anything that could upset Oswaldo any more than he already was. They so desperately wanted to say something along the lines of how he seemed to like him ok at the cabin. Of course, his opinion might have changed because of what he saw. Shaking their head, they each looped an arm through his and led him out.

Quiet footsteps circled around the gates of the orphanage until they found a large fake boulder hidden amongst the rest. Inside contained a complex mechanism that created a magnetic field perimeter around the house that prevented gunfire from reaching it but promoted speed to bullets that were shot. A small silver box was placed inside to reverse the effect while on the other side of the house, welders worked on the iron gates. All six intruders waited until the welders finished before pressing their buttons on their mini EMP’s the shut down the cameras. As soon as they released, they moved in.

Inside, Nicola shifted in her bed before rolling onto her back. Her green eyes slowly blinked open only to find her sister staring at her. Nicola flinched back, "Sorella? What's wrong? Why are you in my bed?"

Marzia licked her lips nervously before whispering, "Don't you hear that?"

Trying hard to hear what her sister had heard, Nicola turned her back to her, "Go back to your bed. I don't-a hear anything."

"Exactly." Green eyes shot open again in realization. The clocks weren't ticking and their alarms weren't humming their soft song. Marzia showed Nicola her phone, "I tried calling fratellone but they aren't working."

A soft thud upstairs made them flinch. It was followed by a bullet piercing their ceiling until it went through their bed right in between them. Nicola's hand flew to the younger red head's mouth to keep her from screaming. She motioned for her to keep quiet, "We have to protect the children."

Marzia whimpered in response but Nicola shook her gently, "Don't be scared. We are Vargas; we are the ones who invoke fear."

The two women sat up in their bed and listened very carefully until they picked up on someone else quietly breathing in their room. Marzia's eyes widened when Nicola confirmed that they weren't alone. Motioning for her to stay quiet, Nicola carefully stood up and reached on the wall to pull out two sun rays from the family crest. She handed one to her sister.

On the count of three, they drove them through the mattress before sliding down Nicolas' side and tugging the top with them to create a shield. The elder redhead crept around and reached for another sunray.

"Who are you," she hissed, holding the ray to the man's throat, "How many of you are there?"

Marzia came around to rip the mask from the man's face only to reveal that their attack had already killed him. "Chigi!"

"We can use his phone," said Marzia as she quickly pulled out of his pocket and dialed Paulo.

"Call Babbo and Lovino, too."

Marzia did as she was told when she suddenly froze, "The boys were supposed to be here tonight."
Glancing up with tearful eyes, she whispered, "You don't think—"

"Of course not! Paulo's their dad. It'll take more than these bastards to kill them." Nicola quickly pulled on her clothes and went into her wardrobe to get her gun, "Come on, we need to get the children out safely." They heard movement outside their door and the two women positioned themselves next to it waiting to attack at whoever walked through.

Moving quickly, a gloved hand caught Nicola's just as it cut through the air with a blade to slice at whoever it was. Paulo shut the door and pressed a finger to his lips, "I was already on my way, here 'cause the alarm on my phone went off saying that power shut down around the block. What's going on?" He glanced over at the dead guy and inspected the body with a frown, "You need to get out of here. I'll take care of them."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Get out and get to a safe point. I'll call you when I'm done—" An explosion rang through the house cutting Paulo off. It was followed by children's screams and the Vargas siblings ran out to help them.

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Feli laid limply in bed, satisfied from his fiancé's amazing mouth. He glanced down at Ludwig who was now nuzzling the inside of his smooth thighs happily, "Liebling?"

"Hm?"

"I want to make love to you." Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Ludwig scooted up to kiss Feli as he continued to stroke his thighs, "I know it tends to hurt after you've come but I think I know how to make you relax enough for me to...you know. Will you let me try?" Still too caught up in his euphoria, Feli nodded sleepily. Ludwig grinned and kissed him on his moist temple before crawling back down. He propped the Italian's legs up and spread his perfectly rounded cheeks to expose his lover.

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Feli's eyes flew open when he felt Ludwig's tongue give playful licks around his most intimate places. Immediately he flailed his legs in embarrassment, "Wait!"

Ludwig paused and glanced up to show he was listening but didn't pull back.

"D-don't do that…"

Immediately pulling away, Ludwig furrowed his brow sadly, "You don't like it? I'm sorry, I didn't—"

Blushing, Feli covered his face with his hands, "It's not that...I do like it but—th-that's...isn't it dirt—ah!" Feli bit his lip to keep from crying out again when he felt Ludwig go down for more, "L-Ludwig!"

"Mm? It's not dirty, liebling. If you like it and I like it then it's alright, right? And look," slipping a lubed finger inside, Ludwig smiled, "you're relaxing enough for me."
"Ve…"

"Not to mention I like how flushed you're getting. You look cute."

Feli gave up and decided that if Ludwig wanted to do it, then he would enjoy it. It wasn't as if he'd never fantasized about it anyway. Gasping when he felt another finger enter him, Feli dug his heels into the mattress, "Okay, I trust you."

Groaning at the need in his lover's voice, Ludwig shifted until he was standing on his knees and lifted Feli's lower body with him, nearly folding him in half. Stopping suddenly, Ludwig demanded that Feli open his eyes before continuing. Golden eyes were trained on sapphire as the German slipped his fingers out to make way for his mouth. He kept his gaze on Feli as he lightly sucked at Feli's rim, barely applying any suction, mostly lips, before stiffening his tongue and pushing in, just a little to continue to work him open.

Feeling himself reawaken with interest, Feli swore and pushed back against Ludwig's face— he could feel him smile against him, breath coming out in harsh pants. This felt nothing like he thought it would, yet so much better. So far, he'd only ever had Ludwig and his fingers inside to release within him a penetrative pleasure. His tongue though…now that was very different; softer, wetter and—Feli bit his knuckle to keep from crying out as Ludwig pressed deeper, swirling his tongue and coaxing moans from his mouth. He bit into the pillow as Ludwig suddenly and rapidly plunged in and out of him before slowing again.

Just how long had Ludwig fantasized about doing this to him Feli would never know but right now he wasn't going to complain. Not with how he was so lovingly kissing around his hole before teasing it again, circling him and then sinking his tongue back inside. Feli cried out for Ludwig and he felt his smile again before repeating the motion seemingly just to have his fiancé call to him again.

When it wasn't quite enough for Feli anymore, Ludwig had to press him back down against the bed to keep him from thrusting against his face.

Feli pouted, "M-more, Luddy. Please!" Ludwig moaned in delight against him, shooting vibrations past Feli's rim and straight to his arousal. He stopped again and gently lowered Feli back down. Flushed and red lipped from his work, Ludwig promised to be quick before running to his bathroom to rinse his mouth and grab a bottle of lubricant before running back. He quickly climbed back on top of Feli and used one hand check that Feli was properly prepared for him and his other hand to coat himself before kissing his lover.

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A gratified moan escaped Feli's lips as Ludwig slowly entered him. Ludwig kept his eyes open to drink in every expression his lover made from the way his brows furrowed to the way his skin quivered. He reached down and lifted his legs again so that they could rest around his waist before moving slowly. His lover's welcoming heat squeezed and sucked him in greedily every time he pulled back.

Earlier he'd thought for sure that he'd never get the chance of being like this with Feliciano. That his beloved had just walked out of his life without knowing how much he loved him. It had killed the joy within him. However, that joy returned tenfold as soon as Feli had walked back in with Berlitz and said that he'd hear him out.

"Amore," mewled Feli in his ear, "faster, please."
Shifting his thrusts, Ludwig continued his languid pace enjoying drawing out Feli's moans as he was. But his beloved seemed to have found a way to renew his energy because at his refusal to do as asked, Feli flipped them around so that he was on top. Ludwig reached up to touch Feli wherever he could as he rolled his hips as he saw fit, coming down hard and fast on Ludwig's arousal.

Feli took Ludwig’s pale hands and placed them on his thighs while he set his own over Ludwig's pectorals. Renewed determination radiated from his eyes as he growled out, "You're mine, Ludwig."

Panting, Ludwig nodded.

"Say it."

"I-I'm yours, only yours."

"Ve~ and I'm yours, too."

Gripping Feli's thighs, Ludwig tugged on him until he fell to his side, the German slipping out of him. He pulled Feli towards him till his back was pressed tightly against his broad chest and propped one of his legs up so that he could slip back inside. His movements were more forceful this time, pulling moans from both of them. He groaned possessively, "Damn straight you're mine. Only mine."

Feli nodded desperately and reached around him to hold on to Ludwig's hip as he ground back to meet Ludwig's thrusts, "God, I love you, Ludwig! I love you!"

"I love you, too," whispered Ludwig sweetly into his lover's ear. Feli's eyes widened and he twisted out of Ludwig's hold so that he could face him. He buried his hand in Feli's red locks and kissed him deeply before gently pushing him onto his back.

The Italian wrapped himself around Ludwig and kissed him everywhere he could, while mouthing sweet nothings against his skin. Ludwig picked up speed until Feli came with a shaky cry and spilled himself in between their stomachs. He followed seconds later as Feli's muscles contracted around him. Legs trembling from his effort and hips still gently moving, he let them ride out their pleasure until it became too uncomfortable for either of them for him to continue. As careful as he was the first time they made love, Ludwig pulled out and settled down, or rather tried to. Feli refused to let go, so Ludwig had to lie on his side to accommodate his fiancé.

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He smiled and looked down at his ring. Fiancé. He had a new fiancé and he couldn't help but feel giddy at the fact that it was Feliciano. Glancing up shyly, he blushed, "I love you. I love you!" He laughed to himself at how amazing it felt to finally say it. He felt like he'd explode if he kept his feelings inside any longer. No wonder Feli was always telling him.

"Ve," cooed Feli and he smiled softly, "Do you like your ring?"

Ludwig nodded sleepily, "Ja. The fact that you made it and it has parts from people that we care about makes it all that more beautiful." And that wasn't a lie. His previous ring had been generic and unfeeling and heavy. This one was heavy too but in a way that provided comfort instead of dread. Good god, he was engaged to Feliciano! The realization finally settled and, he'd later deny this, it brought tears to his eyes.

"Luddy?" Feli noticed how Ludwig dipped his head so that his fringe could cover his eyes and gasped, "Amore, please, don't cry!"
"I'm sorry, it's just...all this time I've been so scared that I was going to lose you. Every day we've been together since you first started working at the hospital as my partner, I've been falling for you. That's why I pushed you away because I knew that as soon as I gave in, I wouldn't want to let you go. And then we finally did start dating and it was wonderful and it made me so happy, but every time I got an email or text from Natalya asking me for my opinion on something for the wedding, that fear and guilt would return. You didn't deserve that deception, liebling. I'm so sorry." Ludwig's tears came faster and soon his entire frame shook in sadness.

"And then Alex came into the picture. I saw how you were falling in love with him and despite my best efforts, I couldn't help but fall in love with him too. Then I started to see my future with you and it was perfect. And the thought of us not living that life was painful enough to make me realize that I wasn't going to marry her. When we got back from breaking the deal with her and her brother, and you had the ring...Willem told me that I needed to be honest with you and when I finally was...you left me."

Feli's heart broke but he pushed past it and embraced his fiancé to his chest, "I'm so sorry I did that."

"Nein," cried Ludwig with a shake of the head, "you had every reason to leave me. You still do. You could rip this ring from my finger and leave me and I wouldn't blame you. I don't deserve you."

"Stop it."

"What?"

"Stop saying those things because it's not true. You deserve happiness just as much as anybody. We both do." Feli wiped the tears from Ludwig's face, "There isn't anybody else I want, only you, to stand beside me. Ve, please don't cry, tesoro. I'm not going anywhere unless you want me to. Unless I hear from your lips that you don't want me anymore and that you want me far from you, I'm not leaving you again." He traced the pad of his thumb over Ludwig's swollen lips until they finally smiled softly.

Pecking them gently, Feli grinned, "Are you happy with me, now?"

"Of course." Ludwig pulled him in and tucked his chin over his head, "I love you."

"Ve," giggled Feliciano as he pecked his shoulder, "That's happy~"

"Ja, it is." Ludwig brushed a lock of hair from Feli's face and held him tighter. He was lucky and he damn well knew it. It was hard to say that he was a religious man but he knew a sign from above when he saw one and he'd be damned if he wasn't going to take advantage of this golden opportunity for redemption. Ludwi nuzzled his fiancé closer, "I love you," he whispered again.

"Are you still sad?"

"It's hard to stay upset when I'm with you," he replied honestly, "I'm feeling rather happy now, actually."

"Ve, good, cause I am too." Feli sighed contentedly, "I don't think there's anything in the world that could ruin this for us." Sleep was beginning to take over Feli, but Ludwig shook him awake.

"Come on, Liebe. We need to take a bath."

"Can't it wait?"
"Nein. Here, I'll tell you what, I'll go prepare us a bath and you nap. I'll come get you when it's ready." The German pulled away and stretched before going to the bathroom. He came back a few minutes later and plucked his little lover despite his protests. "Don't struggle, else I'll drop you."

Feli clung to his neck and giggled, "No, you won't. Ah! We forgot dinner." He pouted, "And I worked hard on it too."

"We'll reheat it when we're done." Ludwig carefully eased them both into the hot water and sighed as the heat relaxed their muscles.

The water had an opposite effect on Feli, who winced as soon as it made contact with his tender rear, "Ve…"

"I'm sorry!"

"No, it's ok. I'm fine…Heh, I like being like this with you. Wash me!"

Ludwig sighed in mock annoyance, "So bossy…fine, come here."

"Ve~"

After they were done washing, Ludwig refilled the tub with clean water so that they could soak for a while. It was something that Kiku enjoyed doing and had recommended for him to try after a particular stressful day at work. He traced the scar along Feli's stomach and the ones along his arms as the Italian dozed off against his chest. Gently running his hand along the length of his appendage, Ludwig brought it to his lips. The thought that this beautiful man had felt so lost that he no longer wanted to live tore at his soul.

"Did Seraph tell you about that too," mumbled Feli as he slowly woke up from his little nap. He frowned, "What didn't he tell you?"

"Don't be mad with him, liebling. He didn't mean anything bad by it."

"He didn't need to tell you about that though…"

Ludwig pulled him up and hugged him, not knowing how to approach the subject, so he gently tilted his face up for a kiss. The Italian melted against his lover as Ludwig’s tongue licked his lower lip for entrance. Feli granted it immediately and reveled at the familiar taste of their toothpaste. He blushed. Their toothpaste…it would only be a matter of time before they would be sharing more than that. Closing his eyes, he allowed for Ludwig to caress him as they continued to kiss lazily in the water.

Catching Ludwig's left hand, Feli pulled away to kiss it, "Ve, we should get out, amore. You still haven't eaten anything."

"Ok."

As they were drying off, Ludwig's house phone went off. He pulled on a pair of boxers before answering, "Hallo...Arthur?...Calm down, I don't under—what?!" His eyes widened in horror and they met with Feli's who froze in pulling on his sweater when he heard the fear in the German's voice. He rose an eyebrow in a silent question. "Ja, we're on our way!"

Feli watched as Ludwig reached for his clothes and coat, "Luddy? What's wrong? What did Arthur say?"
The German grabbed his keys, "Grab your coat."

Doing as he was told, Feli pulled on his boots as well, "Ludwig?"

"It's the orphanage, Feli. Your house is on fire."

It was disorienting, waking up to an explosion. Alex heard screams coming from around the house and smelled a familiar pungent odor. Next to him, Daniel had his three-year-old brother on his back. This wasn't happening…not again! Would he lose another arm? Feli and Ludwig wouldn't want him if he was that damaged! He hugged Kitty to his chest as tears swelled in his eyes.

"Alex," cried Daniel while shaking him, "We need to get out of here!" Sammy whimpered and buried his face in his brother's neck. "Alex!"

Shaking himself free from depressing thoughts, Alexander ripped the sheets off of him and pulled on his shoes. He also grabbed his bee shaped backpack and shoved the books Romulus gave him along with the key he gave him for safe keeping before nodding to his best friend, "Where's Megan?"

"I don't know but everyone's really scared. Come on!" Daniel took Alex's hand and tugged him towards the hallway where Marzia was leading a group of children down the hall. Nicola saw Alex and a handful of children. The Italian had Gino on her head while holding on to Johan; she beckoned them to follow but as soon as they took a step forward, a portion of the floor was swallowed by the flames.

Paulo managed to catch the two children that fell with it and pulled them up. As he moved to lift them, he felt a slight pressure on his head followed closely by something heavier. The two cats had used his head as leverage to jump over the gap in order to reach their masters' little one. Alex picked up Gino and looked at the adults, "W-what do we do?"

The Vargas siblings exchanged worried glances before Nicola remembered, "The secret room, bambino! Use it! It'll be fine. Just go now! We'll see you on the other side to bring you around!"

Alex took a step back when the flames licked more of the floor they were standing on. Gathering his courage, the boy nodded and motioned for the remainder of the children to follow him, "This way!" He pushed his toy chest away from the secret door, "Get in."

"Are you kidding?" One of the older kids, the ones that would usually pick him, shook his head, "We'll burn for sure if we go in there."

"No, trust me. Feli said that there's a door here."

"I will not! I bet it's his fault that our home is burning just like it was his fault that our first one burned too!"

Alex narrowed his dark blue eyes in anger, "Stay here then, but I trust him and I trust Ms. Nicola. If they said that this way is safe then it must be."

He kicked at the wall inside the small room until it opened. A dark corridor made of cool stone laid before it. The rest of the kids looked at each other before running through, Daniel turned around when he realized that Alex wasn't following them, "Ale—what are you doing?!"
The dark haired boy was shoving the journals into his backpack as well, sweat rolling down his face from the heat eating away on the other side of the wall. Grabbing a scroll of paper as well, he followed after his friend, stopping again only to shut the door in hopes to buy them some time from the flames. Gino hopped down from his head and ran ahead to guide them out. His black furred companion lingered behind to make sure Alex was keeping up.

Angry roars echoed in the dark corridor from the flames on the other side of the stone walls as it gnawed away in effort to reach them. After jogging as quickly as they could, they heard a loud pop from where they started, startling the group of children. The roars were getting louder and louder; they could feel the heat rush forward.

"Run," said Daniel as he wrapped an arm around his little brother to keep him from slipping and grabbed Alex's hand with the other. "Run!"

They scurried as fast as they could until they reached a wooden door. Panicked, Alex tried to open it but it was locked, "No…no! Help! Help us, please!"

"This is your fault," accused an older girl. "We never should have followed you! Now we're going to die down here!"

Alex bit his lip sadly but before he could defend himself, he remembered the key he had. It belonged to the journal Romulus had given him but…it was worth a shot. He slid the key to the slot and the door swung open. The children pushed and shoved until they were all safely inside, the two cats followed after them and Daniel slammed the door shut. Their breaths came out in frightened pants but they were relieved that they'd made it out.

Heat pressed against the door, making those who were pressed against it jolt in pain before stepping away. Alex smiled to himself happy that they were all safe. That is until a pair of boots came into his field of vision. Johan hissed viciously at the figure standing before them and the boy's smile quickly fell. Staring down at them was the most horrifying black mask he'd ever seen. The figure didn't speak when it reached out a gloved hand to grab them.

Feliciano and Ludwig cut past the long lines of fire trucks, ambulances, police cars, and reporters on the Italian's scooter. It had been a last minute decision but Feli had insisted that his scooter would take up less space and allow them to get to where they needed to be. He hadn't even bothered to lower the wedge to keep it from falling when he dismounted.

The sight of his childhood home in flames was tearing at his heart but the most disconcerting was that there was no sight of Alex. Feli caught sight of his mother and aunt and ran to them, "Mama! Zia! Where is he?"

"I-I don't know," cried Nicola as she pulled her son into a hug, "A hole appeared and I-told him and the other little ones to go through the secret chamber. They were supposed to come out via the garden shed but Marzia, Lovi, and I checked. They aren't there!"

Reporters shoved their way past the clearance line and ambushed the troubled Vargas, shoving their cameras and microphones in Feli's and Nicolas' face. Ludwig narrowed his eyes and stood protectively in front of them with his arms outstretched, "What the hell is the matter with you people? Get the hell out of here!"

"Mr. Beilschmidt, what is your relationship to the Vargas," asked a woman with tight curls, "Are
you and Miss Natalya looking to adopt? Will this fire impact the selection of a child—"

"You have five seconds to get out of here," growled Francis as he jogged over from his car. "This is a tragedy and you are all in the way of the solution! We will make a statement later. Get away!"

Alfred pulled away from his husband and pointed at the reporters just as angrily, "You heard him, scram! I hate having to pull the daddy card but I swear to god I will. I know most of you work for my old man's global network. It would be a damn shame for you to lose your career out of your disrespect for what's happening." More than a few reporters visibly paled and did as they were told. The others reluctantly followed.

Francis nodded to Alfred in gratitude before pulling his adoptive mother and aunt in his arms for comfort, "Mama, you three shouldn't be out here in the open like this…it's not safe." They stubbornly refused to respond to his words so he sighed and held them tighter. Around them the firemen were working in a frenzy to control the flames that for one reason or another wouldn't be tamed. The glare of lights from the emergency vehicles brought tears to Feli's eyes. He wanted to help the others take care of the wounded but was too distraught to move. Where was Alex!?

"Back away," cried the firefighters as they ran back out from the house.

Arthur let a hand go from its death grip on Alfred's jacket and brought it to his lips with wide eyes, "What's going on? Why are they pulling out?! Alfred! Our babies are in there!"

Beside them, Feliciano was gripping to Ludwig's hand just as hard, lips trembling as the same thought was going through his head, "Why aren't they coming out? Francis, where are the Hounds?!"

"They are looking for the missing children, mon cher," murmured the older man. "Trust that they find them before the bastards who did this do."

"What," screamed Arthur, "what the hell does that mean?!"

Alfred glared at the Frenchmen before rubbing his husband's shoulders, "It's ok, babe. They'll be fine."

"How can you be so bloody calm?! Our boys are—"

"Get back!" Firemen threw themselves at those around them to shield them from the flames that suddenly burst from every window and door in the house before everything collapsed. The fires reflected off Feli's amber eyes as tears swelled to point that he couldn't see anything but a bright orange light.

Letting go of Ludwig's hand, he ran forward, especially after seeing a pillar of fire erupt from the garden shed behind the house, "No, Alex!" He and Arthur ran towards the flames until they were tackled to the snow. The two men held each other and sobbed into the cold night. Their combined howls of pain startled the reporters to silence before pointing their cameras in their direction but not daring to come any closer.

Their hearts felt like a million tiny knives were being shoved into them. A whole future gone in the blink of an eye or rather gone up in flames. It was all Ludwig could do from keeping Feli from falling face first into the snow in his grief, the Italian had suddenly become incredibly heavy. But he wrapped his arms around his beloved, praying that they were assuming the worst and that the children were safe.

As the firemen returned to their battle, Arthur gave into his hysterics and joined Feli on the ground.
So loud were their wails that they didn't hear the soft crunch of snow close to them. A tiny shy hand reached out to Arthur and clung to his coat, "Papa?"

Arthur gasped and glanced up to be face to face with Sammy whose tear stained cheeks were dirty and ruddy from the cold. Like a toad, he reached out and plucked him from the ground to tuck him inside his coat to keep the chill away, "Thank goodness you two are alright!" Next to him, Alfred slid out of his own bomber jacket to rest it over Daniel. He huddled next to his family and whispered words of love and gratitude that everyone had made it ok.

The rest of the children made a beeline to Matron Megan and to the Vargas sisters for comfort. Feli's eyes scanned over every face until they landed on Alex who was lagging way behind the rest along with their two cats. Standing up on shaking legs, Feli ran to Alex and practically tackled him into a hug. He pulled him into his lap and held tight, whispering thanks to his father for watching over him.

"Thank god nothing happened to you, piccolino," cooed Feli as he buried his face into Alex's dark hair, "Thank god…" The two felt powerful arms wrap themselves around them and they sought out the warmth.

Ludwig held tightly to his small family, "We were so worried, Alex. Are you ok? Here, take this, it's cold." Quickly shrugging out of his heavy black coat, he slid it over Feli's and Alex's shoulders so that they could stay warm before hugging them to himself again.

As the firefighters finally began to control the flames, cameramen scooted a bit closer to get a peek of the Vargas family and Ludwig. Across the street, two black cars were parked away from the commotion but close enough to see what was happening. Ivan's violet eyes looked away so that he could see the live reports on his small screen inside his car. The camera shifted from the burning house to Feliciano who was now leading Ludwig and Alex to Mathias' ambulance, presumably to make sure that Alex was indeed uninjured.

A figure on a motorcycle watched with his group of men and a woman behind him. They were standing around him angrily. The woman stepped forward and discretely pressed her gun against his side, "What the hell are we going to do now? Someone beat us to it!"

Luciano didn't bother with raising his brow at this. It wasn't like they could see it with him wearing his helmet anyway. Instead, he gently reached out for her wrist, "Don't fret, bella." Flicking his hand backwards he made her drop her gun, "it doesn't suit you."

The woman winced in pain, "L-let me go!" She took a step back and held her wrist to her chest, "W-what is wrong with you?!

"Absolutely nothing. Now be gone…you've served your purpose."

"But—"

Raising his hand to silence them, Luciano pulled out his knife, "I've paid you to do nothing, isn't that lovely? Now leave." Turning back to the burning building, Luciano took a call, "Pronto…mama, ciao... I wish you were here mama, this is a thing of beauty… No, I didn't do it…not sure, but I'll find them and—what?! Why not?!...I see, I'll just sit back then, shall I?...No, I won't interfere but I can't promise I won't have some fun. And before you say anything mother, I know. I won't do anything stupid…Si, I promise. Ciao." Luciano hung up on his mother in annoyance and glared over at the Vargas. His eyes landed on Feliciano. He smirked, "Buon Notte, Feliciano. I'll be seeing you really soon."
Flicking his black motorcycle on, he drove past a black limo. Inside, Ivan gripped his Pinocchio, his eyes widening at the look on Ludwig's face as he reached down to kiss both Alex and Feli on their heads. His eyes darted to the German's left hand where a new ring was resting proudly, "Damn it."

The Russian pulled out his cell phone and hit his speed dial. As soon as it connected him to Dimitri, he smiled kindly, "I see you did as you were told after all...no, I am not...my sister? What does Natalya have to do with...I see...can it be tied back to you?...mhm....I see...Dimitri, next time you receive an order like this, I expect you to come to me first. My sister isn't the one in charge, I am. See that you don't cross me again or there will be trouble for you." Ivan shut his phone off and motioned for his chauffeur to drive as he carefully tucked his figurine into his breast pocket.

"I am sorry this had to happen to you, Feli," he murmured sadly.

A few blocks from there, Natalya glared at the television in her hotel. Beside her, Dimitri crossed his arms, "Looks like your brother wasn't pleased about the fire, Nat."

The Russian sat on her bed in a huff, "I'm not either. That brat was supposed to die, why didn't you kill him?"

Grey eyes widening, "You were serious about that?"

"Of course, I was; this was a waste of time and effort. The whole point was to drive Ludwig away from that idiot Vargas and all it did was push him towards him and—is that a freaking ring on his finger?!" Rushing towards the TV, she gripped at the sides, "He only broke the engagement yesterday...he's engaged again!"

"Jealous?"

"As if...but this will only make things harder for me to win him back."

"Eduard won't be happy about you planning these things without him."

"I could care less about his feelings."

Dimitri reclined in his chair, "Perhaps you should listen to him. The guy is pretty clever."

Natalya furrowed her brow in thought, "I'll think about it. For now, I want you to go through with what my brother originally asked you to do. Maybe if we go the old fashion way, this Vargas will be more inclined to listen to reason."

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It had been too loud in the waiting room, which is why Feli found himself staring out the window in the empty employee's cafeteria. Wolfgang and his grandfather had arrived and swiftly offered to bring them to the hospital where everyone was going to make sure the children were ok. His mother and aunt had gone home after he personally made sure that they hadn't been harmed. Beagle, one of his brother's men, escorted them home in the light that this had been a third attack on them. He scowled when he heard footsteps behind him, "Lov."

"And the rest of us," said Romulus as he and the rest of the Vargas men approached their heir. "We
"We do," agreed Feliciano as he finally turned around to lean against Oswaldo who had taken a seat next to him on the windowsill. Gathering his hands into tight fists, he glanced up, "I want to be kept up to date on this no matter how small the detail. These people have not only attempted on the lives of the children, Arthur's and Alfred's children, but they tried to harm my child. They've burned down our house and along with it, our memories. My father's… Find me the bastards who did this to our home."

Fixing his scarf he glared out the window again, "Find me the bastards who dared attack the Vargas."
Chapter Summary

In the fire's aftermath, Feli is determined to keep Ludwig and Alex safe but things will only get darker before they get better.

“Tch…stupid girl,” muttered Eduard under his breath as he watched a news broadcast on his laptop about the fire. Slamming the top shut, he ignored the incessant cries of his phone in favor of going to bed.

Natasha glanced up from her novel and smiled at her husband, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, dear. Don’t worry about it.”

“Did my siblings call you?”

“No.”

“Hm. Too bad, I’ve been trying to call Ivan to ask why my antibiotics were being shipped back. It’s saddens me that the company won’t be moving forward. And after all of Ivan’s hard work…he must be devastated.”

Eduard shrugged, “I’m sure he’ll find a way to get the deal back on the table. If not, well, perhaps you should consider taking over. With your personality and my brains, I think we could lift it off the ground.”

“Nice try,” Natasha giggled as she bookmarked her page and sat her book aside, “but my personality belongs in the lab. Someone has to charm those mean old viruses into behaving themselves. And besides, this company is all my brother has left of our mother. Even if he didn’t want it at first, I know that he loves it now. It’s our baby after all. All of ours.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes it feels more like it’s you three’s baby and not mine. I don’t get to have a say in anything you guys do.”

Snuggling next to her husband, Natasha sighed, “Don’t worry, my love. Your time will come. I’m sure of it.”

“Hm.”

“We’ll be ok. Just wait and see. Everything will sort itself out, right?”

“…yeah.”

Four blurry blue plus signs sat still on the white bathroom counter while the fifth one stared almost in pity at the girl who was holding it. Positive. Positive. Positive. Positive. Positive! Five freaking…

Lilly gathered plastic sticks into a brown bag and threw them in the waste basket. This wasn't—
how—why?! Why her? Why now! She was only nineteen for crying out loud and nowhere near ready.

A frightened sob escaped her mouth and she bit her lip. Vash was in the living room and would probably hear her if she started to cry. She didn’t want to tell him yet; she didn’t want to tell anyone. Thoughts of what her family might say about this crowded her mind but she stopped herself before she could let them overwhelm her. Now was not the time for panicking.

Licking her lips, Lilly eyed her phone. There was a new text from Emil; no doubt he wanted to know why she’d been avoiding him. And that was another thing…how would he react to this? Would he leave her? Would he be happy? Sad? Freaked out? Pissed? Would he hate her for ruining his life?

“I don’t think I could handle it if anyone hated me for this,” whispered Lilly to herself, warm tears trailing down her cheeks, “Mutti…what do I do?” The young German pressed her hand to her flat stomach. There was something in there and it would only be a matter of months before she wouldn’t have to worry about telling her family because they would be able to notice.

Lilly found herself draped over the toilet a few minutes later. Apparently, morning sickness wasn’t limited to the mornings. At least, not for her it wasn’t. She stood up slowly to wash her mouth of the bitter taste before making her way to her brother. The older man didn’t even move to show that her sudden plopping on the couch with him had had an effect.

Ignoring the discomfort in her lower abdomen, Lilly laid her head on Vash’s lap, “What are you doing, big bruder?”

“Researching the Vargas,” he said without taking his attention off his laptop screen. The blue glow reflected off his glasses making it seem as if he didn’t have eyes. Vash had been curious about his family’s relationship to the Vargas and tried to look them up. As luck would have it, the media was very selective about what they published about them. Mostly what he found had been articles in the Economic Weekly about their stock and business plans. Romulus and his son had been featured in a lot them especially when Paolo had taken a Blaze woman as his wife.

There had been other things as well, such as the fact that it was a Vargas who had united the founders of their small nation. And even though they hadn’t played a part at all in the creation of the actual government, they certainly helped in fighting off the armies of stronger nations that had wished to claim the Genovian territory as their own. Their loyalty and devotion to the infant nation was rewarded by granting them lands to which they declined, only to later accept when they returned to run their railroad through. Aside from a few sprinkles of articles here and there concerning the generic history that everyone already knew since first grade, the Italian family wasn’t mentioned in his university’s database at all.

Vash clicked on one while absently stroking his fingers through Lilly’s hair. He frowned and clicked his tongue in annoyance, “Damn it.”

“What’s wrong?”

Shutting down his laptop and setting it aside, Vash took off his glasses, “Have you ever used the Metatron database?”

“Is that the one that has everyone’s family history in? Well, the ones who’ve played a part in Genovia’s history.”

“Yeah, well I looked us up and it gives us hundreds of articles, old news clippings and stuff like
that. I saw some on Grandpa Amadeus and Uncle Elric.”

“Don’t call him that,” said Lilly with a scowl, “That man is not our uncle. Not after what he did to Monika.”

Vash nodded in agreement, “Ok. But listen, the point is that if I look up even the lesser known families I will still find dozens of items. However, when I look up the Vargas, there is only a very few good ones. The rest is nothing but gossip or conspiracy theories and most of them are about how they’re a part of something called the NGDs.”

“What’s that?”

“Supposedly some secret government agency but I’m not buying into those stories. Dad or the others would’ve told us about it.”

Lilly rolled on her back so that she could face her brother, “But if it’s a secret then why would they tell us? We’re not in the military like they were.”

“Because we’re family. If we can’t trust each other with secrets then who can we trust? Not to mention that most of these are ridiculous. According to one of the articles, Seraph and Oswaldo shouldn’t even exist because they supposedly died in a freak accident when they were on their way to a concert.”

“Hm, that’s silly.” Lilly turned on the TV and sat up abruptly, accidentally hitting her brother on the nose but before Vash could scold her, she raised the volume.

“Witnesses are saying that they heard an explosion around 8:45 this evening before chaos erupted here at one of the last historic houses in our beloved city. The Vargas household became a temporary orphanage after the devastating fire took Sacred Heart Orphanage. Officials are still uncertain if this fire and that one are related but speculation says that perhaps the Vargas have made new enemies.”

A picture of Feliciano and Ludwig holding hands with their backs turned to the camera replaced the reporter much to the shock of Vash and Lilly. Ivan and Natalya’s picture replaced it before the camera went back to the on-scene reporter. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and continued, “This is a terrible blow for—Hey!” Her face twisted in anger as the camera suddenly became shaky, “Let go of that! That’s station property. You can’t just—”

The broadcast was suddenly cut off, leaving behind the shocked faces of the news anchors and that was quickly replaced by a commercial.

Vash and Lilly exchanged glances, the former quirking and eyebrow, “What the hell was that?” They jumped when their phone suddenly rang. It was their cousin Lars alerting them not to go out.

Ludwig washed his hands and quickly dried them before administering a tetanus booster to Alex. He’d shoed away the nurses after Matthew had performed a checkup on the boy. In his escape, Alex had cut himself with a jagged piece of iron in the shed. Placing a bumble bee band aid over the puncture, Ludwig patted his arm, “Come on, let’s go find the others.”

Alex shyly slid his small hand into Ludwig’s giant one and walked next to him as the German led the way towards Matron Megan and the Orphanage’s Social Worker. Romulus, Feli, and Wolfgang were shaking hands with her and Judge Maxwell. The Elder Beilschmidt caught sight of his son and he winked discreetly, making Ludwig sigh in relief. It was times like these when he was grateful for coming from a family with influential power. He supposed having a father who once
held a government office did come in handy after all.

Down the hall, Arthur had yet to let go of neither Sammy nor Daniel but as soon as the little boy saw his best friend, Danny darted to hug him. Alex hugged back and asked, “Are you ok?”

“I should be asking you that,” cried Daniel, “Why did you take all those stupid books?”

“Books?” Ludwig carefully took Alex’s backpack from him and gasped at its weight, “Why didn’t you tell me this was heavy? I would’ve carried it for you.”

Alex tried to get it back, “I-it’s ok! I don’t mind carrying it.” He gave up after a while and chose to hold on to the scroll he was still clutching tightly to. Turning back to his friend, he whispered, “They’re Feli’s diaries. I couldn’t just let them burn.”

“I guess.” Daniel glanced up at Ludwig before lowering his voice to a whisper, as well, “What’s going to happen to us? Papa Arthur said that he’s not going to let ‘those bloody wankers’ take us from him… whatever that means.”

“Feli and Ludwig are going to take me home with them. I think your daddies are going to do the same with you guys.”

“And the others?”

“…Foster care, I think.”

Daniel dipped his head, “That sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“Will we still see each other?”

Alex shrugged before tugging on Ludwig’s hand. He asked, “Will I still get a chance to see Danny and Sammy when I go live with you and Feli?”

“I don’t see why not,” said Ludwig, “But right now we’re just going to let the dust settle before we decide on that, ok?”

Both boys weren’t sure what that meant but nodded anyway. When Feli walked up to them, Alfred and Arthur rushed to him with hopeful eyes. The Italian smiled tiredly and handed over an envelope, “Ve, you guys got custody of them and we have custody over Alex while the adoption process starts.” He yelped when Alfred suddenly pulled him in for a hug.

“Dude, you have no idea how much this means to us!” Tightening his embrace around his friend, he whispered in his ear, “If you need any help with—”

“You don’t have to thank me,” interrupted Feliciano. He squirmed out of the hug and gave Alfred a meaningful look, “Just promise to protect your family.”

“Don’t worry, man. They’ll be safe with me.” Alfred picked up Daniel and winked at Arthur, “They’re with a hero after all.”

Arthur rolled his eyes at his husband before addressing Ludwig, “Do you think your father will let me take a leave of absence to watch over them?”

“Of course, I would,” said Wolfgang. He and Romulus walked up to the two small families and smiled, “Take as much time as you need. Alfred, do you need time off as well?”
“I would feel more comfortable if I could have morning shifts so that I can be with my family at night if that’s ok.” Alfred shifted Daniel from one hip to another, looking at Romulus, “Is there any reason to believe that…”

Alfred trailed off with wide begging eyes that Romulus understood perfectly understood what he wanted. The older man nodded, “I can lend you one of my hounds if it would put you at ease. Whichever you want.”

“Doggy,” drawled Sammy sleepily. He tucked his head under Arthur’s chin and yawned before dozing off again.

“I’ll take the meanest one you have.”

“Done. I’ll send him over as soon as possible.”

Ludwig frowned. Why on earth would Alfred want the meanest dog? Wasn’t he afraid that it would bite the boys? He turned to Arthur in hopes that he would voice these concerns but to his surprise, Arthur was nodding in agreement. Shrugging, Ludwig and Feli bade their family and friends goodnight before heading back home in Lovino’s car.

He watched the two Italian brothers quietly discuss something in their native tongue before exchanging their good-bye kisses on their cheeks. Ludwig pulled out his keys but Feli shook his head, “He has to stay in my apartment, Luddy, since the social worker already inspected it and cleared it suitable for him to live in.”

“Ok.” The German opened the door anyway to whistle for his pets to come out and join them in Feli’s apartment.

As soon as the Italian’s door opened, Feliks pulled his best friend and Alex in for a hug, “Like, I saw what happened on the TV! Are you guys alright?”

Feli hugged back, “Yeah, they were able to evacuate all the children out. Alex is going to be staying with us from now on.”

“Really? That’s totes awesome! We’re going to have so much fun, little broski.” Feliks offered his hand out to the boy, “Come on, I already prepared the spare room for you.” He lowered his voice, “Let’s give your papas some time to get their bearings together.”

“C-can the dogs and cats come with me,” asked Alex bashfully.

“Like, totally! Come on, ya little munchkins. Alex wants your company.” Feliks tugged him along, “I’m more of a pony man myself but I don’t think I could keep one in the apartment.”

Feliciano watched Feliks escort Alex to the boy’s room as he shrugged out of his coat and shoes. When they were out of sight, he made his way down the hall towards his own room.

Ludwig followed after him, picking up all the clothes he was dropping on the floor until he had everything but his fiancé’s boxers. He was about to scold him and tell him to put some clothes on but Feli was already tugging on a pair of flannel sleeping shorts and his old college t-shirt.

“What a night,” said Feli after a while. “What do you want from your drawer?”

Ludwig dismissed Feli’s robotic behavior on how stressful his day had been. Guilt poked at him for he had been partially to blame for Feli’s mood. Warm arms pulled him close and the Italian stood on his tip-toes to kiss Ludwig’s jaw, “I’m ok, bello, just…really worn out. Change so we can
Doing as he was told, Ludwig joined Feli in the guest room where Alex had changed into one of Feliks’ old My Little Pony t-shirts. It was far too big on him and looked more like a gown than anything but Alex had been content because there were little bumble bees on them. Felix had helped him remove his prosthetic before leaving to give the family some privacy.

Feli gave his friend his goodnight kiss and sat on the edge of the bed next to a sleeping Alex. The poor boy had been so emotionally and physically exhausted after the night’s events that he had passed out as soon as his head hit the pillow. He unconsciously clutched Aster to his chest, his brow furrowing in manifestation of whatever was plaguing his dreams.

Feeling his own brow crease, Ludwig reached out to hold Alex’s hand. With his other hand, he smoothed back the boy’s black hair and whispered, “It’s ok. You’re safe.” When that didn’t do anything, Ludwig glanced over at his beloved. To his surprise, the Italian had a distant look to his face. Clearing his throat to get his attention, he motioned to Alex, “I think he’s having a nightmare.”

Clarity returned to Feli’s eyes and he laid down next to Alex. Running a hand soothingly over the boy’s back, he cooed, “It’s ok, sweetheart. I’m here. From now on I’ll always be here.” Alex made a sad pout in his sleep and whimpered but Feli was quick to soothe away the lines gently with the back of his knuckles. He sung softly to him, “Come stop your crying, it’ll be alright. Just take my hand, hold it tight. I will protect you from all around you. I will be here, don’t you cry.”

As he watched his fiancé soothe their soon to be child, Ludwig felt like he was floating and grounded at the same time. He wondered if his father had felt the same whenever he and his mother were baking together when he was a child. Domestic bliss is what his older brothers had called it. If this was a sample of what was to come, minus the fires, then Ludwig could hardly wait to be wedded to Feliciano and have the adoption go through for Alex. He extended his arm to drape over the two protectively as Feli continued to softly sing the lullaby.

With a kiss to the forehead, Alex’s face relaxed and he let out a coo of his own, making both men smile at each other over his head before getting up and going to Feli’s bedroom. The Italian curled up next to his beloved and fell asleep with a content

Ludwig waited until Feli’s breaths evened out before carefully slipping back out of bed. He padded over to the living room where they had left Alex’s backpack and scroll. His cat eyed him with disapproval from his perch next to Gino on the cat tree and he rolled his eyes, “I’m not being nosey, I’m just…curious.”

The feline gave him an unimpressed look before curling up next to his companion. Huffing, Ludwig settled in the couch and pulled out one of the leather journals. It really wasn’t all that bad, right? These were practically ancient and a part of him really wanted to know more about Feli’s depression. It was clear that the Italian felt ashamed about that part of his life and would not open up to him about it even if he begged.

“It’s just so that I can understand,” said Ludwig to himself. He turned on the lamp next to him and opened the book to a random page.

May 30, 2004

Ok, so I’m really not supposed to be back in here but I couldn’t stay away. My brothers and I decided to use our money to put Eric through school ‘cause we don’t want him to do what we’re going to do. He’s too delicate for it. Not saying that my brother can’t throw a punch cause I’ve
seen how he nearly tore that kid a new one when…never mind. The only reason I’m back was because I needed to see Feliciano again.

Ludwig jolted back like he’d been electrocuted. This wasn’t Feli’s journal…it was Oswaldo’s! Looking around him to make sure that he was still alone, he looked back at the text wondering if he should keep reading. A part of him wanted to shove the journal back into the pack and go back to bed but a smaller…more possessive part of him wanted to keep reading to figure out just how far Oswaldo’s affection for Feli went. He opened the journal again to the same page and continued to read.

I was trying to move on but in trying to convince myself that I no longer loved him, I started to think back to when I first realized what he was doing to me. Not to say that he was doing it on purpose. I don’t think he would ever do something like that to us.

Anyway, I realized that I had always loved him. Since the beginning of time when I first heard his laugh…when I first felt his pain. Of course, we were so young so I didn’t know what I was feeling. And like I said in what I thought was going to be my final entry, I think, Journal, that you are more than aware of how much I love him. Damn, it’s taking him forever to come into our secret room…should’ve tied the note on his dog instead of the cat.

Welp, guess that just means that I can talk to you about this crazy dream I had about him. It was so damn vivid that I couldn’t just not see him, you know? Seraph and Bernardo said that I shouldn’t have come back, and this is probably the last time I’ll attempt it, but I can’t get over how soft his body felt against mine or how beautiful his face was or how he wrapped himself around me and depended on me to get him to heavens gates.

Again, Ludwig jolted back though this time he felt relatively angry. No, not at Feli but at Oswaldo for daring to have a dirty dream about his beloved. It was stupid, he knew, because first of all it was just a dream and second of all because this happened to a teenaged Oswaldo when he couldn’t control his hormones yet. Against his better judgment, the German opened the book again and continued where he left off.

And how his hips melded perfectly with mine every time he tried to meet my thrusts. Oh! He’s here. Be right back.

To Ludwig’s horror, the entry was cut off and wasn’t continued leaving him feeling irrationally jealous and—

“Anxious to know what happened?” Oswaldo, dressed in nothing more than flannel pajama pants sat across from Ludwig in Feli’s favorite chair with a bottle of root beer. His high cheekbones were dusted pink as if he knew what Ludwig had been reading but aside from that he didn’t look the slightest bit ashamed.

Instead of answering, Ludwig raised an eyebrow, “What are you doing here?”

“Feli’s letting me stay here until my brothers find us an apartment of our own.”

“And hotels are not an option?” Had Ludwig been in a clear state of mind, he doubted that the question would’ve sounded as hostile as it did.

But Oswaldo didn’t seem fazed by that either and simply shrugged, “Guess old habits die hard and I prefer my angel’s company than solitude. Nothing happened by the way.” At the German’s blank stare, Ozzie rolled his eyes, “Between my angel and me; nothing happened that night. He found me and we talked…cuddled for a bit then I went back. I freed him so to speak.”
“Freed him?”

“Told him that he didn’t have to wait for me, that it was best if he didn’t wait for me. After all, why risk going to hell for being involved with me when there are so many other things one could go for.”

“Feliciano isn’t going to hell,” growled Ludwig, not that he particularly believed in such things but if it did exist, he highly doubted that Feli would go to such a horrid place.

And it seemed that Oswaldo agreed because he nodded with a hum, “You’re right. An angel like him belongs in heaven where he can touch the stars to his heart’s content.” He took a gulp of his drink with a smirk then asked, “What’s the matter Beilschmidt?”

“I love him. He asked me to marry him and I agreed.”

“Broke up with your fiancé, did you? Well, that’s good. I was afraid that I’d have to seriously harm you if you hadn’t.”

Ludwig ignored him and narrowed his eyes, “He’s mine now and I don’t want you to interfere.”

“What makes you think I’d do something like that? I love him too, potato bastard, and he was mine before he was yours. Be happy that I backed down and didn’t tell him about you and that bella.”

Looking rather distressed for a moment, Oswaldo leaned back in his seat and stared at the ceiling, “Be happy that I love him enough to know when to back down and let him have a shot at real happiness.”

Returning his gaze to Ludwig, Ozzie snorted, “I’m not going to interfere because Feli would only get upset with me. And as I’m sure my big brother already told you, I wouldn’t do anything that would compromise my angel’s happiness. Just because it isn’t with me doesn’t mean that I don’t want to see him happy and I know you make him happy so…enjoy, I guess, and treat him well because I will hurt you if you break his heart again.” He swallowed the rest of the root beer before getting up but Ludwig called out to him again.

Flushing furiously both in embarrassment and annoyance that he was going to ask Oswaldo of all people, Ludwig stood up as well, “How do I do it?”

“What makes you think I’d do something like that? I love him too, potato bastard, and he was mine before he was yours. Be happy that I backed down and didn’t tell him about you and that bella.”

“Of course, you are.” The Italian offered him a genuine smile this time, “You fucking knitted him a shawl with all his favorite constellations and…he’s told me about all the things you do that make him happy.”

“Like what?”

Smirking again, Oswaldo went into Feli’s office, “Where’s the fun in just telling you? If you really want to know, ask him. I’m sure he’d be more than happy to tell you.” He paused before adding, “But in all seriousness, just keep doing what you’re doing. Believe me when I say that you’re doing a good job in keeping him happy.” Without another word, Oswaldo quietly shut the door behind him, leaving Ludwig to mull over his advice.

In his own high rise, Lovino was going in and out of consciousness on the couch as he waited for
his boyfriend to return. His sleep was restless; the threat was still out there and if something were to happen to Antonio, he didn’t know what he’d do. The blood rushed from his head when he suddenly sat up at the sound of their door opening. Antonio entered stiffly and tossed his keys into the bowl and leaned against the door with his face in his hands.

The Italian frowned at this and walked over, “Where the hell have you been? I’ve been calling your sorry ass for hours now! Are you ok?”

Antonio stepped away from Lovi before he got a chance to embrace him, “Lovi…”

Not paying much mind to him, Lovino continued, “There was another fire tonight at the orphanage. My mom and the others were able to get them out but a lot of our men that were stationed there were killed.”

“Lovi.”

“This is really starting to piss me off because the old man said that stuff like this would happen but so far Acidanthera is the one doing the dirty work. We need to find a way to tie this back to those damn Russians, else we won’t have an excuse to make our move.”

“Lovino,” said Antonio again more forcefully but Lovi ignored him.

“What frightened me though was my stupid brother…something’s changing in him and I don’t like it. I think even Grandpa noticed. You should’ve seen him, Tonio.” The Italian brought his finger to his lip in thought, “Something dark got inside him tonight.”

Shaking his head, Lovi tried to embrace his boyfriend, “Anyway, there’s going to be a dinner at the Villa next week to celebrate my brother’s and Willem’s union and for Moni and Licia’s engagement, and I guess also for Feli’s and the potato bastard’s engagement. Hell, I think it’s also to welcome Alex to the fam—”

“Lovino,” growled Antonio as he shoved the Italian away from him, “will you shut up for once?!”

Stunned silence followed before Lovino narrowed his eyes, “The fuck did you just say to me?” He put some distance between them and crossed his arms over his chest, “You don’t answer a single damn call or return a single fucking text message on a night that I fucking need you and when you finally do arrive and I need you to listen, you fucking tell me to shut up? Fuck you, Carriedo.”

Antonio didn’t say anything but a dullness overtook his usually cheerful face. He moved to stand close to their fireplace and stared at the flames.

“What happened out there? Did your grandma say something to you again?” Lovi scowled when his Spaniard didn’t say anything, “Chigi! Why aren’t you answering?” Taking a deep breath, he softened his gaze at his now shivering boyfriend. “I’m sorry. It’s just that, with everything that’s been happening tonight. With our guys dropping dead at the hands of these bastards, I was scared that something happened to you.”

He hugged Antonio from behind and held him tightly, “I was scared that I was going to lose you, damn it! Please, say something. Look, even Mico and Saul are sad that their…that their p-papi is sad.”

As if to confirm this, their two cats came up to lightly headbutt their master on his leg. This only made Antonio release a sour laugh which startled the cats away. Even Lovi pulled away at the sound. Frowning again, he said, “Antonio, what the hell is—”
“I can’t do this,” breathed Antonio bitterly, though Lovi wasn’t sure if he was talking to himself or him. Before he was able to ask, the Spaniard finally turned around and glared at him, “I can’t, Lovino. I can’t keep pretending that I love you.”

Crack.

Lovi could feel the damn lines going down his heart, chest clogging up like someone was pouring icy cold cement into his lungs. Now, he’d been shot, stabbed, and beaten up and for the most part, none of that could compare to how badly this was hurting him. He blinked back tears and shook his head, “I—what…what are you—”

“I can’t believe I’ve held out as long as I did,” interrupted Antonio, all form of affection vacant in his eyes. “My grandma even commented on how I was able to stand you and your rude manners. I ask myself the same thing now that I think about it. It’s no wonder that your Grandpa chose your brother instead of you as his successor. You’re a shitty person with a shitty attitude.”

Thoughts were racing through Lovi’s mind as he tried to figure out why Antonio, the man who laid the world at his feet and would hold him in his arms, would say such hurtful things. Then it hit him. Rushing over to the Spaniard he ripped open his shirt in hopes to find a wire on him that the enemy might’ve strapped on him but…nothing.

His olive skin was bare save for the sun tattooed on his shoulder and his own family’s symbol along his sides. Antonio grabbed Lovi by his wrist and sneered, “We’re not being spied on. It’s just me.”

“Wh-why?”

The barest of flickers of his old Antonio showed through when Lovi finally let the tears rush to his eyes but it could’ve just been the fire’s light playing tricks on his hopeful heart that this was just a bad dream. Antonio pushed him away, “I already told you. I can’t pretend that I love you. I—”

Click.

Antonio froze at the sound of the safety being released from a gun. He turned around and saw that Lovi was pointing his pistol at him with a shaking hand. His teeth were bared in an angry grimace and his brow furrowed but the tears were now cascading his cheeks, “Get the fuck out of my apartment, bastardo.”

“Y-you won’t shoot me, tomate.”

“Don’t you fucking call me that! You lost that right when you decided to play with my heart.”

“What heart,” spat Antonio, “You don’t care about me…you don’t care about anyone that’s not your stupid family.”

“They were your family too. Everyone loved you.”

“Did you?”

“The fuck do you think! You f…” Lovi was losing his ability to speak along with his ability to stay calm as hysteria was quickly overtaking him. The pain was wearing down his resolve but he tried his best to hold back out of fear of what he could do should he lose control. Glancing back up he took a step forward, “Get out.”

“That’s for the best,” said Antonio but instead of leaving he went to their bedroom. Or rather, he
tried, a bullet whizzed by him creating an invisible wall that kept him from going any further. A look of genuine surprise washed over his face.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going, asshole? You don’t get to take anything with you, not even your fucking cat or fucking turtle. On second thought, take the damn turtle. I hate it almost as much as I hate you!”

The Spaniard didn’t move. Apparently, he was still in shock that Lovi had actually made good on his threat, “You shot at me…”

“Take another step forward and I won’t miss. Now get out. I won’t fucking say it again.”

Thinking it was for the best, Antonio grabbed his turtle and keys. He paused at the door, “Lovi… I —” He was unable to get anything else out because Lovi grabbed him harshly by the arm and shoved him out before slamming the door shut in his pained face.

“Fuck him,” screamed Lovi. He tore across the apartment, breaking and shattering everything that was in his path. The cats rushed to their tree and out of harm’s way just as Lovino grabbed the potted tomatoes and ripped them out of the soil. Stomping on the ripe fruit, he screamed and cursed until the anger exhausted him and all that was left was fumes of despair.

Feli found himself blinking rapidly in the corridor of his childhood home. Everything was gray as if he’d entered a black and white film. Feli rubbed his arms nervously and wandered down the marbled floor and into the library, “Ve? Is anyone here?”

The library looked exactly as it did when he was a boy. His father’s textbooks and notes were still laying on the desk as if he’d just gotten up for a break. Feli touched the page it was on before taking a seat to read the passage. He was halfway through the first paragraph when he heard a loud thump.

Startled, he leapt from the chair and cowered behind it, staring at the door in fear as the handle jiggled violently. The Italian wondered if he should speak out but thought against it when the door swung open. In his effort to dive under the desk, he scraped his forearm but he managed to keep his frightened whimpers to himself. Quick paced footsteps thumped near the desk and he covered his mouth when the chair was shoved to the side.

To his relief, it hadn’t been a monster of his past but rather himself and Lovi. The two were giggling as they hid right next to him.

“Ah,” sighed Feli with a chuckle, “It’s just bambini. Ciao, little me~” Neither child made any inclination that they heard or saw him. He smiled as the two children whispered to each other in Italian. The door opened again and if memory served him correctly, it was no doubt—

“I wonder where my two beautiful boys are,” said Cesare loudly. Feli’s heart sped up when he heard his mother respond in the same tone. They sounded so happy. “Are they…here?!”

A handsome face with boyish features came into Feliciano’s field of vision. Thin rimmed glasses threatened to fall off Cesare’s freckled Venetian nose but he didn’t seem to mind. His sole attention was on his two sons who were now squealing in joy and latching onto his legs.

Feli remembered this day. It had been the last day of perfect peace their family would ever have. Scrambling to get up in order to follow after his family, he froze when his dad motioned for the little ones and his mom to go ahead without him before closing the door. Feli frowned. This wasn’t how this was supposed to go.
To his surprise Cesare removed his glasses and spoke in sad Italian, “I’m so sorry, son, but you can’t join us.”

“You can see me,” asked Feli unsure whether he felt excited or upset. One thing for certain, the bubbles in his tummy were making him feel really uncomfortable. He tried to reach out to touch his dad but what Cesare said next stopped him cold.

“And I’m sorry that I can’t be there to guide you through what will surely feel like hell.” Like the burners in gas ovens, flames engulfed the library releasing a horrid stench of flesh burning.

Feli cried out in horror and tried to escape but his dad reached out for his forearm and gripped him tight. His beautiful face now looked decayed and horrifying just as it did when they found the body. Hazel eyes were gouged out and black slime oozed from his rotting teeth, but his voice still held that tender tone that sent Feli’s feelings into whiplash.

“Things are not as they seem, son. The devil loves details because people easily overlook them which is why he hides there.” Grabbing Feli’s shoulders, Cesare shook him firmly, “You’re going to be a king, son. You have to be strong for what’s going to come.”

“Wh-what are you—what’s going to come?!”

“Don’t trust everything you see, Feli.” He jerked around as if he heard something before getting swallowed by the flames.

“No! Babbo,” screamed Feliciano before the flames ate the floor below him. He held on to the floor boards for dear life, wincing as the fire licked at his legs. He saw someone reach out to him but the hand went through his and pushed him down. Instead of being consumed like his father, he landed on a hard surface. It was dark again and all trace of there having been a fire was gone. A bright light shined down on him and he realized that he had actually landed on a huge mosaic of his family crest.

Tiny glass squares of various golden and red hues made the sun and V. Feli grasped his head; he’d seen this version of his crest before…but where?

“I want to wake up,” he whimpered, “Please, Luddy, wake me up. Please! I’m scared.”

Dark chuckles resonated around the room, mocking him for his desperate pleas, “There was once a prince who sat on a wall. Little Prince Feli had a nasty fall.”

Feli swallowed thickly. He knew that voice. He heard it that night when he found out about Ludwig and Natalya but he’d played it off on his emotional distress. The room seemed brighter now, light illuminated the fact that the walls were made of mirrors. He picked himself off; his legs aching from both the flames and the fall.

“Ve, leave me alone!”

“And all the king’s doggies and all the king’s friends couldn’t put the young prince’s mind together again.”

“God, shut up. I got rid of you once and I’ll do it again!”

“Is that really what you want,” asked the voice. The Italian grabbed at his hair, fighting to not hit his head against something to get the voice out. He shut his eyes tightly and tried to wake himself up but that only made the voice chuckle again.
“I still can’t believe that you’re the clan’s heir. Why would grandpa pick such a pathetic, cowardly boy to be a prince of his mighty empire? How are you going to lead a family as great as the Vargas when you can’t even see where you’re going?”

Feliciano opened his eyes and glared at his reflection, only to bite back a scream. His face looked almost as bad as his father’s only he was missing his left eye. The left was tinged with black around his iris like some form of demonic being was staring back. His reflection offered a twisted smirk, if he could even call it that. It was the most horrifying thing he’d ever seen.

Backing away, Feli tried to pinch himself awake, “You’re not real. This isn’t real! I’m going to wake up and everything will be alright. Si, I’ll wake up and I’ll make some pasta and Ludwig and Alex will be there and—”

“And what, prince,” spat his reflection, “Are you going to pretend that I don’t exist? Cause I do. I very much do and it’s only a matter of time before your precious Ludwig realizes what kind of monster you are. He won’t forgive you for putting him and Alexander in danger. He’ll leave you and go crawling back to that girl.”

Feliciano was clawing at his skin now, “Damn it, please! I’m happy right now, please don’t ruin it for me. Please…”

“Please! Please,” mocked his reflection cruelly before giggling. “I’m your best friend and it’s only a matter of time that you succumb to me. Don’t worry; I’ll be sure to scratch at your walls to remind you that I’m still there when you think I’m gone. I won’t leave you.”

“But I want you to!” Feli turned his back on the reflection and sat back down on the sun but stood up again and backed up into the mirror when it cracked down the middle. Rancid blood oozed out through the cracks and made a small ravine towards Feli’s bare feet. “Wh-what’s going o—Ah!”

Arms wrapped around his mid-section and the voice yelled into his ear, “Long live the king! Long live the king!” It repeated over and over and over, every time the voice changing its pitch from high to low until it finally growled out, “Fuck the Vargas, long live the king! Haha! Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are.”

“No,” screamed Feli as he fought against the arms around him.

“Up above the world so high—”

“Stop singing!”

“Like a diamond in the sky.”

“Ludwig, help me!”

“Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder when you’ll die!”

Feliciano woke up paralyzed with fear. His clothes had been soaked through and somehow he’d fallen onto the floor. Ludwig was beside him, his hands on him as if he’d been trying to wake him up, trying his best to say something, Feli parted his lips but the barest of whispers was all he managed to get out.

“Shh,” said Ludwig soothingly. He held him close and kissed his hair, “You were having a nightmare but it’s over now. You’re ok, I’ve got you.”

“O-outside.”
“What?”

“I want to go outside,” croaked Feliciano with an attempt to get up.

“You can’t, Leibling.” Ludwig stood up and picked Feli up bridal style, “You’re soaked in sweat. Going outside will only make you hypothermic. I’ll give you a bath first and, if it’s some fresh air you want, we’ll step into the balcony for a minute.”

“I just want to see the stars, Luddy.”

“Does the ceiling work in the bathroom like it does in here?”

“No.”

Sighing, Ludwig sat Feli back in bed and reached for the remote to make the ceiling light up with feed from outer space. He laid down and pulled his fiancé back with him until he was resting on his chest. The effect of the stars was instantaneous; Feli’s breath calmed down and he could feel him relax.

Ludwig ran his hand soothingly under Feli’s shirt in hopes that direct skin contact helped soothe him further, “Are you feeling better?”

“A bit…thank you.”

Ludwig breathed out in relief, “That’s good to hear. Do you want to take a bath now?”

It took a moment for Feli to respond but before Ludwig could ask again, he responded, “Yes, please.”

Without another word, Ludwig took him into the bathroom and started to run a bath. Feli stared into space and didn’t even realize when Ludwig undressed him and lowered him into the bath. Taking a small dish, he poured water over Feli’s hair, washing him the best he could before pulling him out of the bath and wrapping him in a warm towel.

He carried him back and gently sat him down on the bed, “I’m going to get you some clothes, ok?”

“I don’t want them tonight. Could I just sleep like this? You can take off yours too if you want.”

Ludwig blushed, “You…is that something you want me to do?”

“Ve, please?” Feli gave a tiny smile when Ludwig started to remove his clothes and climbed back into bed. He instantly clung to his larger body, hooking his leg over his hip and sliding the other in between the German’s, “You’re so good to me, Luddy. Thank you for taking care of me.”

“I’ll always take care of you,” assured Ludwig as he instinctively wrapped his own arms around Feliciano. Licking his lips, he pulled him tight against him before asking carefully, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“About what?”

“Your nightmare.”

“Oh, um, I don’t really remember it very well anymore,” lied Feli. He nuzzled his face against Ludwig’s chest and sighed, “But, Luddy?”

“Hm?”
“Promise me you’ll always love me.”

“Of course, I’ll always love you.”

“No matter what?” No matter what I become or have to do, he wanted to say but couldn’t bring himself to.

Frowning, Ludwig pulled back only enough to be able to meet Feli’s eyes. “No matter what? Feli, I don’t think there’s anything that could happen or you do that will keep me from loving you. You know that…right?” Then it hit him. Of course, he was having nightmares. After a night like the one he had, one full of trauma, it was no wonder that he was acting as he was. Guilt washed over him again. “I love you, Feliciano Vargas. I’m going to marry you and no matter what, I’m always going to love you. We’re going to live together, love together, and grow old together. And when it’s time to part ways, remember that it’s only temporary because when two people love each other as we do, nothing in the universe can keep them apart.”

“Promise?”

Instead of answering, Ludwig ran his nose along Feli’s and whispered that he did before pressing his lips against his beloved’s. He intended for the kiss to be a short sweet one but Feli quickly changed those plans when he slipped his tongue past his. Not that he was complaining.

Nimble fingers raked through blond hair as Feli all but tried to meld himself to Ludwig’s body. The kiss itself was full of promise. Promise that they were still there in their reality and no longer in a world of dreams. Promise that they indeed love other and would forever continue to love each other. And, on Feli’s behalf, that it was going to take more than a fire and a monster’s half assed attempts to break him again.

He pulled Ludwig on top of him without breaking their kiss and rolled his hips upward hoping that his lover would understand what he wanted. He did. Through his haze and pleasured gasps, he silently vowed to do whatever it took to bring down those who were tormenting his family and threatening the lives of those he loved.

“Come on,” muttered Godfrey into his cell, “Come on bastard, pick up!” He exchanged glances with Collins who raised an eyebrow in question. Godfrey shook his head before glancing at the television broadcasting the fire on the Vargas home that was serving as a temporary home for the orphans.

“Do you think it was him,” asked Collins.

“I don’t know. His loyalty to the cause has been rocky at best ever since that damn Vargas implied that he was going to get a promotion. The bastard…”

“Who are you calling a bastardo?” Luciano eyed both men in their suite as he lazily twirled his knife. He smiled at them.

“Who the hell are you?”

“A harmless bystander, and I’m using the definition of harmless very loosely.”

Collins reached out for his office’s phone, “Get out before I call secur—” Gasping when a knife pinned his sleeve to the wall, he turned to Luciano.

“Whoops.”
“You’re mad!”

The Italian frowned, “Mad? No, I’m not mad. Though, my mother may be disappointed. Maybe a tad put off?” He walked closer to the two older men, his curl bouncing along with every step.

“You’re a Vargas,” hissed Godfrey as he hung up his phone.

“Fuck no, I’m not!” Luciano’s face twisted in anger. “I may look like those sons of bitches but I’m nothing like them. You will do well to remember that.” He turned to the TV and sneered, “Look at that. See that? That’s art. *That* is someone who is serious about sending them a message.”

“Nobody died.”

“Maybe so but…” Luciano trailed off to listen to what the reporter had to say. She was pointing to the rubble behind her and explaining what the firefighters were speculating had happened. What caught his attention however wasn’t what had caused the damn thing but the rubble itself. Remains of red paint in familiar curls and sweeps of a flower stood out, “Are you positive you or the other guy didn’t do this?”

“No!”

“Hn.” Curiosity piqued, Luciano plucked his knife from the wall and dropped a flower onto the table as he walked away without so much a word to the two confused men. He had questions that needed answers.

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The next day, Natalya found herself eating breakfast alone at the hotel’s restaurant. Ivan didn’t want anything to do with her at the moment and Dimitri went to run an errand. She sighed to herself, flipping through her magazine until she stopped at a spread featuring M.B Designs with Felicia Vargas as a model. Annoyed, Natalya took out a pen and started to draw on the Italian’s grinning face.

“You certainly don’t do things by halves,” cooed Luciano as he took a seat across from her. He looked at the horns and blacked out teeth on Felicia’s face and stifled a laugh, “Crude but it gets the point across.”

The Russian glared at the intruder and picked up a butter knife, “Who the hell are you? Get out of that seat!”

“Oh? You’re expecting someone?”

“Well, no, but my brother could always show up.”

“Right, put the knife down before you hurt yourself.” Luciano smiled sweetly to the waiter as she brought out Natalya’s food. She blushed and nearly spilled the Russian’s coffee before asking him if he’d like anything. “I’d say you but I’ve already had too much sugar. Anymore and I might go into insulin shock.” Winking, he nodded to what his dining companion was having before handing over his menu, making sure to brush his hand against hers.

Natalya rolled her eyes, “You men are all the same. Shameless pigs, every single one of you.”

“Surely, we’re not *all* that bad.”

“No, but none of you can match the gentlemanly perfection that my big brother is.”
“Well I have a guy back in Spain that would argue on my behalf.”

“Good god, are any of you straight?”

“Well the human spine does have a natural curve to it so, technically, no one is straight, but I fail to see what that has to do with the company I choose to keep?” Luciano reached over and plucked a strawberry from Natalya’s waffle, popping it into his mouth. “Though hearing you talk, one would think that you prefer the beautiful ladies yourself.”

Natalya took a bite from her waffle, chewing the fluffy morsel thoughtfully. Swallowing, she nodded, “I guess I wouldn’t mind. So long as she was tall, had thick thighs and a soft belly but still strong. She’d have to love sunflowers and wear long white scarves.”

As she continued to list qualities her dream girl would have, Luciano’s eyes followed Ivan as the Russian scurried out of the hotel, white scarf flowing behind him. “Tch, you certainly have a type. Is the person you hold as your standard the reason why you ordered the Vargas home to be set ablaze?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Natalya, finally gathering enough wits about her to pull up walls around herself.

Leaning in, Luciano squinted his eyes and asked, “How did you do it, hm? How did your men step onto Vargas property without getting caught let alone kill them as easily as they did? Who helped you?”

“As I said, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Hm. Well, I could tell you.” He pointed to himself, “I think a thank you is in order. Perhaps instead of hostility, you should regard me with gratitude and friendship. I did practically hand you the keys to that retched place on a silver platter. They don’t just have their home blueprints on archives for the world to see. Not the real ones anyway.”

Natalya stared at her unwanted companion in amusement, “And why would you do me, a stranger, such a favor.”

“Because, bella, your brother has been rendering my organization’s services. Now, my mother has asked me not to personally interfere with the dealings between our people and you guys so I’m just going to sit back and enjoy the show but I don’t mind offering advice here and there.”

“In exchange for what?”

The waitress came back with Luciano’s breakfast. He winked at her before picking up his silverware. Digging his fork into the plump strawberry, he held it up for inspection, “Feliciano’s mind.” The strawberry seemed to pass his inspection and he took a bite from it, swallowing before adding darkly, “In pieces.”

~One week later~

Latex gloves smacked against skin losing its tan as Feliciano pulled on a fresh pair. Ludwig blinked over their patient’s head incredulously at his partner. Their patient, a nervous woman in her late thirties, had just confessed of being terrified of hospitals and Feli had to go and do that with his gloves.

It had been a long and trying week for them both. Ever since the nightmare, Feli had tried to play it off as if it never happened, but Ludwig secretly suspected that it was starting to be a reoccurring
thing. He wouldn’t have paid much mind to it if it had not been interfering with his fiancé’s usual cheerful persona.

The woman glanced at his hand and asked, “Is that an engagement ring?”

“It is,” admitted the German proudly, “My fiancé made it all by himself.”

“Oh! That’s so exciting! What’s she like?”

“He just said that his fiancé made it all by himself,” said Feli as he finished administering the antibiotic. He pulled out the syringe carefully and put a cotton ball to the puncture, “What do you think I’m like?”

Blushing, the woman held it in place while he went to go dispose the needle, “I’m sorry, I didn’t … Usually most places don’t let couples work together much less be partners.”

“That is strange, isn’t it?” Feli took the clipboard from Ludwig and glanced it over, “Well, that should take care of it. The injection site might be sore for a few hours but that’s normal. Take a few days off from work and be sure to get plenty of rest. Have a good day.” With that Feli handed the clipboard back to Ludwig and left the room.

“Um…was it something I said?”

Ludwig stared after his fiancé before shaking his head, “No. I’m sorry about that. He’s usually very well behaved.”

“Sounds like you’re talking about your pet dog instead of a fiancé. Maybe he needs to wear a yellow ribbon.”

The urge to defend Feli’s honor was threatening to tip the scale of his professionalism, so Ludwig nodded curtly, “A nurse will be coming in to escort you to the receptionist. If you have any questions or if something arises don’t hesitate to call the hospital.”

“Will you be the one to take care of me?”

“Probably not. Have a good day.” He scurried out of the room and after his lover down the hall with every intention to scold him for being rude but there was no sign of him. “Where on Earth did he…” Berwald, who was wheeling a patient over to Roderich’s side of the hospital, silently pointed towards Ludwig’s office. The younger Beilschmidt thanked his brother as he jogged over.

Again, the intention had been to scold his lover but at the sight of him with his face buried in his hands made him hesitate. Feli spoke through his fingers, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not me you should be apologizing to, liebe.”

Feli finally looked up when he felt Ludwig lean against his desk and buried his face in the German’s stomach instead, “I’m still sorry, Luddy. I embarrassed you.”

Ludwig didn’t have the heart to validate that statement so he held him instead. “You don’t embarrass me, Feli. Well, only when you insist on stripping out of your clothes to take your nap but you’ve been getting better at not doing that until you’re in the privacy of our room.”

“Ve…”

“What’s wrong?”
Feliciano wasn’t sure how to answer that or if he even wanted to. Luckily for him, he had an excuse he could use and so he said, “We have to go to my grandpa’s villa after our shift for dinner.”

“It’s never bothered you to spend time with your family before.”

“No, I know, but we’ve been working really hard all week.” Feli nuzzled against his fiancé’s shirt, “I’ve missed you.” He smiled up at Ludwig making chest warm with affection, “I’ll try my best to not be cranky with the patients.”

Running a hand through Feli’s hair, Ludwig lifted his face by the chin, “That’s all I’m asking, liebe.”

“Aw, and here I thought you wanted a kiss as well.”

“Not really.”

“What if I want a kiss?”

“Then I guess I’ll have no choice but to humor my little fox.”

“Ve~”

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They finished the rest of their rounds before heading out. The rest of Ludwig’s siblings promised to meet up with them at the villa as soon as they were done with their work so the couple went to go pick up Alex from the Kirkland-Jones household. Arthur greeted them at the door with a smile, “Hello.”

“Ciao, Arthur,” chirped Feliciano as he kissed his friend on the cheek. “How did he do?”

“Excellent as always. He actually helped me make some scones. Would you like some with a cup of tea?”

“Uh…” Feli exchanged a glance with Ludwig who’d paled at the mention of Arthur’s cooking. “We’ll take a couple. We’re actually going to my grandfather’s place for dinner.”

Arthur handed over Alex’s bag, “Oh, don’t worry about it then. We’ll have tea some other time.”

“Thank you again for watching over Alex while we’re at work,” said Ludwig. He took the bee backpack and slung it over his shoulder, “If you and Alfred ever need the favor returned, Feli and I would be more than happy to.”

“Thank you for the offer but the hound Feli’s family gave me is more than—” The stern look Feli gave him surprised Arthur but he was quick to mask the shock with a smile again, “I’ll tell Alfred you offered.”

Alex walked up to Feli and hugged him, “Are we going to grandpa’s now?”

“Si~ Thanks again, Arthur. Ciao!”

Ludwig sighed and bade his own goodbye before heading towards his car. As the family drove away, Seraph walked up with a sleeping Sam in his arms. He carefully handed him over to Arthur, “That was close.”

“I’m sorry, I thought…Ludwig doesn’t know about what you and the Vargas do, does he?”
“No.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine but I think you and Alfred should consider getting a real dog. You know, for appearance sake.”

Arthur kissed his sleeping son’s forehead, “What do you suggest?”

“A golden retriever would be a nice play on irony.” At Arthur’s confused look, Seraph chuckled, “It’s what we used to call Alfred but I’m sure he’s told you all about his adventures with us.”

At that, Arthur did roll his eyes, “You have no idea. Sometimes I think he misses it.”

“Nah, he’s got you and the boys now. I’m sure he’s very happy. Now if you excuse me I have a dinner to get to. I’ll be back later tonight to keep an eye out. My colleague will be arriving shortly.”

“It’s not the frog, is it?”

“Frog?” Seraph blinked in confusion before laughing, “Oh, you mean Francis? No, it’s Corgie. Francy pants is going to be at the dinner too.”

“Corgi? That’s a bit of a step down from Cerberus, isn’t it?”

The Italian winked, “Can’t all be hell hounds.”

Leading Seraph out, Arthur shifted Sam in his arms, “You say that but you’ve been really kind to us, and the children love you.”

“Dogs love their charges. It’s the ones trying to harm those they care about that should fear them.”

“So, it’s one those ‘you won’t like me when I’m angry’ sort of deals?”

“Exactly.”

Ludwig and Feli listened as Alex told them all about his day. He and Daniel had played with Sammy until it was time for his nap. Afterward, Arthur had read to them and then they watched a movie. Ludwig was waiting for him to tell them about the dog Romulus had given them but didn’t get a chance to ask because they’d already arrived.

Alex gasped, “This is grandpa’s home?” He suddenly felt small in comparison. Realization that Feli was actually someone important and his family were people of money made feelings of insecurity parade through his heart. He glanced down at his prosthetic arm.

“What’s wrong, bambino,” asked Feli.

“Nothing.”

Ludwig came around to open the door for Alex, “I know it looks fancy, son, but it’s actually really cozy inside.”

Tugging on his blue t-shirt and old jacket self-consciously, Alex averted his eyes, “I’m…I’m not dressed good enough.”

“Bambino, they don’t care what you are wearing. You’re going to be a Vargas and family is family.” Feli snapped his fingers, “I almost forgot!” Rushing around to the trunk he pulled out a
“I went to the store during my lunch break,” he said as he closed his trunk again. Feli held out his hand to Alexander to take and said, "You can change in my room if you like but I can promise you that they’ll love you no matter what.”

“Is that why you didn’t want to join me for lunch today,” asked Ludwig. He wrapped an arm around Feli’s shoulder and gently rested a hand on Alex’s. “I could’ve gone with you.”

“Ve, sorry, amore, but I wanted to meet up with Feliks. He’s been kind of down since Toris has stopped talking to him for no reason.”

“So that’s what’s been going on. I was wondering what was wrong with him. He’s been acting all mopey at the bakery and practically begged to be slotted for the kitchen.”

“That’s weird.” Feli reached out his key to unlock the door but it swung open before he had a chance to insert it, a pair of strong arms pulling him in for a warm hug.

“My adorable baby grandson,” cried Romulus cheerfully, “It’s been ages!”

Feli hugged back and grinned, “You saw me last week, nonno.”

“That’s seven days too long!” The elder Vargas pulled away and scooped Alex up for the same treatment, “And our little guest of honor. How’s my great-grandson doing this fine evening?”

Overwhelmed by the affection, Alex shyly looked over to Ludwig but his second father was also pulled in for an embrace, “I-I’m doing good, thank you.”

“Bene, bene. Come inside, everyone’s waiting for you.”

True enough, everyone was waiting already, including a short blonde woman Ludwig had never seen before. Her hair was tamed in a soft braid and she was in a deep conversation with Nicola and Marzia while Paolo sat contently next to her. Ludwig had to do a double take on Feli’s uncle for a light blue argyle sweater had replaced his usual dark business shirts and he was wearing khaki pants. What was most surprising though was how his mischievous smirk was now settled in a soft smile as he gazed upon the woman.

“Mama!” Four gushes of wind blew past Ludwig and before anyone knew it, the quadruplets were surrounding the blonde woman, Eric hugging her around her belly while the other three held on to her arms and around the shoulders. This only made Paolo’s smile grow and face positively glow.

“My my,” drawled their mother, voice thick with an American southern twang, “it’s awfully nice to see you boys, too.” She glanced over Eric’s shoulder to see Feli and Ludwig before grinning at the Italian, “Feli, sug! I didn’t see you come in; how are ya doing, hun?”

Feli walked over to her and kissed the back over hand, “Better now that I’ve said hello, zia.” He caught Oswaldo’s grin and winked, “I don’t know, Nonno, but I think Zia Cindy’s peaches are going to rival our grapes in terms of eternal youth.”

Cindy’s giggle was like chimes to everyone in the room. She punched his shoulder heartedly, “You Vargas are all flirts. Oh! And who are these handsome young men?”

Feli stood up and proudly told her, “This is Ludwig, my fiancé, and Alexander, my soon to be son.”
Ludwig moved forward to shake her hand but Cindy stood up and hugged him, “My son has told me all about you, darlin’. Said that our little Feli met a special someone though he failed to mention that you were a handsome devil.”

“Mama,” whined Oswaldo as he moved over to hug his dad, “When’s dinner?”

Nicola clapped her hands excitedly, “Very soon. Shall we go to the dining room? Babbo is bringing up a new batch of wine.”

Feli motioned for his family to go ahead while he went with Alex to help him change into his new clothes. Ludwig was going to follow but Feli gave him a loving smile, “Ve, mingle with the others, tesoro. Why don’t you show Mama your wedding journal? I’m sure she and my aunts would love to offer their opinion.” He paused before adding, “But don’t let my mother bully you into something you don’t want.”

“No, but she can be very persuasive. It’s our Vargas charm that lets us get away with anything we want after all~”

“Bully?” Ludwig scoffed and motioned to himself, “Does it look like I’m someone who can be bullied into anything?”

Smirking, Ludwig placed a kiss on Feli’s cheek, “And it’s a Beilschmidt resolve that lets us reel you guys back into reality.” He kissed him again, “Don’t take too long.” He watched them disappear down the hall before joining the others in the dining room. Feli had been right when he said it was just going to be family, though he had to learn to start associating an intimate gathering with extravagant food. At least it looked extravagant.

His father had already arrived as had his family. Lars and Emma were there as well, the former in deep conversation with Gilbert. Willem was talking to Roderich about one thing or another while Lilly chatted with Monika. Slowly but surely, as if not to scare them away, the Vargas embraced the Beilschmidts and the others, welcoming them to their home.

A heavy hand fell onto his shoulder making him jump. Romulus chuckled heartily, “Relax, it’s just me. Isn’t this a wonderful sight?”

“I…I guess? I’m not really sure what you mean, sir.” Ludwig looked back at the scene to see how both families were now intermingling. Roderich had managed to start a conversation with Eric while Gilbert and Matthew spoke to Bernardo. He frowned, “Someone’s missing.”

Sighing, Romulus nodded, “Francis went to get Lovino. He wasn’t picking up his cell and we couldn’t get a hold of Antonio but I’m sure they’ll soon be on their way. It’s not like Lovino to miss family gatherings.”

Light laughter interrupted the conversations in the room. How? The Beilschmidts will never know but Ludwig did. He would bet that he could detect that beautiful sound even in the loudest of places. Feliciano walked in the room looking radiant; on his shoulders was a freshly bathed and clothed Alex who was happily smiling back down at his father figure.

Ludwig stifled a content sigh. Or at least he thought he did. Romulus gave him a side glance with a knowing grin but thankfully didn’t comment.

“Ci-ciao,” said Alex when Feli put him down.

At once, Nicola embraced him, “Picollino nipote, che bello!”
“Heh, mama,” Feli gently pried his mother off his overwhelmed son and let her hug him instead, “I haven’t taught him much Italian yet.” At his mom’s scandalized look, he quickly added, “But I will!”

Shrugging, Nicola patted the boy’s black hair “Ah, well, language doesn’t make a Vargas. Shall we eat?”

Everyone gathered around the large dining room, Romulus tried to convince Wolfgang to sit next to him but the German insisted that they each take opposite ends of the table. The Vargas patriarch grinned at that making Wolfgang blush at the seating arrangement. Nevertheless, everyone claimed their seats and were promptly served their meal.

Ludwig could tell that his brothers were trying their best not to misbehave but as soon as Oswaldo flicked a cherry tomato at Eric and Bernardo retaliated with a grape, their resolve quickly dissolved. It certainly didn’t help that Marzia was bugging her sister about one thing or another which made Paolo smirk and say something that earned him a smack on the arm from his wife. Soon everyone was teasing and playfully bickering with one another. Even Feli poked fun at his little brother, his hand slipping into Ludwig’s to give a loving squeeze.

The doors opened again sometime later, allowing Francis to enter with Lovino. Feli and Ezio frowned at the state of their brother. His clothes were wrinkled and hair was matted down with moisture from a shower that, based on the scratches on Francis’ arms, had been forced on the Italian. Lovi glared, “What the fuck are you looking at?”

“Lovino Roman Vargas,” hissed Nicola. She motioned to Alex, “There is a child in the room.”

Lovi’s glare instantly vanished at the sight of his nephew, “Mi dispiace. I’ve…I’ve not been feeling well this week.”

“Where’s Antonio?”

The glare returned tenfold and if looks could vaporize, Ludwig was sure the floor would’ve disappeared from under their feet. Lovi snarled, “How the hell should I know? I’m not his keeper.” He shook off Francis and went for the library.

Francis sighed, “I’m sorry for the tardiness, grandfather.” He kissed his mom and aunts on their cheeks before walking around to whisper something into Romulus’ ear.

Nodding, the Vargas patriarch wiped his mouth and stood up, “Who’s up for some dessert in the drawing room? We have a grand piano and a few classical instruments. Perhaps Eric, you could convince our sweet Felicia to play the cello.”

Eric grinned, “Of course! But first, Roderich? May I persuade you to join me on the piano? I just finished a duet arrangement for Chopin Polonaise Op. 53 in A flat Major that I’d like to play. You are a fan of Chopin, yes?”

Pink colored Roderich’s face as he stuttered out a yes.

“Excellent~ Come, come.”

The group moved to the drawing room where the servants brought out dessert on carts. Ludwig was about to ask Feli something but he caught him walking towards the library with Oswaldo’s arm over his shoulder. Jealousy would’ve overtaken him had it not been for the fact that Bernardo clasped the other side of his fiancé’s shoulder and Seraph and Francis were following after them. He clutched the wedding journal he’d been working on, his engagement ring catching the light.
That’s right. He was the one Feli asked to marry him. Not Oswaldo. Monika saw it and smiled, “I’m really happy for you, Lud. You two are going to be very happy, I know it.” Her eyes glittered with a thought, “I know! You should let me design your wedding suit.”

“What about you,” he asked as he took a seat next to her on the couch. “Won’t you be busy with your own gown and Felicia’s?”

Monika waved the thought away and pulled out her own notebook, “No reason why I can’t do all three of us. Feliks is a great assistant so I won’t be doing it all by myself. When are you and Feli planning the wedding for? ‘Licia and I were thinking of a fall wedding.”

It had never occurred to Ludwig that he would ever be enthusiastic to talk about his wedding let alone be the one to plan it. When it’d been with Natalya, every decision he made felt like another nail in his coffin. This time though, as he looked through magazines with his cousin and shared a lovely evening with everyone he cared about, it was bliss. Nicola and Marzia spotted the duo and quickly made their way over with bowlfuls of gelato. Needless to say, the two Beilschmidt were about to get a taste of decision making with their future mother-in-laws.

Meanwhile, the Vargas men convened in the library. Feliciano leaned against the desk with a glass of red wine as he and the rest of them watched the television in front of them. It was first person video feed pieced together from the footage the firefighters gathered. Feli gripped the glass tighter and worried his lip. The fire and the screams were too much akin to those of his nightmares.

Oswaldo noticed Feli tense next to him and discreetly reached around him to hold his hand. His father paused the video, “Here.” Firefighters were picking through the debris in Feli’s room and the acidanthera flower was painted on what was left of the wall.

“What about our men,” asked Romulus gravely, “The ones that were supposed to be monitoring the premises?”

Paolo sighed and inserted a memory stick into the screen, “This is footage from my camera. The girls said that they heard a struggle in the security room above theirs. When I went to go look, they were all dead. I’ve already paid off the firemen for their silence.”

“They were dead,” asked Feli finally. He stood up angrily, “How the hell do men of their caliber just die at the hands of mercenaries?”

Romulus hugged his grandson in hopes to calm his anger, “Our men are strong, Feli, but they aren’t invincible. From the looks of things, there are some that are just as capable. The Russian crime syndicate can be really brutal when it comes to getting what they want. They don’t take prisoners and they don’t think twice of bulldozing those they call friends.”

“The Russian crime syndicate…” Feli leaned against his grandpa, taking in his scent and let it soothe him. His first thought was of Ludwig and his prior engagement. It’d been for a business deal that would allow her brother to open a location here. A location here would mean that there would be a perfectly justifiable cause to allow anything into Genovia. Did his family know that? His eyes rolled over to look at his uncle who had gone back to discussing his findings.

You know they’re hiding something from you, purred a voice inside of him. Feliciano clenched his jaw, mentally telling it to shut up. Aw, don’t be like that. You’re thinking it. I know you’re thinking it.

Feli growled, “Shut up.”
“Excuse me?” Paolo and the rest of the Vargas turned to him in shock.

“Oh,” whimpered Feli, shameful tears welling in his eyes, “I'm so sorry, zio.” He pulled away from his grandfather and hugged his uncle tightly, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“Oh…no, I mean— don’t worry about it.” The dark-haired Italian chuckled and hugged Feli back, “It’s ok. I know I tend to ramble sometimes. Haven’t been on a hunt in ages, so guess I just got a little excited.”

Feli didn’t try to explain himself. Instead, he sat down next to Francis and let him wrap an arm around his shoulders. He was only half listening at this point, choosing to focus his energy on keeping the gates shut tight on the monster trying to talk its way out of its cage.

From across the room, Seraph was studying Feli. He gauged his reactions to what they were telling him. Oswaldo was also watching Feli. In his case, though, it was more out of concern for his angel’s outburst. When Paolo pulled out a file with a picture of Ivan walking out of Olympia Hotel, Feli frowned again, “Why do you have a picture of my friend?”

Lovino rolled his eyes, “Weren’t you paying attention, you imbecile?”

“Yeah, and from my understanding, you guys think Ivan is responsible for all of this.” Feli shook his head, “That’s impossible. I know Ivan. He’d never hurt a fly let alone hurt me.”

The older twin stared at his brother incredulously, “You’ve got to be shitting me.” Getting up he snatched the spare folder and dropped it on Feli’s lap, “Look at it. Do you remember what we talked about in Italy? About the Russian company that collapsed? That shit belonged to his mother.”

Scoffing, Feliciano closed the file back, “So what? His family’s history isn’t enough to incriminate him. You should be ashamed, all of you! Like we’re ones to pass judgment on the shady pasts of others.”

Lovino took the file from his brother and smacked him on the head with it, “Open your damn eyes for once, bastardo!”

“Lovino,” admonished Romulus just as Oswaldo stood from his perch on the desk. The patriarch motioned for him to sit back down and frowned at his other grandson, “Lovi, that’s no way to treat your brother. We’re family. We can’t afford to be cruel to one other.”

“Fuck, we can’t afford to baby him anymore either! He’s a grown ass adult who is about to be a father, a husband,” turning his attention back to Feli he shook him by the shoulders, “You’re going to be a fucking king amongst dons. And if you want them to fear you as much as they fear nonno, you can’t afford to be this damn naïve.”

Feliciano pushed him back and stood up, “Naïve? I may be naïve but I’m not stupid. I know Ivan and you’re wrong about him.”
“The hounds sniffed out the trail already, asshole! Fresh and ripe and just begging for us to open the gates. And guess where it leads to?”

"It’s not Ivan,” mumbled Feli stubbornly. “He isn’t the only person in that company. It could be anyone.”

“He’s the only one desperate to lift that sorry excuse of a business from its misery and is willing to do anything for funds.”

“You’re wrong.”

“He tried to hire Lukas to kill you!”

At that, Feli faltered, “What?”

“Yeah, Mathias told me the night of the fire.”

“And he’s certain that it was Ivan?”

“Well, no but-”

“Then, again, it could’ve been anyone, right.”

“Fucking hell,” spat Lovino, shooting his hands up in exasperation, “I give up.”

Paolo ran a hand through his hair, “Nipote, I know you two were friends but you have to at least entertain the idea that he isn’t who you think he is.” He knelt down so that he was at eye level with Feli, “Do you remember the massacre?”

“Papa,” said Ozzie in concern when he saw Feli bite his lip.

“Be still, son. Feli, the massacre, do you remember why that happened? Do you remember who was responsible for it?”

No, Feli didn’t remember. As a matter of a fact, that was one of the things he wasn’t sure if he wanted to remember. He felt his lower lip tremble as he shook his head no.

“It was your—” At the sight of his own father shaking his head, Paolo trailed off sadly. “The point is, Feliciano, there are going to be times when you’re going to make difficult decisions no matter who is on the other end of our scope.” Patting Feli’s knee, the older Italian stood up, “While we have you here, there is also the matter of your self-defense. How are you with your gun? Do you remember your training?”

Feli leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling, “Kind of?”

Ozzie rose his hand, eager to volunteer to reteach him but Romulus interrupted, “Lovino can teach you.”

“Why me,” asked Lovi, his mood no less foul than it had been earlier.

“Because Bernardo will be escorting Fabrezzo and Eric back to America with Willem, Seraph is on security watch at Alfred’s, and Oswaldo is watching over Alex. Marcello needs to keep his eyes and ears open at his club and not to mention Antonio is really good at that.” Romulus grinned, “I’m sure he’d love to help you teach your brother how to fight.”

The elder Vargas clapped his hands excitedly, “Let’s go back to our guests, si? Hopefully our girls
didn’t scare off the Beilschmidts.” He clasped his hand on Paolo’s shoulder, “Good job, figlio.”

Back in the dining room Fabrezio, Gilbert, and Matthew were playing Pictionary with Alex, Elizabeta, and Tino while the others around them conversed and occasionally giggled at the silly pictures they would draw. Ludwig glanced up from the piles of wedding magazines Nicola and Marzia seemed to have produced out of thin air. Poor man looked so overwhelmed.

Feli took pity on his fiancé and climbed onto his lap, “Ve, do you think those are enough magazines, Mama?”

The older Italian sniffed, “Of course not. These are the ones Willem and your brother were looking at for their own wedding. They have to go back to the states tomorrow because classes are going to start again but they’ve agreed to come back as soon as possible for a summer wedding.” She pulled out a calendar, “Let’s see, they said May 22 and Monika and ‘lica have claimed September 8 for their wedding. Is there a date you two want?”

Hugging his lover tenderly, Feli nuzzled against his shoulder, “I don’t care when so long as I get to marry him—”

Ludwig blushed and tried to get him off his lap but Feli only clung tighter. Sighing, he flipped to a pocket calendar he’d glued into his journal, “I was thinking that perhaps in July. It gives the guests a month in between everyone’s weddings to get their bearings together. What do you think, liebe?”

“That sounds great!”

As the evening came to an end, everyone started to take their leave. Romulus pulled Feli aside while Ludwig helped Alex buckle in, “Nipote, I’m going to need you to schedule a tour of the research facility your aunt has been supervising. Also, you need to go take a look at V Enterprises. Have your uncle show you around and—”

“Grandpa, I’ll take care of it. Though, I’m warning you now, I don’t have the slightest idea how to run a business.”

"Please, you came up with a formula that proved the existence of multiple universes. I’m sure you’ll figure something out.” Romulus ruffled his grandson’s hair affectionately, “You’re my grandson after all.”

Feli glanced over at Lovino who was looking more sad than grumpy. The elder Italian followed his gaze and sighed, “Don’t worry about him. I’m sure he and Antonio just had a lover’s spat and that’s why he’s being huffy.”

Leaning up to kiss his grandfather on the cheeks, Feli hugged him tightly, “Te voglio bene, nonno.”

Warmth rushed to the Italian’s cheeks as he hugged his grandson back just as tight, “Me, too. I love you, too. I know you’re going to make all of us proud.”

As the days proceeded, Feli found himself growing more and more frustrated with the lack of progress his family was making in finding the actual arsons. Every time he asked his cousins, they would tell him that they were close or that they were chasing a lead. When he asked Oswaldo, Ozzie would give him a tight smile and swear to him that he’d personally make whoever it had been pay. When he tried asking his brother, all he got was a string of colorful words, if that.

'We’re on it,' he’d said with annoyance, 'You asking us every other day is getting real old real fast.'
Feliciano had seen red and for the first time in his life had snarled back at his brother saying what good was it to be next in line as head of the most powerful family in Europe if he still had to wait so long for answers. He would’ve been more patient if it were not for the fact that they had more resources and contacts than most governments.

Eventually he gave up asking and continued with his journal in hopes to figure it out himself. Not that that was any better. Between work, wedding planning, child rearing, and trying to track down the culprits responsible of burning his childhood home, the stress was starting to get to him. On top of it all, he was still having nightmares which only made him feel worse both physically and mentally.

Days became weeks and still nothing changed. That is, until a patient arrived under his and Ludwig’s care in the Pediatric ICU.

Apparently, she had collapsed in class during a test after complaining that she was feeling nauseous. In route to the hospital she’d started to seize. Berwald helped transfer her over to her new bed now that the doctors in the ER had stabilized her enough to move her.

“Her name’s Linda,” he informed his residents, “Here’s her chart. Ya know th’ drill. Come t’ me if ya have an’ issues.” He caught sight of Tino on his way out and discretely smacked him on his rear making the shorter doctor scold him with a heavy blush.

Feli looked over the chart, “No history of heart disease, kidney, or liver failure.”

“Epilepsy,” asked Ludwig as he helped the nurses hook her up to the machines.

“No history of that either nor of aneurysms or tumors. And it doesn’t say that she suffered any head trauma.” Sighing, Feli handed the chart over to Ludwig and pulled his stethoscope on to listen for abnormalities in her heart.

Ludwig looked it over and nodded, “We should still get a CT scan and an MRI to make sure.”

“Sounds good.”

When those came back clean, Feli suggested getting blood work done to see if maybe it was an infection. Unfortunately, those came back normal as well. Not to mention that she wasn’t suffering from fever. The Italian furrowed his brow as he looked over his notes then at Linda, “Are you sure that you haven’t felt any headaches?”

Linda scratched around her IV needle and nodded, “I haven’t had any in months. Strange no?”

“Lucky more like,” said Feli with a giggle. He motioned to a nurse, “Let’s start her on a low dosage of Lorazepam and we’ll see how she does. Linda, I’m going on my break, can I get you anything before I do?”

“Your number?”

That only made him giggle even more, “Nice, try, bella. But I think I’m a little too old for you.” He made note of her vitals in the chart before excusing himself to his shared office. There, Ludwig was looking over one of his cook books, leather bound wedding planner sitting open next to it. Feli grinned and climbed into his lap.

Ludwig unconsciously wrapped an arm around his waist to prevent him from falling, “What do you think about this cake?”
“I thought you wanted a chocolate German cake?” Feli tucked his head under his fiancé’s chin, “I do like the decorations on it though. They’re pretty.”

“I did want the chocolate cake but Willem and your brother really wanted chocolate and well…”

“You couldn’t say no, huh?” At Ludwig’s blush Feli nuzzled him, “You’re so adorable!”

“Feli…”

“It’s true. What is it?”

“A yellow sponge cake layered with a creamy meringue made from dark chocolate ganache and fresh strawberries. The frosting can be—mmph!” Ludwig’s eyes widened when Feli suddenly pressed their lips together. He tried his best not to whimper when Feli shifted on his lap to deepen the kiss. When they pulled away, both men were flushed, “Wh-what was that for?”

“Because I love how happy you look when you’re talking about things for our wedding. And the fact that I’m going to marry you makes me happy too.” Feli tapped his chin in thought, “Did you know she’s on the gymnast team in her school.”

“Who?”

“Linda.”

“Ok…and?”

“Nothing, Luddy.” The Italian pecked his fiancé again before snuggling close, “We were just talking, amore. Weren’t you the one who told me I shouldn’t let my stress get the better of me?”

Ludwig smiled and finally sat back, pulling Feli against him, “I did say that, didn’t I?” He glanced over to the clock, “It’s lunch time. Want to go down to the bakery or—”

“Ve, I think I’m going to take a nap.”

“Alright. I’ll bring you back something from the cafeteria then. Also, think you can talk to her parents later?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you, liebling.” Ludwig lifted Feli’s face up by his chin and kissed him chastely before scooping him up and depositing him in his own chair. “I’ll be back in a few to wake you up. Oh, and put your pager’s ring at its highest setting in case you get paged.”

“Ok.” Feli curled his legs up and rested his head on his arms on the desk. He felt Ludwig give his hair an affectionate ruffle before giving in to his fatigue.

Weary amber eyes shot open and immediately watered from the bright light. Groaning in agitation, Feli sat up from where he was lying on an ottoman. When his eyes adjusted to the intensity of the light, he looked around. He was in a white room. There were no doors and no windows. Unfortunately, this wasn’t the first time he’d dreamt of a place like this. He was just surprised his mind would betray him and conjure such a suffocating room.

“Of all the places,” muttered Feli as he stood up anxiously and started to pace the room. His footsteps echoed on the white marbled floor. That’s odd. He could’ve sworn he had been wearing his trainers. And scrubs. Looking down at his body, he noted that he was wearing a white suit with
a light gray tie. “This is a first,” he noted as he resumed his pacing.

The tiles in the center of the room twisted and shrunk until they became pieces of a mosaic. Curious, Feli moved towards it and realized that the mosaic was his family’s crest, “Again?”

He pulled out his cell phone to check the time but it was dead, “Merde!” Shoving it back in his pocket, Feli decided that he should just wait it out. It wasn’t his first visit here and he would bet his favorite set of oil paints that it wouldn’t be the last. But the last time he’d been in the white room…something bad happened.

Sighing, Feli figured he should just sit back down in the ottoman and try to sleep. Hopefully Ludwig would come back soon and notice that he was having a bad dream and wake him. He turned around to do just that but froze mid-step when the lights flickered off. “That’s never a good thing…” One of them came back on, making everything look dull and eerie.

Feli licked his lips nervously and hugged himself. He didn’t particularly like the dark, not like this at least. The lights went out again and a drone echoed throughout the room as if a generator was trying to turn itself on. When the lights came back, Feli gasped. Beneath his feet, the golden sun had been shattered like something smashed it. Feli stumbled back, his eyes widening in horror as he took in the walls. They were no longer white, “Ve?”

His name was written messily in blood over the walls over and over again. One of the phrases had a knife sticking out of the ‘I’ of ‘king’ and Feli slowly went up to it and pulled it out of the wall, watching in disgust when blood splattered onto his white suit as it seeped from the hole in the wall.

“Feliciano,” whispered someone from behind him. Freezing at the familiar tone of voice, Feli refused to budge. As much as he loved his father, he really hated seeing him dead, which unfortunately for him was more and more these days. “Feli, look at me, figlio.”

The Italian slowly turned around, tears pricking at his eyes at the sight of the mangled man before him. His eyes were missing again and his clothes were ripped in various places with the remains of the tulip his brother had given him the day he died. Shaking his head, Feliciano stared at Cesare, “Babbo? What are we doing here? What is it?”

“You can’t trust anyone, son. Don’t trust anyone.”

Neatly groomed brows furrowed, “You keep telling me that, babbo. But why? Why can’t I?”

Cesare shook his head and reached out for his son, “Take care of the family. Teach yourself what you need to know to protect them.”

“I-I will but you have to tell me more, babbo.” Feli’s eyes lit up, “Oh! Can you tell me about the symbol I keep seeing? Do you know who it belongs to?”

“Don’t trust—”

Feli growled angrily and shook his father’s shoulders, “Speak clearly, babbo! Tell me what’s going on! You can’t just keep telling me things like this and expect me to know!”

“Nothing is what it seems, son.”

“Stop telling me that! I don’t understand…why couldn’t grandpa pick someone smarter than me, like Lovino.”

Black tar oozed out of his father’s eyes and the broken sun began to seep blood as well. Cesare
smiled wryly, “The knight must protect the king. The king must protect the empire.”

“We will.” Feli jumped when a fire alarm started to go off. He glanced around in hopes to spot it but there was nothing, “I will, babbo.”

“Feli.”

“Ve?”

“I think it’s time for you to wake up.” The alarm became louder and more insistent. Feli tugged at his hair but his dad gently pulled his hands away, “It’ll be ok. You can always trust yourself.” He looked youthful again and he offered a kind smile, “But you really need to wake up.”

Feliciano’s eyes burst open at the sound of his pager, “Merde!” Grabbing his scope, he tore out of his office and down the hall to where Linda’s room was. The nurses were already there trying to hold her down as her body convulsed in a seizure. The erratic beeps from the heart monitor and the shouting from the nurses all sounded muffled to Feliciano.

“What took you so long,” asked one of the nurses. Shaking her head, she motioned to Linda, “She’s having multiple grand mal seizures. How do you want us to proceed?”

Feli stared dumbly at the scene. His thought process seemed like it was running a relay in sludge. Seizures? What the hell was he supposed to do in those again? Acidanthera flowers? Shaking his head, Feli chewed his lip, “No.”

“What? Doctor, we’re going to lose her if we don’t do something! Are you even listening to me?”

“D-Dr. Ludwig. Did you page him?”

“Yeah, now what do we do?!

The chart! Feli grabbed it to look at what was the last thing done, “She’s got 2 milligrams of Lorazepam and Diazepam. Did you give her a second dose?”

“I just did. She’s up to four milligrams now. It’s not working.”

“Alright.” Shaking his head, Feli ran to the cabinet and pulled out a vial, “We’ll give her some Phenobarbital. Give me a syringe.” With forced steady hands, he measured out the correct dosage and injected it into her IV tube.

“No change, doct—”

The sound of the heart monitor suddenly flat lining shattered Feliciano but he quickly righted himself and barked out for someone to bring him the crash cart. Matthew rushed in with it, having heard the monitor’s loud steady hum and nurses shout out Code Blue. Feliciano ignored his colleague and grabbed the paddles letting the nurse coat them with gel before rubbing them together, “Charge the pads at 200.”

“Charge.”

“Clear.” Feli glanced up at the heart monitor, his bangs clumped with sweat hung over his eyes.


Matthew watched as Feliciano ordered for another charge at 360. He pressed the paddles to the girl’s chest but the result was the same.
“Nothing. Charging, 26 seconds.”

“Fuck,” hissed Feli as he massaged her heart through her chest, “Come on, Linda. Charge again!”

“Uh, Doctor, at 60 seconds you have to administer another—”

“I said, charge again,” growled Feliciano. The nurse nodded and did as she was told. Feli didn’t waste time and pressed the paddles to her, this time getting some response. Feli handed the nurses the paddles and brought an oxygen pump to Linda’s face.

“I see sinus rhythm.”

Another nurse let out a breath and smiled, “Blood pressure is returning and her rate is coming back.”

They looked at Feliciano disapprovingly, “Seriously, though what took you so long to get here.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You were supposed to be monitoring her!”

“I did, she was fine a few minutes ago.”

“Well, clearly you missed something or else her heart wouldn’t have stopped. Honestly…and you’re the supposed gem all the Dr. Beilschmidts speak so highly off.” They slowly cleared out of the room when Linda was stable enough to allow visitors. Her parents immediately rushed to their daughter’s side and Feliciano tensed under their glare.

“What the hell happened,” said her father lowly.

Her mother reached out to soothe him, “Simon…”

“No, Darla.” Standing up he crossed his arms across his chest and glared at Feliciano, “Tell me what’s wrong with my kid.”

Ludwig rushed in, “Feli, I’m sorry. I was with another patient who was bleeding out and—” He froze when Simon directed his glare to him. “What happened?”

“She had another seizure and her heart stopped,” said Feliciano quietly in shame. “I’m sorry, Mr. Cain. It’s not seizure disorder like we originally thought.”

“But that’s what you told us it was,” said Darla as she stood up to join her husband. “What is it then if not that?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“Well, when will you know?”

“I can’t give you an answer but for now the important thing is that Linda is stable and—”

“Don’t give me that bullshit! We came here because Asclepius is the best in the nation and you’re telling me that you have no clue what’s wrong with my daughter.”

“Sir, my partner and I are trying our best.”

“Well clearly your best isn’t good—oh I see.” He caught sight of a black tip peeking out from the
V of Feli’s scrub and he pulled it down to expose the sun tattoo. Disgusted he pulled back, “Fucking Vargas. Is there a place where your kind aren’t infecting? I understand now, you think you can slap on a white coat and a stethoscope and you can play doctor. This isn’t a game. My little girl’s life is on the line.”

Feli licked his lips, “Sir, my name has nothing to do with anything. I’m a doctor just like any other.”

“No, you’re just a rich junior who buys his way into prestigious establishments just like everyone else in your family.”

“That’s enough!” Ludwig pulled Feli towards him, “I understand you’re upset for your daughter, I would be too but that doesn’t give you the right to belittle my partner. We’ll find out the cause of your daughter’s seizures but I’m going to have to ask you to place some trust in us.”

Darla rubbed her husband’s arms and nodded, “All we’re asking is that you make our baby better again.”

Ludwig ushered Feliciano out, leaving the parents alone with their daughter. Matthew cleared his throat to get their attention.

“Who the hell are you,” asked Simon.

“I’m Dr. Willems-Beilschmidt, tonight’s attending physician in the pediatric ward. Listen, I never get involved with other physician’s students or the patients they’re taking care of but I have to say that I’ve never met a doctor more qualified to be here than Dr. Vargas. That being said, if you have an issue with him being Linda’s physician all you have to do is request another. There is no need to be rude to the staff, especially when they just saved your daughter’s life.”

Matthew took his leave but paused at the door and looked over his shoulder, “And there isn’t a damn thing infectious about the Vargas. They’re a good family who do more for all of us than neither you or anybody will ever know about.”

Elsewhere in the hospital, Feliciano ripped his arm away from Ludwig who was trying to take him to their office and ran outside through the side door. He tripped on the wet cobblestone of the hospital’s courtyard and landed close to the small pond. Crawling towards the bushes, he emptied what little contents his stomach had before burying his face in his knees.

“Liebling,” cried Ludwig as he tried to scoop him up and out of the rain.

Feli pushed him away, “Leave me alone.”

“No, it’s freezing out here and you’ll get sick. Come inside. We’ll figure out what Linda has together. If not, we can go ask my brother for help. Please, come on.”

“I said leave me alone! Who the hell was I kidding? I’m a shitty doctor and even worse human being. She died, she…” Feli broke down and started sobbing harder.

“Feliciano Vargas, get up this instant!” Ludwig yanked Feli up by his arm and tried to drag him back inside. but once again the Italian pulled away from him.

“Why? You heard her dad. I don’t belong in there with you. I’m just a snobby rich boy who’s playing doctor.”

“That’s not true.”
“Yes, it is! You know I’m an heir. You know that as soon as my grandpa decides to retire, which very much might as well be after we’re married, that I’m taking care of our empire. I have to take care of that stupid V Enterprises and everything that comes with it. I’ll have to trade in my white coat and stethoscope for a business suit and a briefcase!”

“Not if you don’t want to.”

“Of course, I have to. If not me, then who?”

“What about your brothers or cousins? It’s not like they’re not also you grandpa’s grandchildren.”

“But my mother is first born. Lovi and Ezio can’t do it, it has to be me.”

“Well then I’ll do it!”

Feli stopped crying and stared at his fiancé in confusion, “What?”

Ludwig shifted on his feet, “I’ll do it. If you really don’t want to do that, then I’ll do it for you. No one can make you quit what you love doing, leibe. I wouldn’t want you to.”

“Luddy…”

“Feli, I want nothing more than for you to be happy. I don’t know why you’re having nightmares but I’m going to assume that it’s because the stress of being who everyone is expecting you to be is getting to you.”

“I’m going to be your husband,” said Ludwig kindly as he pulled his fiancé close to him, “It’s my duty and privilege to keep you safe and happy. If me helping you with your responsibilities to your family’s business will do that, then so be it. Truth be told, I think I’d be better at that anyway. I do own my own bakery you know.”

Feli melted into the embrace, burying his nose into Ludwig’s neck, “I think a multi-billion-dollar business is a bit different than a bakery.”

“Maybe, but I’m good at keeping people in line. Anyway, it’s just a suggestion to keep in mind. Right now, I think we have a little girl to save.”

The two walked back inside and to their office where they changed into a fresh pair of scrubs. Ludwig pulled out one of his medical books and started to do research. Feli went back to Linda’s room to get her chart, to his relief her parents had gone to get coffee, and rushed back to his office.

“What about Meningitis,” asked Ludwig as soon as the other doctor sat in his seat.

“We’ve ruled out infections remember? Her white blood cell count is within normal range.” Feli looked over the history tab of the chart again, “I think it may be an aneurysm.”

“It can’t be. There wasn’t blood in the CT remember? What about medications? Her parents said that she was on Xanax. She could be having seizures as a side effect.”

“It’s unlikely.”

“But probable.”

“Well no, Luddy, because if she was going to show seizures as a side effect, she would’ve gotten them a few years ago when she started the medication. It’s like with me when I was on Valium for my depression. I became constipated and my sex drive suffered so I switched to something that
Ludwig’s stopped reading and looked over to Feli, his mouth opening and closing in effort to say something. He wasn’t sure whether to thank or hug him for finally sharing some more about his depression. All he could get out was, “Oh.”

“So, what could possibly be an underlying cause for this…”

“Did I already mention that she’s a gymnast?”

“Ja.”

Feli’s mouth parted in an ‘o’ shape before grinning, “I know what this is!”

“You do?”

“Si! Si! I can’t believe I didn’t see it before.” Giggling, Feli tucked the chart under his arm and motioned Ludwig to follow, “She does have an aneurysm.”

“Liebe, we’ve been through this. There wasn’t blood on the CT nor on the MRI scans. Not to mention that there are no indicators. No headaches, no neck pain, nothing.”

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t there. The devil loves hiding in the details because no one bothers looking into them! Oh, how did I not see it before? Stupid me.”

Ludwig dug his heels to stop Feli from dragging him, “I still don’t understand what the hell you’re saying.”

Sighing, Feli tapped his foot impatiently, “She’s a gymnast, Luddy.”

“You’ve said that, but I don’t understand how that’s relevant.”

“Isn’t it obvious? She fell. She told me she fell a few weeks ago when she was practicing on the balance beam. The only injury she suffered was a twisted ankle. But what if she did bump her head?”

“She would’ve told us, don’t you think?”

“Not if she thought it wasn’t worth mentioning. A twisted ankle for a gymnast, yeah, that’s big. But a bump on the head? No. A-and she is a teenager who may or may not have a itty bitty crush on me.” He waved his hands at Ludwig’s scowl and insisted, “She wouldn’t want to admit to me or you that she did something as embarrassing as bump her head.”

“Why admit to the fall at all?”

“I don’t know, amore, teenagers are weird like that. Some injuries are cooler than others.” At Ludwig’s hesitant face, Feli widened his eyes and pouted, “Please, Luddy. Trust me on this. The only thing that she would possibly need is an angiogram. We can do it now.”

Sighing, Ludwig patted Feli on the head, “Fine. What do we have to lose anyway?”

“Yay!”

Linda’s parents, or rather her father, were less than thrilled to see that Feli was still their daughter’s
doctor but with Berwald’s help, they were able to convince them to allow the angiogram. The two doctors watched the monitor as the images slowly began to show a minute bulge in a cerebral cavity. Ludwig released his breath in a light chuckle, “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“Yeah,” said the tech, “It’s a subarachnoid hemorrhage. Looks like she’s bleeding into her brain.”

“Ve, I told you,” cried Feli happily, “Now all we need to do is get Dr. Awesome to take care of it and she’ll be all better~”

Ludwig groaned, “Please don’t call him that. He’s already full of himself as it is.”

“Aw, but he told me to call him that.”

“Don’t listen to everything he says. Come on, we need to tell her parents that she’s going to need surgery. Then we can go home.”

“Okie dokie~”

Gilbert was more than happy to bug his mentor and chief surgeon to squeeze this one last surgery in. Dr. Sadik rolled his eyes but allowed it. After all, Gilbert was by far his favorite pupil and not because he was Dr. Beilschmidt’s oldest and therefore obvious heir but because of his raw talent and excitement to better himself as a doctor and surgeon. Ludwig and Feli watched from the observation room as Gilbert took care of Linda for them.

The surgery was beautiful. Gilbert took the responsibility of informing her parents that their daughter was going to be just fine. Just as the couple was about to leave, the eldest Beilschmidt sibling snapped his fingers, “Oh, and don’t forget my open heart surgery! It’s going to be on the tenth of February. I already booked two seats for you guys so mark your calendars. Don’t worry, it’s with the fam so the other surgery residents won’t bother you. I’ll see you guys later, k?”

Waving good bye, Feli and Ludwig gathered their things and prepared to walk out of the hospital hand in hand but Wolfgang stopped them, “Dr. Vargas, may I have a word with you?”

"Vati," groaned Ludwig, “we’re both really tired. Can’t it wait ‘till tomorrow?”

“I’m afraid not, son. This won’t take long. Come with me, Feliciano.”

Feli nodded, “I’ll be right back, Luddy.” He followed the older doctor into his office.

“Please, come in. Sit.” Wolfgang watched as the Italian did as he was told. “How are you feeling?”

“Ve?”

“I mean, stress-wise. Are you well?”

“I think I am. Why?”

“Berwald has mentioned that you seem distracted lately. Nervous, anxious. I understand that it’s been a rough few months what with everything that’s been happening to your family and now that you’re engaged…I assume that you found out about Ludwig’s previous engagement.” The dark look that came over Feli’s face startled the German but he brushed it off. “Would you like some time off?”

“No, thank you. I’m fine.”

Wolfgang leaned back in his chair, “That’s the thing, Dr. Vargas. You’re not. I have had
complaints from the patients.”

Feliciano didn’t understand where the wave of anger came from when he heard that. The feeling must’ve been apparent on his face because the German softened his features as he continued, “I understand that people want to be babied and sometimes their ailments don’t always require you to hold them by the hand but I do ask that you don’t tell them and I quote, Wolfgang put on his glasses to look at a sticky note, ”’Well if you don’t feel comfortable with doctors examining your rectum, next time don’t shove a fucking beer bottle up your ass.’”

"It was a long, long night in the ER, sir. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, I can understand your frustration with this one. It’s not the first time this particular type of…injury has arrived at the hospital but perhaps next time don’t lose your temper. It’s bad enough Berwald sometimes scares them. Ludwig used to have the same problem, he was very distant with those under his care.”

“I’ll try not to snap, sir.”

“That’s good to hear. Now, also, I’ve heard that you’ve been volunteering at the clinic again. I would like for you to stop.”

Feliciano panicked, “Why?”

“Because you’re tired, son. You’re working twelve hour shifts here, working lord knows how many hours at the clinic, and then you go home and tend to your child and my son. It’s obviously affecting your usual persona. I’d hate to see what happens when it starts affecting your mental capacity to work.”

“I’m fine, Dr. Beilschmidt,” stressed Feli. He felt his eyes water and again he was baffled by his behavior. Wolfgang was hardly being mean to him. If anything, this felt more like a light scolding. So why were there tears running down his cheeks?

Wolfgang sighed, “I’m not saying this to be mean but things run differently in this hospital than they do anywhere else. I don’t work my residents on ridiculously long shifts for a reason and I don’t like when they push themselves to the brink of exhaustion. You’re no good to me if you’re not here.”

“But, sir, I am here! I’m here right now.”

“Physically, yes. But your mind isn’t. I’m going to ask that you take some time off. And to ensure that you don’t try to go overwork yourself at the clinic, I’m going to tell the director there not to allow you in.”

“Dr. Beilschmidt, please! Please, don’t do that. I promise I’ll cut back my hours and I’ll sleep more. I’ll take more siestas but please don’t make me take time off.”

“That’s the thing, Feliciano. Since when has anyone had to threaten you or beg for you to take naps and sleep more? When’s the last time you’ve eaten a proper meal?” Pushing a box of tissues over to the weeping Italian, Wolfgang frowned, “Why are you crying?”

“I-I’m sorry, sir. I don’t know why I’m—I’m sorry!” Feliciano pinched his leg through his scrubs but quickly stopped. The voice started to chuckle, telling him that this was Wolfgang’s way of getting rid of him because he was useless. Sniffing, Feli nodded, “I guess a few days won’t hurt.”

“Good. This isn’t punishment, it’s for your own good. Now run along to my son. Lord knows how
he gets when he thinks you’re in trouble.”

Feli cracked a small smile. He knew. As he left the room, Wolfgang watched after him, pulling out his cell phone as soon as the door closed and dialing it. After a few rings Romulus finally answered, “Hallo?...Ja, I am well, thank you. Listen, I’m calling in regards to Feliciano. He’s not doing very good and I’m worried...no, it’s not ok. We need to tell him what’s going on before it’s too late and he ends up hurt...Of course he’s going to be upset but who wouldn’t? Also, my son... Yes, Ludwig needs to know as well. We’re going to have to tell him about our relationship sooner or later and I think it's best if it’s sooner...do you really think it’ll hurt the pla—I understand.”

Wolfgang sighed and swiveled in his chair, “I just don’t want to see our boys hurt like we were when we were their age...can you promise me that no harm will come to my son?...Well, can you at least promise me that he won’t die?...Thank you...No it’s just that, in the light of things that’s been happening, I just wanted some reassurance.” He blushed at what the Vargas patriarch said next and covered his face with his hand, “Shut up, Romulus. Don’t say such embarrassing things!” The Italian’s laughter could be heard from the phone.

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Feliciano and Ludwig parked the car in the garage and walked hand in hand towards the elevator. They walked slowly, their heads close to each other to whisper sweet nothings in the privacy of the dimly lit garage. Nobody was around so Ludwig wasn’t embarrassed to stop and kiss him in hopes to replace whatever sadness was plaguing his little fox with love.

Click.

Both men tensed and looked up to see three figures. One of them was pointing a gun at them while the other two played with their crow bars. Ludwig tried to put himself in front of his fiancé but the one with the gun took a step forward, “Don’t.”

Feli was frozen, mentally torn with what to do. On one hand, he wanted to take Ludwig’s hand and run away. On the other, he didn’t like that there was a gun pointed to his Ludwig’s chest. The men were saying something to him but Feli didn’t hear it. All he could hear was his own demon growl and claw at his cage begging to be released. He held tightly to the doors.

“I said, is you fucking Vargas,” spat the one with the gun.

“Well first off, it’s are you a Vargas,” drawled Oswaldo as he pulled up on his motorcycle, “but that’s a moot point. What isn’t is that you currently pointing a gun at my Feliciano and his fiancé and we both know how unkindly I take to that.”

Ludwig noticed how the three thugs paled significantly at the mere presence of the older Italian. Perhaps it was because he was a celebrity? Or maybe they were confusing him with Bernardo who was a champion boxer. Either way, he wasn’t going to get in the way of this confrontation. He tugged Feli and rushed them both to the elevator, completely missing how Oswaldo pulled out his own gun and took care of the three men who dared to threaten his beloved angel.

Feli blinked in confusion, “Where are we?”

“Home, libeling.” Ludwig sat him down on the couch and checked him over, “Are you ok? You froze up.”

Realization hit him and Feliciano jumped back up, “Those guys! Did they hurt you? Are you ok, amore?” Anger bubbled up in him, “Did they say anything?”
“N-no. I’m fine, they were just after our wallets and cars. Oswaldo came home just in time.”
Frowning, Ludwig picked up the phone, "Do you think we should call the police?"

“No, it’s ok. I’m sure Ozzie took care of it.”

“Feli, they pulled a gun on us! Are you sure that—Oh my god, we left your cousin all by himself
down there! Is he going to be——”

“He’s fine.” Besides, it wasn’t Oz that Ludwig should be worried about, but Feli didn’t want to say
that out loud.

Alex bustled into the living room, their herd of pets trailing after him as he climbed onto Feli’s lap,
"Papa, Vati, you’re home!"

Good lord! Ludwig’s face burned at being called Vati but it felt so damn nice. It hadn’t been the
first time the boy had called him that but it didn’t make the feeling less intense. He pushed his
concern aside and pulled both Feliciano and Alex to him, “How was your day, son?”

“Good. Uncle Ozzie picked me up from school and took me to your bakery, Vati. Then we went to
the pet store to buy more food for Gino and Johan. Then we came home and he helped me with my
homework and after we played, we watched The Lion King but then he had to go do something
after Feliks came home.” His face fell and he massaged his stump, “Simba reminds me of you,
papa.”

Feli smiled tiredly, “Yeah?”

“Mhm. That’s why you like showing me the stars isn’t it? On the balcony with your telescope? It’s
because we become stars when we die, huh?”

“Stars are beautiful, figlio. I like how each star in itself is so unique. They sometimes live alone, or
in couples but mostly they live in large families called galaxies. Have I ever explained how a star
works?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, in the deepest parts of our universe, there are these beautiful colorful clouds of dust and gas
called nebulas.” He gently nudged them up and led them both to his bedroom where he jumped on
and encouraged them to join him. The Italian fiddled with his remote and instantly the ceiling was
filled with stars.

“See,” he said as he let Ludwig wrap an arm around him. Alex settled himself in between them and
stared at the ceiling as Feli zoomed in on a random nebula. Feli smiled, “These are star nurseries
and even though we can’t really tell, they are about a million miles wide. See these dark spots?
Those are where gas and dust are most concentrated and that’s where stars are being formed.”

“In the dark,” asked Alex. His blue eyes shifted to the parts where light was, “Not where the
sparkles are?”

“No, sweetheart, the dark spots.”

“Can’t we see inside?”

“I’m afraid not. The dust clouds are too thick even for the best of telescopes. But that’s ok, right?
Even stars need their privacy. Well, actually, there is the Spritz telescope but that isn’t like mine.
That one takes pictures.”
Alex glanced up at Feli, “But how are they made?”

“Gravity. It pulls the dust and gas to a giant swirling vortex which forces it into a tight space and makes everything heat up. After thousands of years, eventually the vortex gets thicker and larger. In the center of it, gravity keeps crushing the dust and gas into a ball. Pressure builds until the gas can’t take it anymore, it just shoots out from both ends. It takes about a million years before the young star is completely born.”

“Wow,” cooed Alex in awe. The ceiling zoomed out of the nebula and a sea of stars came back into focus. They glittered and winked at him almost in pride. And they should be proud, he thought. Just as Ludwig and Feli started to doze off, Alex spoke up again, “Papa, what makes a star shine so bright? Where do they get the energy?”

Ludwig chuckled at that and absentmindedly patted Aster’s head. He was starting to wonder the same about Alex. He answered this one, “A smart man named Einstein said that stars can tap into an atom to use their energy.”

“What are atoms?”

Ludwig was about to suggest that they talk more about it in the morning but Feli was all too happy to explain now. So, Ludwig listened to his calming voice explain how that worked as well. He let his beloved’s gentle explanation of fusion and gravity’s role in it all lull him to sleep. When he woke up from his nap, he saw Feli holding Alex’s small hand.

Alex stared at the stars in a fearful awe, “That sounds scary.” His thoughts were to the sun now and how something so dangerous was so close to home.

Feli picked up on it and sighed, “Don’t be scared, figlio. Yes, this energy wants nothing more than to explode and get away.” Feli held Alex’s hand and spread his fingers to demonstrate, “And no matter how badly the energy wants to escape, the gravity says no and keeps it in check so it encapsulates these gases by pushing it down.” He wrapped his larger hand over Alex’s smaller one to make a fist, “That’s why stars look like dots. They’re quite literally balls of burning gas.”

“That’s what Pumba said!”

Feli laughed, “Yeah, that’s what he said, huh?”

“But Timon said that they were fireflies that got stuck up in the bluish black thing.”

“That sounds cuter. Let’s go with that.”

“Papa!”

“Ve~”

Alex giggled too and flipped himself so that he could lay belly down on top of Feli. He rubbed his face sleepily against his chest and yawned, “Papa, if matter makes everything, does that mean we’re also made of matter?”

“Yes.”

“And stars are made of matter too, then.”

“That’s right.”
“Does that mean stars also die?”

Feli felt his eyes water, “Yes.” He ran his fingers through his son’s black hair, “But they live for a really long time. And when it’s their time, they explode.”

“What happens then?”

“Everything that made up the star becomes star dust and the process starts again, sometimes. Sometimes, they bond with other particles and become something else entirely.”

“Like us?”

“Yeah.”

“So, we’re stars too?”

“Well we are made from star dust.”

Alex smiled; his eyes now too heavy to do anything else but remain shut, “I was a star once.”

“Yes.”

“The sun is a star, isn’t it? That’s what Miss Claudia said.”

“It is,” said Ludwig this time, thinking about Feli’s family crest, “and it is one of the most beautiful stars I’ve ever seen.” It bathed them in warm light, just like Feli. Their entire existence relied on their sun, Ludwig found himself wondering if the Vargas held any power like that over their nation. At this point, it would hardly surprise him.

When Oswaldo finally came up, he went to Feli’s room in hopes to be able to speak with him about what happened. He hadn’t expected to find him under a pile fast asleep with Ludwig and Alexander. Shaking his head, he couldn’t help his fond smile. He pulled out his phone and took a picture, no doubt his aunt Nicola would love this sight. Afterwards, Ozzie gently carried Alex back to his own room.

He hesitated outside of Feli’s room afterwards but decided that he should at least help his angel out of his work clothes and tuck him in so that he would be more comfortable. Unfortunately, the only person in bed was Ludwig. Puzzled, Ozzie gently closed the door and went to the balcony where he was positive Feli would be.

Sure enough he was.

“I heard your explanation to the kid,” said Oswaldo as he slid in next to Feli on the swing. “Stars are pretty bad ass, huh? The power struggle of two great forces of nature; gravity makes sure the star doesn’t destroy itself. Sounds like our life story, right?” When his angel didn’t say anything, the older Italian let out his breath in a small huff, “Listen, Feli, why didn’t you do anything out there tonight? When those guys came up to you, you just stood there with your dick in your hand.”

Feliciano laid back on the swing, “Did you know iron is poison to a star? It’s at its core where it starts making earth metals and once it makes iron, it’s doomed. Iron robs the star of its energy and gravity finally wins and the star rips itself apart.” He met Oswaldo’s eyes, “I’m starting to make iron, Ozzie. I keep holding it back but I can feel it inside me. It’s pester ing me in my dreams and it’s starting to affect me more than I like to admit.”

Oswaldo frowned in confusion but before he could comment, Feliciano continued. He lightly
pushed them with his socked toe to make the swing gently move back and forth, “At first I thought I could control it but it’s festering. I don’t want to give in. I don’t want to go supernova.”

“Are you asking me to get you back on your medication?”

“…yes.”

Grinning, Ozzie hugged him tightly, “I can do that.”

“I want something for night terrors too if you can get it for me and I want this to be as discreet as possible please. I’ll talk to whoever I need to.”

“I’ll arrange for a video conference with my aunt Amara.”

“Thank you, Ozzie. Talk to Zia Marzia about what I’m on now.”

Oswaldo’s frown came back, “I thought you weren’t on anything anymore.”

Raising his coffee cup, Feli finished it off before answering, “I’m not technically. It’s herbal infused coffee that Zia Marzia made for me before I went off on my agoge.”

“Oh.”

Feli yawned and stood up, “I’m going to try and get some sleep…hopefully I’m too tired to dream of anything.”

“Ok. I hope you have peaceful sleep, angel.”

“I’ll have peaceful sleep when I find out who tried to kill Alex. Oh, and thanks. I’m sorry I didn’t say it sooner.”

“For what?”

“Getting Alex and the kids out of the shed. He was telling me about how a man in a mask lead them to us.”

Oswaldo stood up, “That wasn’t me.”

“Your brothers?”

“No. Feli we were looking like crazy for the people responsible. I thought it was Lovi who got them out.”

Feli shook his head, “Then who?”

“It was probably one of the guys,” lied Oswaldo. The last thing he needed was another thing to make Feli fret. Smiling, he gently pushed Feli towards his bedroom, “See you in the morning.”
Trying Not to Lose Control

Chapter Summary

The pressure is becoming too much for Feliciano and it's getting harder and harder to keep things from Ludwig.

January 13, 2014: A few days later

"Yeah, so, do you have any idea why Lilly isn't talking to Emil?" Mathias took a bite from the breakfast sandwich Emma placed before him on the counter and waited patiently for her to finish ringing the last customer from the morning rush. He tossed back the rest of his orange juice before continuing, "I mean, I know the kid is kind of awkward but I'm sure he didn't do anything that terrible, right?"

Emma rested against the counter with a sigh, "I don't know. She hasn't been in here since last month. I asked Elizabeta but she said that it had something to do with her classes." Tapping her finger to her chin in thought, Emma gasped, "You don't think that she broke up with him, do you?"

"That's what I thought, too! Only… I don't think so, else my little brother would be in a whole lot worse mood than what he already is, ya know?"

"Hm. Speaking of bad moods, shouldn't you be heading out? I know how your partner gets when you make him wait in the ambulance too long. I don't see why he doesn't just come in too."

At this, Mathias grinned, "He just doesn't want to see me flirt with you. Says it's annoying."

"It is."

"Wah?! But I thought you were finally warming up to me!"

Flicking his forehead, Emma gave him a mischievous smirk, "Just 'cause I find you endearing doesn't mean you always coming in here to chat me up isn't annoying. Honestly, I think I'd rather take you up on your offer for a date."

"Really? Are you for serious," asked the paramedic excitedly. When the smirk turned into a sincere smile, Mathias took her hands in his gloved ones, "Oh, gosh, Em, you won't regret it! Pick anywhere you want, I'll take you!"

"Yeah, yeah. Now get on out of here before your partner reports you to my uncle."

Mathias put down his money for the bill and kissed Emma on the cheek, "I'll see you later, Em. Have a wonderful day!"

"Y-yeah, you too." She slipped a piece of paper into his hand before returning the kiss.

When the last of the customers left, Lilly poked her head out from the kitchen, "E-Emma? I think
I'm ready to go now."

"Sweetie, I think you should call Emil," said Emma as she pulled off her apron and slipped on her coat, "He should be here for this, too."

Lilly averted her eyes, "I don't...what if he gets mad, or blames me for this happening? I couldn't bare it." She followed Emma to the door.

"I don't think he's that kind of man. Hey, Toris, mind the bakery would you? If Ludwig comes by, tell him I had to go run an errand."

Toris gave an empty smile and nodded, "Will do, ma'am."

The two women quickly arrived at a women's clinic where Lilly recognized Emil's car. She furrowed her brow, "Emma why is—ah!" Emil was suddenly at her window, gloved hand and face pressed against the glass. His hair looked dull and his eyes were red as if he'd spent the last few days crying. Lilly felt her heart give a painful jolt with guilt. Reaching out to touch the glass, she whispered, "Emil..."

"Lilly, I came as soon as I heard," he cried, "Why didn't you tell me, love?" Beside him his best friend, Leon, pulled him away from the window.

"Like, don't do that, man," said the brown haired Asian. He smiled at his other friend and waved, "Hey, 'Lil."

The young Beilschmidt turned to Emma, "You told him?"

Emma had the decency to blush, "No, not really. I told Mathias but I only did it because he needed to know and because you were miserable without him." When Lilly didn't say anything, Emma sighed, "Please don't be mad at me."

Lilly averted her eyes, "I'm not, Em. Let's just get this over with." She got out of the car and shuffled into the clinic. Emil was at her side in an instant and held her hand as she shyly went up to the receptionist.

Without looking up, the girl typed away at the computer, "Name?"

"Biel-

"Liechten," said Emil, cutting her off.

The receptionist didn't question the interruption, "Reason for your visit?" When Emil turned to Lilly, she ducked her head and mumbled something. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, but you need to speak up.

"P-p-pre," stuttered Lilly. The fact that Emil was staring at her with wide eyes wasn't helping but the receptionist seemed to understand.

"Alright, just fill this out and the next available doctor will see you in a minute."

Bubbles seemed to churn in Lilly’s tummy as she sat down with her boyfriend. She silently filled out the clipboard, very aware that Emil's indigo eyes were on her. Her hand trembled as negative thoughts began to fill her head about this whole situation. Emil was sure to leave her now. Oh god! What if she really was pregnant? This would ruin not only her but Emil as well...school a-a and—
"Miss Liechten," called a nurse, "the doctor will see you now." She smiled kindly and offered her a hand, "How are you feeling sweetie? Is that your boyfriend?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Do you want him to come along too?"

"Yes, please."

Emil stood up numbly and followed the two into a private room where the nurse took all her vitals before telling them that the doctor would be in with them in just a few minutes. Lilly's vision clouded with tears, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Is...is this why you've been ignoring me?"

"I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you—"

"Hi, there," said Kevin cheerfully. The dark eyed doctor entered the room, "I'm Dr. Evans from the V Medical Research Facilities. Dr. Barns was unable to come in I'm afraid, so I'm on loan."

Shutting the door behind him, Kevin smiled and looked at his clipboard, "I see we're here for a pregnancy test. I'm going to need you to give me a sample of your urine. There's a restroom down the hall and the cups are in there as well."

After a few awkward minutes, Lilly shyly walked back in and sat back down. "I gave it to the nurse."

"Thank you, hun. I'll be right back with the results." Kevin smiled again before walking back out. Emil's frown immediately evaporated when Lilly suddenly burst into tears, "Lilly, what's wrong?"

"I'm sorry!"

"It's ok. I'm not—"

"No, you don't understand. Coming here was Emma's idea. I don't need a test; I already know."

Fear gripped Emil but he tried his best not to show it. He swallowed thickly, "Know what?"

"I've missed my cycle, Emil. I've been throwing up. I—oh my god, I'm a failure! You hate me, don't you?"

"What?"

With tears running down her cheeks, Lilly sat as far away from Emil as she could, "You're going to leave me, aren't you? This is my fault! This is—"

Cool lips were on hers, pressing as much love as Emil possibly could while wrapping her in his arms. When he pulled away, Emil looked at her belly before placing a kiss there as well, "Lilly, I'm not going to leave you and our baby. I was more upset at the fact that you were ignoring me without telling me what I did wrong. I thought you wanted to break up with me."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing, 'Lil. You didn't do anything wrong. This is on both of us. The little puffin didn't
Emil blushed, "Th-that's what Lukas and Mathias used to call me when I was a kid. Tino liked calling me munchkin." Cupping his girlfriend's cheek, he pecked her nose, "I'm sorry too, I didn't try hard enough to get to you and you've been suffering all by yourself. From now on, I'm going to be with you till the end, Lilly. I promise."

It was then that she realized how much she'd needed to hear that. When the doctor returned he had a cheerful expression, "Congratulations, you're going to be parents! If I may, I'd like to give you a quick examination to make sure everything is in order." Kevin gave Emil a pointed look signifying that he needed privacy with his patient.

Emil huffed and sat by Lilly's head, "It's nothing I haven't seen before. I mean, she didn't get herself pregnant."

"Emil," said Lilly gently brushing her hand over his, "I'll be ok. This won't take long, I don't think."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, please. For modesty sake."

"Flower…"

"Emil."

"Well, ok, but I'll be right outside in case you need anything." Emil kissed her forehead before stepping into the hall. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he caught sight of a blemish on Dr. Evan's forearm but before he could get a closer look, the door had been shut.

As Lilly had predicted, the examination had been quick. She was out the door in a matter of minutes and despite the anxiety she was feeling, there was a certain glow to her. Emil couldn't remember a time when she was more beautiful and that was saying something because to him she was the most beautiful person he'd ever met.

Taking her hand in his, he led her to the receptionist so that they could pay the bill. Kevin watched the couple with a small smile before shaking his head and pulled out his cell phone. He had a few missed calls but those could wait. He still had things he needed to do.

A Few Days Later

Feliciano shot up from his bed, body slick with sweat and hair matted down. He had to force himself to slow his breathing in order to calm his erratic heartbeat. Glancing over at his clock, he let himself drop back onto his clammy pillows. It was only four o'clock in the afternoon.

His nap hadn't been as long as he'd hoped.

The desire to cleanse himself started as an irritable itch that quickly forced him to climb out of bed and head straight for his shower. Ludwig went to pick up Alex from school with the dogs so that they could take them for a walk. That gave Feli enough time to be able to bathe before starting dinner.
He stripped on his way to the shower and turned the water on, stepping in without caring whether it was too hot or cold. The rough dark slate that was his tile scraped against his skin as he pressed his forehead against the wall. Silent tears ran down his cheeks; Feli felt so damn tired.

With a sigh, he shut down the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. Running his hands through his hair, he pushed his fringe backwards and out of his face. His reflection looked terrible. Dark circles had become prominent under his eyes, his skin was losing its tan and he desperately needed a shave. Ludwig hadn’t commented on his scruff so he wasn’t sure where he stood on it.

"I’m starting to look like my grandpa." Feli opened his cabinet and stared at his medication. Bottles were lined neatly in order of administration. He pulled out his shaving cream and razor blade and shut it back. As he worked carefully, his reflection suddenly smiled at him. Startled, he jumped and cried as he accidently cut himself, "Merde!" A few drops of blood fell into his sink from his cut. He stared back before shaking his head, "That didn't happen."

"Of course, it did," said his reflection, "Anything can happen in a dream."

"Ve?"

His reflection didn't answer him. Raising the blade in his hand, the reflection slit along his arms before smearing the blood with his fingers. It reached forward and wrote a name on the mirror.

"Don't do this to me," whimpered Feliciano. He tried to take a step back but he slipped on the wet floor and fell backwards.

Feliciano fell to the ground with a grunt. Blinking rapidly at the sound of children laughing in the distance, he pushed himself to a sitting position. The sun shone right above him which meant it had to be noon. But where the hell was he? He pressed his hands to his face and thought hard. He'd decided to take some time off, or rather, his boss made him take time off, but that had been days ago. So that meant that—

"Today is Saturday," he mumbled to himself, "Ludwig's at work..." He felt tongues lick his cheeks and he realized that he had Aster and Blackie with him. Patting them on their head, Feli smiled, "Where’s your little brother? Your papa will kill me if something—oh my god! Where's Alex?!"

Now he remembered. Alex had wanted to go to the park so they'd taken the dogs and gone over to Magyar park. He'd taken a seat at one of the benches while Alex ran off to play on the playground with the other children. When the hell had he fallen asleep? And more importantly, just how long had he dozed off?

"Alex," he called. When the boy didn't respond back, Feli tried again. Silence. Panicking, Feli scrambled to his feet and searched the playground for Alex but there was no sign of him nor the Doberman puppy. He pulled on the dog leashes as he searched the jungle gym but, again, didn't see his son hiding in there, "Alex!"

Out of all the times to be careless, he had to choose now?! Running around the playground, Feli felt ill, "Alex!" Negative thoughts and images of Alex being held hostage by his enemies clouded his head. He could hear his frightened cries for help echo but he couldn't reach him.

"Papa?" Alex tugged on Feliciano's jacket and before he knew it, the Italian was on his knees staring at him with wide eyes, "Papa, why are you—"

"Where were you," interrupted Feliciano.

"I—"
"Do you have any idea how frightened I was?! What if someone took you? What if you needed help and I wasn't there to get you?"

Alex looked at his shoes, "I'm sorry." He gasped when he suddenly found himself in a tight embrace.

"Don't ever do that again, figlio. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you. Please, don't do that again."

"I'm sorry, papa," cried Alex as he wrapped his arm around his father, "I just went to get Berlitz. He escaped his collar while you were napping but I got him." He stepped back and unzipped his jacket to reveal a happy puppy that quickly licked Feli’s nose.

"Oh, dude, what's up," asked Alfred as he jogged passed them. Daniel was jogging next to him both dressed in Captain America shirts. He caught sight of Alex and asked if they could go play with the dogs, rushing out to the field with Alex in two as their dads allowed it.

Alfred grinned at Feli, "Fancy seeing you here. Where's Lud?"

Feli dusted his pants off as he stood up to face his friend, "He's at work. Where's Artie?"

"Over at the kiddy playground with Sammy. Me and Danny were getting some exercise in. A hero must always be in tiptop shape, ya know?"

"Ve…"

"Dude, no offence but you look like shit."

"So, I've been told. How's Cerberus working for you?"

"Great, man. He's a good guy; really great with the kids and Arthur." Alfred shifted on his feet, "But seriously, you look pretty bad. Are you feeling sick?"

"I'm fine, just…you know the stress for what's been going on, I guess." He checked the time on his cell phone with a yawn, "Listen, I've got to go down to the market and get some groceries. I'll see you around."

Alfred called out to him again, "Hey, if you and Ludwig want to take some time for yourselves, Alex is always welcomed to stay with us. I'm sure my boys would love to have him spend the night. After all you've done for us, it's the least we could do."

"Ve, grazie. I'll run it by Ludwig. Come along, Alex." The two walked back to the Italian's car unaware of a brunette watching them gravely.

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Feli and Alex were putting away the groceries when Feliks came home. Feliks sat his bag aside and pulled his hair back into a ponytail, "Like, what's up, fam?"

"We're good, uncle Feliks," chirped Alex sweetly as he put some canned goods away.

"That's totes awesome." Feliks pulled out some of the groceries to help as well, "Do you want some coffee, Feli?"

"Sure, Fe," said Feliciano, "We bought some of those cookies you like…I think. Figlio, where's the bag with the bread and cookies?"
"You said that you were going to bring it in, papa." Alex climbed onto the island stool and patted Gino, "I think maybe it's in the car."

"Mm, I think you're right." Sighing, Feli grabbed his keys, "I'll be right back." His cell phone went off when he finally reached his car. The number wasn't one that he recognized so he ignored it. His patience ran out after the fifth time, so Feli answered curtly, "Pronto...huh? Wait slow down, I can't—yes?...oh, hello, Mr. Sullivan...yes I remember you...your stitches? What about them?...I see...I'm sorry, sir, but I can't. I'm on vacation...oh! I'm so sorry that your insurance doesn't cover it. I used to work for a clinic that—...well, I'm not sure I'm allowed to make a house call...That bad, huh?" Feli bit his lip in thought before sighing, "No, no. It won't be a problem. I'll just go get my medical bag and I'll be right over...mhmm, ciao."

Feli pulled out the forgotten grocery bag and took it upstairs before grabbing his black bag from the closet. He kissed Alex and Feliks goodbye and promised to be back home soon. The GPS in his car maneuvered him through town until he reached the address his patient had texted him.

Lovi stumbled drunkenly out of a bar, hungry lips abusing the tanned skin of a nameless Spaniard's neck. He pressed him up against the alley's dirty brick wall, hips roughly grinding against his needy partner. If he pretended hard enough, he could pretend this nobody was his beloved Antonio. At least that was what he kept telling himself.

The roar of an Alfa Romeo snapped his attention to the street where he saw his brother drive by in a rush. Confused and curious, he abandoned his administrations and scurried over to his own car, completely ignoring the furious Spanish curses sent his way. Lovi shook his head, "What the hell am I doing? Oi! You, Anton—uh—whatever your name is. Get your ass over here and drive me."

The apartment complex was in the south side of Victrola, just close enough to his old apartment to make it count as the dangerous side of town.

Gathering his bag together, Feli walked up to unit twenty-six and knocked. The door opened when his fist met the decaying wood. Licking his lips nervously, Feli gripped the strap of his bag and entered cautiously, "M-Mr. Sullivan? I'm here, Mr. Sullivan." He tried flicking the light switch on but the fuse had obviously blown out. With a sigh, Feli took another step forward only to find that the house had indeed been empty, "Mh."

The door shut behind him and he cowered in fear, "Gah, please don't hurt me! You can have my wallet and even the keys to my car."

"Jesus Christ," muttered a deep voice, thick with a Russian accent, "Beilschmidt left my boss for the likes of you? I thought you Vargas were braver but you're nothing more than a sniveling coward."

Feli opened his eyes and lowered his hands calmly, "Ve~"

Two blond haired men entered the room and locked the door behind them. Tightening his grip on his medical bag's handle, Feli summoned everything he had to appear aloof, "My apologies. I thought you were a civilian."

"Civilian or not, that was really pathetic," said Dimitri as he circled Feli.
"What do you want?"

Donovan was Dimitri's partner in his dealings with the Braginsky's and was more direct when it came to his work. He cut off Donovan’s path and said, "Our boss wanted us to send you a message." His soulless eyes were tight around the edges with repressed excitement for what was about to come.

They unnerved Feli greatly but he tried his best to keep cool. His hand reached for his cell phone in his pocket but Dimitri pulled out a pistol, "Ah-ah-ah. Don't even try it, Vargas. We just want to talk."

"I'm more than familiar with what our kind considers talking. Sorry, but I'm not interested." Feli tried to push past them but they each grabbed an arm and shoved him into the coffee table.

"Now that's just rude. Here we are going out of our way to deliver a message and you don't want to listen."

"I'm not interested in whatever you have to say. Now let me go…please." The Italian's voice was beginning to quiver with undertones of fear and he prayed that his assailants wouldn't pick up on it.

Dimitri's smile fell, his eyes hardening as he bent down to pick Feli up by his collar, "My boss and his sister want you to break up with Ludwig."

So that was what this was about. Shaking his head, Feli whimpered out a no.

"I was hoping you'd say that." The impact of the first punch was barely registered in Feli's mind before the next one came. And the next one. And the next. Dimitri's mouth was moving but Feli couldn't hear a thing. He felt his own mouth move and apparently, he said the wrong thing because the next thing he knew his head had gone through the cheap plywood coffee table. There was blood on the carpet. Was that his?

Time dragged on for Feli. Somewhere along the way he couldn't keep up with the crime prince persona and he cried and pleaded for them to leave him alone but when asked if he was going to leave Ludwig he replied with a shake of the head. Pain radiated from his side and he assumed that they'd either kicked him or used the iron bar Donovan had been carrying with him.

And as he did this, Feli stared right into Dimitri's face, taking in his narrow cheekbones, the tight line of his jaw and full pout. Somewhere in the haze, Feli couldn't help but think that this man could be beautiful if it weren't for the fact that he was beating the life out of him. What was he, like, 25? Maybe 26 if that.

Dimitri's next punch missed when he realized that Feliciano was staring at him. He raised his arm again but somehow, he felt something he'd never felt before.

Hesitation.

Underneath sweat matted hair and despite the bruising and bloody mess his face was in, Feli's piercing gold eyes were staring at him. He was close enough to see dark amber lines around his iris like cracks in old paintings, minute blemishes that added an ancient beauty akin to wisdom. They unnerved him.

The Russian felt a terrible shiver trickle along his spine. Despite their positions and how pathetic the man looked, he couldn't help feeling that he wasn't in control. With the way the Vargas was staring at him, it felt as if he was staring right into his soul. Brow twitching, Dimitri gripped Feli by his collar, "What are you thinking about? Why the hell are you staring at me like that?"
Feli remained silent.

"Stop looking at me!"

Feli felt a bony fist make contact with his cheek again but he didn't say anything though he did break eye contact. His eyes fell onto his assailant's long forgotten gun by his feet. The Italian stared at it, wondering if he should even try to get it. It would be easy but would he even use it if he did? Thick Russian accent made its way to his ears as he was roughly rolled onto his back. He blinked, "V-ve?"

"I said that if you don't fucking dump Ludwig, break his heart so that he knows you're serious about leaving him, then we'll have no choice but to come after him. We'll hurt him a whole lot worse than we hurt you. Afterwards, we'll come for that sweet boy of yours. And little by little we'll—"

Whatever Dimitri was going to say died on his lips when Feli grabbed the table's broken leg and swung it with so much force that it shattered on impact with Dimitri's jaw. Donovan was about to move to help his partner but saw Lovino's infamous matte black Alfa Romeo pull up next to Feli's and made a run for it instead.

With a swift kick to Dimitri's leg, Feliciano was able to knock him down. He crawled over him and pinned his arms to his sides with his knees. "You want to know what I was thinking? I was wondering what could possibly have happened in your life that screwed up your Karma so to put you in this position. I was thinking that perhaps if I just sat there and took it that you would leave me alone and run off to collect your paycheck. That perhaps you needed the money for a sick relative or what have you. I don't mind hurting for a bit." Picking up another piece of the table, he inspected it critically before slamming it onto Donovan's face after every other word, "But I will be damned if I let you get away with threatening to harm my family!"

Lovino drunkenly followed his brother voice to the unit and froze at the sight before him. Sobering up, he rushed forward and pulled him off the bloodied Russian, "What the actual fuck? Fratello!"

"Let me go," growled Feli, "This bastardo asked for it!"

"Jesus Christ, did you kill him?"

At the word kill, the younger twin stopped struggling, "O-of course I didn't. You pulled me away."

He glared darkly at Dimitri, "But I wish you hadn't."

"Who the hell is he?"

"From the sound of it, he works for Ludwig's ex-fiance."

"Or Ivan," muttered Lovino. He checked for a pulse, "He's alive. Ok, let me think."

"We should dump his body somewhere his people will find it."

"Why?"

"I want his handler to know that I've had enough of their taunts."

"Ok. Are you going to take him?"

"I was hoping you would."
"Hell no! I love my baby too much to get blood stains on her interior. You take him."

"No! I love my baby too much, too." The twins stopped glaring at one another and laughed.

Lovi wiped a tear from his eye, "I think that's the first time we've laughed together in a long time."

"Fratellone, what's wrong," asked Feli bashfully. He pressed his fingers together, "You haven't been yourself."

"I don't want to talk about it." Wiping his nose, Lovino glanced over Dimitri again, "I'm going to call in the sweepers to clean this place up. They'll dump him somewhere."

"Ve, okie dokie." Feli checked his watch, "Lovi, will you meet me at the V tower in a couple of hours, please?"

"Why? You can't go anywhere looking like that? You should go to the hospital."

"I'm fine. I just need to meet with Ivan."

"I'll go with you."

"Ve, you don't have to. I'll be fine."

Despite his better judgment, Lovi let himself part ways with his brother when the sweepers came by to pick Dimitri up. Feli fixed himself up to the best of his ability given the circumstances and entered the designated restaurant via the back door so to not get caught by the wandering tabloids and asked for a table in the very back. His cell phone buzzed when Ivan arrived. It was Ludwig asking where he'd run off to. Texting a quick reply behind his menu, Feli motioned for the Russian to sit.

"I'm so happy you called," said Ivan cheerfully as he placed a bouquet of sunflowers next to Feli's hand. "This past month must've been busy for you. I went back to Russia after you didn't call. There is a conference here, though, and my brother-in-law was supposed to come but I'm glad I came instead. We have so much to talk about, friend."

Feli looked over his menu before lowering it, "Yes, we do."

"Oh my—Feli, what happened?!" He scooted his chair closer to his friend, reaching out a cool hand to caress Feliciano's bruised face but Feli avoided the contact by pulling back. Ivan's heart dropped but he didn't say anything.

"Never mind that." Feli took a sip from his wine, wincing at the alcohol burned the cut on his lip. Licking his lips clean, he waved the waiter down to place their orders. When that was done, Feli took the sunflowers and sniffed them, "These are pretty."

Ivan perked up, "Do you really like them?"

"Ve, I do, grazie."

"I'm happy, I could make you happy." His smile wavered when Feliciano didn't smile back. Sighing, he tried to hold his friend's hand, "Won't you tell me what—"

"Why didn't you call me after you left for Russia?"

"Huh?"
"Contact me. Why didn't you?"

Ivan fiddled with his napkin in thought, "...I was busy. My mother's company wasn't—**isn't**—in the best condition. My mother died and left the company to me with my sisters as secondary partners but...as I'm sure you know there was a scandal that led to all of our investors abandoning us. Guess they wanted to jump ship before things got too messy for them."

His eyes lit up, "But then my sister developed this drug and then I finished my machine, do you remember? The one you helped me with?"

"It's finished?" Feli momentarily forgot himself and grinned, "You actually finished it? That's great, Ivan!"

"Uh-huh, and I even gave you credit for your part," said Ivan, now fully pleased that he got Feli to smile at him. "Wolfgang seemed interested but...well, you know the story."

Feli reached out and covered Ivan's hand with his, fingers brushing under his wrist, "I am so sorry about that, truly I am. If I'd known that Ludwig was engaged to someone, I would've **never** pursued him. You have to believe me."

"I do." Ivan turned his hand around, happy to hold his friend's hand at last, "I mean, I was plenty angry when I found out he was cheating on her but to be fair she cheated on him first. Practically as soon as they became engaged she started to date little Toris."

The waiter brought out their food and Ivan let go of Feli's hand to dig into his pasta. Feli however stared at the Russian as he reached out for a bread stick, "Toris?"

"Mhm. He's this funny little guy. Always seemed nervous when he was around me but it didn't last. He wasn't man enough or whatever. At least, that's what my sister said. I thought he was a good guy. Kept her away from me, at least," he muttered before taking a sip of his wine.

"I see." Feli slowly began to munch on his own pasta. He nearly choked on the buttery noodles with what Ivan said next.

"Da! That was my same reaction when I saw him at Ludwig's bakery. It was so funny; he spilled my soup on himself and then ran away." Ivan's smile saddened, "Guess he still thinks I'm scary. Am I scary, Feli?"

The Italian shook his head, "Not at all. Ivan, may I ask you a question?"

"Of course!"

"How badly did you want things to work out with Dr. Beilschmidt?"

"I still want for things to work out." Ivan slowed his intake, a frown making its way onto his face, "I'm still working on it."

"How far are you willing to go?"

"As far as I need—why are you asking me this? I thought you wanted to catch up."

Everyone's conversations and the tingling sounds of dinnerware being utilized were nothing but white noise. Feli pushed his bowl aside and leaned forward, resting his chin on fists. His eyes were shiny with desperation and a quiet anger, "How far are you willing to go?"
"I—what are you really asking me?"

"Did you hire Acidanthera to set fire to the orphanage my family funded?"

"What?!"

"And my groundskeeper at my family's cottage in Italy? Did you have him killed so as to scare me away from Ludwig?"

Ivan looked horrified at the thought, "How could I possibly know your groundskeeper, let alone you had a cottage in Italy? Feli, I want my family's company to succeed but I would never go to such lengths. I don't want to rebuild it on a foundation of dirty business. That's what caused it to fall to start with!"

"So, I suppose you didn't try to hire an assassin to collect my head?"

"No!"

"Weren't you at least curious to who took Ludwig away from you?"

"I admit that I hired someone to find out who the man was that was threatening my business dealings and, yes, I was furious when I found out it was a Vargas but I didn't know that it was you. I mean, the guy looked like you but I didn't think it really was. When we were last together you were working at some restaurant living practically paycheck to paycheck." Ivan reached over and held onto the Italian's arm, "I only found out recently when I saw you with him at the hospital. Please, don't be mad at me. I would never hurt you."

"But you sent someone to beat me up," growled Feliciano tugging his arm out and gripping Ivan's instead, "He threatened to hurt my family. Tell me you didn't have anything to do with that." When Ivan didn't say anything, Feli let go with a sigh, "Why?"

"I didn't…that—I," Ivan trailed off in thought. Raising sad violet eyes to Feli's tired ones, he nodded, "I did tell them to…convince Ludwig's lover to leave him. But that was weeks ago! When I found out it was you, I canceled the order. I told them not to hurt you. I can't hurt you. You're my best friend…My only friend." He didn't break under Feli's intense gaze, "Please say something."

"Ve…" Feliciano sighed and pulled out a folder from his bag, "What do you need to get your company to move forward?" He flipped until he reached his checkbook, "Give me a number. Better yet, here, you fill it out and I'll sign."

Ivan looked at the pristine white paper and at the heavy pen Feli was offering him before shaking his head, "I don't want your money."

"But you need it. What Wolfgang gave you is a lot but not enough for you to sufficiently stand on your own two feet."

"Are you trying to buy your friendship back from me?"

"I'm trying to get you to go back to Russia, and make sure you stay there."

"No!" Ivan shoved the book back towards a startled Feli, "I didn't do it!"

The restaurant's patrons stopped chatting and looked over at their table in curiosity before murmuring quietly to one another when Feli gave them a look. He pushed his check back to Ivan, "I know it wasn't you."
"Eh?"

"You aren't lying. I know." Feli smiled and motioned back to the checks, "But my family thinks otherwise. I want to prove to them that you aren't responsible but the only way I can do that is if you go back to Russia for a while. My family owns a research facility where my Aunt Marzia works. I think we could do business together."

"Feli…"

"Someone is trying to hurt my family, Ivan, but my family won't believe me and the only way they will is if I clear your name. Please, amico, help me help you."

"You don't hate me?"

Feli hugged Ivan tightly, "Never. I could never hate you."

Warmth wrapped itself around Ivan's heart at his friend's words. This is why he loved him. In college, all of his other roommates would curse at him and tease him and his ideas. When Feli had been assigned to his dorm, he immediately took to him. He stayed up late at night helping him with schematics for inventions and even stood up for him when his classmates bullied him. An odd duo though they were, Ivan would never forget the kindness Feli showed him.

Burying his face in the crook of Feli's neck, Ivan hugged back, "Thank you, comrade, but I still can't take your money without giving you anything in return."

"Maybe in the future. Right now, I don't need anything."

"Oh, I know! I can give you some shares in my company."

"I—"

"It's ok, really. It is not like people are jumping to get them." Ivan pulled out his own folder from his briefcase and searched for some documents, "I went out of town the weekend of Ludwig's brother's wedding, that's why I didn't go, in hopes to get some partners or investors for the company but nobody was willing to give me a chance. My brother-in-law came with Natalya though."

"Oh?"

"Mhm. He's married to big sister. I don't really like him though, he's kind of shady." He pulled out the correct documents and his Pinocchio doll, "Sometimes I think he wants to keep my company all to himself."

"Ve," said Feli thoughtfully as he pressed a napkin to his lip, "I don't think I've met him." Nor did he think he saw his profile in the list of relatives his uncle had researched.

Ivan unscrewed Pinocchio's body and dipped his pen into the ink to fill out the documents, "His name's Eduard. I don't know much about him aside that he has two brothers, one here and a little one over there. Though, now that I think about it, I don't think he likes him very much." Ivan shrugged, "Not much I can do about that though. He's his legal guardian and my sister was already married to him by the time I went to live in Russia with them."

"There's one more thing, Ivan. I have here permission for you to use my family's railroad to import anything you need to. Please feel free to use it."
"I don't need it, silly, but thank you!"

"You...you don't need it?"

"Nope. I mean Russia in general can't send anything into Genovia but I've had permission to use the lines for a while now."

"I see." Feli glanced down at the papers Ivan pushed towards them and frowned, "Are you sure you want to give me all of these? These are-

"Honestly, I don't trust anyone else with these aside from you."

"Ve...if you're sure, then thanks, I guess." Feli signed his name with the ink from Pinocchio before handing them back over to Ivan. The two concluded their dinner after dessert and parted ways with the promise of keeping in touch. The Italian's cell phone went off again, this time Ludwig wanted to know when he was going to be home. After texting back, Feli maneuvered his way through the busy streets of Victrola until he reached his inheritance.

~.~

V Enterprise tower was one of the tallest skyscrapers in the city. With over sixty floors, it loomed over the streets of Victrola, keeping a watchful eye over her and her citizens. And like many other things the Vargas owned, Timothy, Lars' father, designed the post-modern building. The highest floor, the sixty-sixth, was only accessible to those bearing the Vargas seal, or had special permission, and had to go through a retina and body scan before they were even be able to press the button.

Complete with an indoor Zen garden, or at least there had been a garden—Feli would have to ask what happened to it—it was on that floor that Romulus often resided in when he wasn't at his Villa. Feliciano could see why too. At this height, all of Victrola was on display for him. He could see everything from Asclepius hospital to the clinic he used to work at. The other V Tower was glowing. No doubt his loved ones were having dinner as the streets overflowed with golden light.

Clothes were strewn about the high rise when Lovino arrived. He found his brother in the Zen room looking out the window in a pair of black sweatpants, his chest was bare save for the bandages he had wrapped around his injuries. The older twin stared at the curvature of Feli's back, skin glowing under the moonlight. It was marred with bruises far too small to be fresh and light scratches at his hips. He didn't even want to imagine how he got those.

"This place looks lived in," said Feliciano without looking away from the window.

Leaning against the door frame, Lovi nodded, "I've been staying here for about a week now." Before Feli could ask why, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Numb, angry," whispered Feli, "How do you do things like that every night? How do you keep your cool and not freak out?"

"I have Anto—had...I remember that everything is part of something bigger than me."

"Do you feel numb?"

"No, but I do feel angry." Lovi shrugged, "It's good to feel angry sometimes. Nobody expects you to be cheerful all the time. In this line of the work, it's normal to feel...different things."

Licking his lips, Feli ran his hand through his thick hair, "Will I be like you one day?"
"I don't know."

Silence overtook them for a moment until Feli finally sighed and muttered, "Those guys threatened Alex. Said that if I didn't break up with Ludwig, that they were going to hurt my family."

Lovi sighed himself, "Nobody's going to hurt anybody. We'll protect—"

"No!" The window panel shook from the impact of Feli's palm slamming against it. Finger pads dug into the glass as they were dragged down creating lines unparalleled by the trails left behind from the raindrops. Feli pressed his forehead forward, "No more protection. You guys are busy too. Once this clears up, Cerberus is going to go to wherever they need to. Whether that's here in town or on the other end of the globe, doesn't matter. And you, you need to keep these... these people in line for me while I keep up our appearances."

"...Someone's pissed off," muttered Lovi with a slight chuckle, "What's flipped your switch?"

"Nonno is keeping something from me," said Feli simply, "I don't know why but I swear that if it has anything to do with what's happening..."

"We're not hiding anything. Didn't we already tell you all we know—"

"No, you didn't." He didn't want to discuss what Ivan had told him yet so he pointed to a small device on the bench and waited for Lovi to retrieve it. Feli was silent until his brother finished listening, "That was from last night. Who the hell is Luciano?"

Lovi shook his head, "Where the hell did you get this? How did you get this?"

"Willem gave me these new bugs and I planted one on nonno so that when he went to a meeting I could transfer it over to Collins or Godfrey."

"...You planted a bug on the old man?"

"Did you know that Ozzie practically moved in with me? Well, I was going to go call him to dinner one night and I overheard him talking to Seraph. I think Seraph believes me when I'm saying that it was someone else attacking us."

"What does that have to do with you planting bugs on our grandfather?"

"Listen to the recording before the one you heard."

Pressing the little arrow on the device, Lovi raised the volume. Paolo's smooth Italian filled their silence.

"Dad...something isn't right," said Paolo. "It shouldn't be taking us this long to find a way to incriminate that Russian."

Romulus chuckled softly, "If things were so easy we wouldn't have lasted this long in the business, now would we? Be patient, son."

"What about Feliciano? I think he should be informed of what's going on."

"And upset him? I don't think so. My adorable grandson has enough on his plate. This would only stress him more."

"Lovi was right, dad. We can't keep babying him. He's going to find out sooner or later. Isn't it best if he hears it from us?"
"I'd rather not. The less he knows, the better but enough of that. What is it you really wanted to tell me?"

"Acidanthera. One of the arsonists that my sons captured was assassinated while they were interrogating him and they were also being poisoned in a way that would’ve made their death seem accidental. Marzia tested their blood and Naya and her people tested the bullet casing along with the fibers found on Mr. Sunwell. Dad, all of the results came back with one similarity."

"What’s that?"

"Spanish material."

"So, you found out where the mercenaries get their ammunition from? Good, one more crime we can charge the bastards with. What’s the problem?"

"You know what the problem is! Feli was right. We can’t pin the first fire and the death of Mr. Sunwell on Ivan and his people. I don’t even think that Ludwig and Feli were dating yet for that first one and how could they possibly have known about the vacation home?"

Paolo took a deep breath and let it out slowly before saying, "Papa, you need to let my boys investigate in Spain. Or better yet, let me. I know how to sniff things out."

"Papa? It's been years since you've called me that. You must really want to go to Spain."

"I'm being serious."

"Listen, you know how I feel about Spain, but Antonio is heir to that country's crime syndicate and he’s already asked me and your sister's permission to ask for Lovino's hand in marriage. I don’t want to do anything that will jeopardize Antonio’s ascent to power within his family. As soon as they marry, their alliance to us will run deeper and Spain will finally be under our permanent control. Besides, do you really think that they'd be so stupid as to ruin an alliance with us by burning and killing our things?"

"Mr. Sunwell was more than that, dad. He was family!"

"You know what I meant, son." Another deep sigh was heard as well as some shuffling. "Paolo, I know you love and care for our family but don't lose your head."

"It's kind of hard not to when my nephew is losing his sanity over this. Did you know that he's back on his medication?"

"For what?"

"Depression. Night terrors. Anxiety. I don’t know what happened to trigger this but—"

Romulus' voice came out harsher than either Vargas brother had ever heard, "You being seconds away from telling him that his own flesh and blood ordered the execution of the entire main branch of our family didn’t have anything to do with it?"

"Don’t pin this on me, dad. He has to know that we can’t always trust those we hold dear to us. My asshole uncle was the best example I could come up with."

"My brother wasn’t the best example, Paolo. I'm just glad you didn't drag my sister into it as well."

"Aunt Lucrezia was just as guilty and of course he was. Dad, if you would just explain to him your
experiences, it would let him see that he isn't the only one to feel what he's feeling. He thinks you were ready to be king just like that when we all know that wasn't true. The game we're playing is so much different from back in your day. You changed it, and despite why you did it, it doesn't change the fact that you've made things a whole lot more dangerous for us. And if this operation is still going to work as smoothly as it has been in the past twenty odd years, Feliciano needs to be the man we all know he is deep down inside."

Paolo sighed sadly and patted his father on the shoulder, "I have the utmost faith in him, dad, but I just don't want him to go through what you went through. Big sister doesn't want that and I know for a fact that Cesare wouldn't want that either."

Their grandfather was silent for a while. Lovino figured that perhaps the recording had ended but Romulus spoke again, "We'll tell him after this job is over. As for Acidanthera, let's wait and see what results we get with the Russian thing. Magyar hasn't mentioned anything about trouble with Spain outside the usual so we can't just go in guns blazing. It's poor ruling and I believe in order of priority. Spain has been behaving as of late but I assure you that as soon as we catch our mice, we'll get to the bottom of it. We stick to the plan for now, understood?"

"...Understood."

A little ding indicated that the recording was over. Lovi stared at the device, speechless until he heard his brother laugh quietly. "Do you believe me now?"

The older twin opened his mouth and closed it multiple times unsure what to say. Despite all the information he just heard, the only thing that truly stood out was the fact that Antonio had gone to his grandfather and mother to ask for permission to marry him. But that didn't make sense, did it? If he didn't love him, why go make his desires known to someone as powerful as his grandpa and to his mother, who if she knew that he broke up with him and told him all those nasty things, would reveal her claws and bare her fangs. 'Why the hell did the tomato bastard leave me like that,' was the only thought he could form.

Feli turned to face his brother, "Are you going to help me?"

"Huh?"

"Please, Lovi, I can't do this alone."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Either as the puppeteers or puppets, Collins and Godfrey are in league with Acidanthera. There's a third person and I want to know who and what their connection is with Ivan's company."

"I thought you didn't think it was him."

"I know it's not him but that doesn't change the fact that his company is where the drug trail you guys found leads. I want you to run a background check on everyone else affiliated with his family. Husbands, exes, everyone. See if any of them were ever involved with anything shady. Also, try to see what you can find on Luciano."

"That's a shit ton of work. It might take me awhile."

"I know. That's why I'm going to help you whenever I can. I'll also ask Oswaldo."

Lovi watched as Feli paced the Zen garden with his back straight despite the obvious pain he had to be in and finally saw it. He saw his little brother as who he truly meant to be. Smiling softly,
Lovi shook his head, "We'll figure it out, fratello. Why don't you head on home? I'm sure the potato bastard and your little sprout are missing you."

"Ve! I almost forgot," checking his watch Feli rubbed his eyes tiredly, "Could you give me a ride? I left my car at the restaurant."

"Nah, I had one of the guys drive it home. Come on." An arm shot out and gently touched the older twin's arm making him glance over his shoulder, "What?"

"I—um—grazie."

Lovi frowned, "For what?"

"Doing this for me. I honestly thought…"

"What? That I wouldn't? Tch, you're an idiot you know that? Of course, I'd help you. You'd be completely useless without me." He said that last bit with a smirk to show that he was only teasing. He hadn't expected for his brother to pounce on him, "H-hey! Get off of me, bastardo!"

"I love you so much, big brother," cried Feli making Lovi's cheeks redden at the declaration.

"That's nice, now get the fuck off of me!"

After much prying and some scolding, Lovino managed to get his brother to make himself look presentable before leading him down to his car. The drive back was filled with Feli's excited chatter about the adoption process with Alex and the wedding planning with Ludwig. That last part annoyed him but he bared with it for his brother's sake. Thoughts of Antonio and their break up continued to flow through his mind until Feli asked him something he didn't catch.

"What was that?"

Feli puffed his cheeks, "I said that when Antonio proposes to act surprised. I didn't want to ruin the surprise but I really needed you to hear that."

The mention of his ex-boyfriend sent his gut into frenzy. He gripped his steering wheel tightly, "Don't worry about it."

"Ve, did you two have a fight? You've been acting funny whenever someone mentions him."

"I said don't worry about it."

"But—"

"God damnit! Do you want me to drive you home or not?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"No! No buts. Either you shut up and enjoy the warm drive home or you can walk back in the cold. Which is it?" Lovi heard his brother mumble something and he brought a gloved hand to his ear, "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. Fucking speak louder."

"…drive home."

"That's what I thought."

The rest of the drive was in relative silence with the occasional ve from Feli. When they arrived at
his building, Feli turned to Lovi and kissed him on the cheeks, "Grazie."

Lovi kissed back and grumbled, "Yeah, yeah."

"Fratello, why aren't you sleeping at your apartment?"

"Goodnight, Feli."

"Ve…goodnight." Feli opened the car door before remembering something, "Oh, I almost forgot!"

Releasing a long-suffering sigh, Lovi resisted the urge to bang his head against his steering wheel, "What now?"

"My training. Could you…"

"I'll text you later. We can start as soon as you're healed."

"We can start tomorrow. We'll train at night, ok?"

"Whatever you want. Now get the fuck out of my car."

"Love you too, fratello."

Feliciano watched as his brother drove away before pulling out his cell phone. He quickly scrolled through his contacts until he found who he was looking for. Waving a hello to the building's watchman, Feli stepped into the elevator and hit the button for his floor, "Marcello? Ciao…listen, I need a favor. Find out what happened between Lovino and Antonio. Did you know that he's living in nonno's high rise at V Enterprise?...Si, grazie. Ciao."

The Italian let out a sigh and stepped out of the elevator as soon as the doors opened. He fumbled for his keys and stepped inside. The lights were all off save for the television screen that was playing the Lion King. Simba was stargazing with his two companions musing about what the glowing diamonds in the sky were.

"Ve," he murmured, "I'm home!" He didn't get a response except for Berlitz who gave a happy yip from his dog pillow.

Feliks called out quietly from the kitchen, "Welcome home, Fe." His smile fell as soon as he saw Feli’s state, “What the hell?! What happened—"

“Shh!” Feliciano quickly kissed his friend’s cheeks, “I don’t want to wake them.” He motioned to a sleeping Ludwig on the couch and Alex who was dozed off on top of him, his prosthetic leaning against the couch.

Feliks pursed his lips but humored Feliciano. He leaned against the counter as Feli pulled a blanket over the sleeping duo, "They were trying to stay up in hopes to scold you for not eating dinner with us but I guess they were too tired."

Feli affectionately cooed at his tiny family, all of that night's negativity being shoved away from his system and replaced with peace, "Were they angry?"

"Not really. They bonded over trying to figure out ways for you to make it up to them."

"Ve, nothing too bad I hope."

"I think they want to go to the zoo with you tomorrow. Your fiancé got the day off." Feliks
followed his best friend to his room and laid down on the Italian's side of the bed, “Fe, what the heck happened to you? Were you hurt too badly?”

"Mm, no. It looks worse than it feels…"

"It's pretty ugly."

"Heh, but I'm ok. Don't worry about me."

"Like, I'm not the one you're going to need to convince rather your macho fiancé."

"Ve?"

Feliks scoffed, "Don't think I haven't noticed how he frets like a mother hen over you and Alex. He's almost as bad as Monika and, like, she's pretty bad. Always chasing after your cousin to make sure she doesn't hurt herself and scolding her for climbing ladders and using too sharp scissors. Actually, it's kind of cute."

Stripping down to his boxers, Feliciano climbed on the bed as carefully as he could. Once settled, Feliks turned to face him, "Fe, I'm worried about you."

"I'm worried about me, too."

"I'm serious though. Where were you tonight?"

"A patient called me saying that he needed help. It was a trap and I got beat up by one of Natalya's lackeys. It's ok though because he looks a lot worse than I do."

"Feli," said Feliks dryly, "anymore worse than you is practically, like, dead." He gasped when Feli flinched and stared at his friend, "No…Feli, tell me you totally didn't."

"I don't know…" Feliciano waited for Feliks to jump out of the bed but to his surprise his friend simply hugged him.

"Are you ok, broski?"

"He's not dead, Fe." At least, he didn't think he was. No. Lovino told him that he hadn't died and he was going to trust his brother's word.

"But you fought back, didn't you?"

"Ve…"

"Man, like, I didn't know you had it in you. Is that why Oswaldo flew the coup?"

"Ozzie left?"

"Yeah, he got a call and made up some excuse about going to go out with some friends." Feliks glanced to his side and smiled, "I've missed you. I mean, we live together and everything but…so much has changed in just a few months, ya know? You're engaged, you're going to be a dad… you're a doctor and an heir to the most, like amazing gig in the history of gigs."

Feli winced, "I wouldn't go that far, Fe."

"Point is, man, you've got your life together and I…"
"You're apprenticing with Monika Beilschmidt. She's letting you put your designs in this year's fashion week with her in Milan. That's pretty impressive too, Feliks." The Italian grinned at his friend, "Don't sell yourself short."

The two talked a bit more until Ludwig trudged in sleepily. Feliks rolled his eyes and bade his friend goodnight before making his way to his own room. Ludwig rubbed at his eyes and looked at Feli, all trace of fatigue evaporating at the sight of his beloved, "What the hell?!"

It really shouldn't have surprised him but Feli couldn't help but blush at how Ludwig pulled the bandages off of him to inspect his other injuries. Eyes hardening in anger, Ludwig growled, "What happened? I thought you said you were out with your brother!"

"P-please don't yell, Luddy," stuttered Feli as he cowered slightly, "I was with Lovino but—promise you won't get mad."

"I will do no such thing."

"Ve…"

"Fine! I promise, now tell me."

Taking a deep breath, Feli told him everything that happened. Of course, he skipped the part where he beat a man to near death—not that he was anywhere near death…more like he beat him up pretty badly. Yeah. By the time he was done, Ludwig's anger simmered down to shame and before he knew it, Feli was wrapped in his fiancé's strong arms. "Don't be upset, Luddy. I'm fine, right?"

"This was my fault…"

"Not really."

"Of course, it is! If I hadn't," Ludwig trailed off and buried his face in Feli's hair, "I'm sorry this happened to you."

"I said it's ok. I kind of look cool like this, don't I?" He giggled at Ludwig's expression, pressing a sweet kiss to his nose, "Bello, there's something I need to tell you."

"Hm?"

"I'm going to be seeing my brother at night from now on. There are some things that we need to do."

"Like what?"

"Just…things, Luddy. I'll be back before either you or Alex wake up, promise." Feli kissed Ludwig gently before nestling himself in their bed.

As the moon shifted phases, Feli felt himself grow more and more content. The nightmares no longer bothered him. They'd been replaced by either dreamless sleep or pleasant dreams. True to his word, he would leave once everyone had gone to bed and return before they even had a chance to notice he was gone. This, of course, bothered Ludwig who would ask Feliciano what exactly he was doing so late at night that would result him coming home sweaty and sometimes bloody and bruised.

Feli would smile and kiss him, assuring that everything was ok and that he was only working out to be stronger for him. He blamed his wounds on his clumsy nature which Ludwig would only roll his
eyes with an exasperated grin and kiss them better. Things were really looking up for them.

Lovi was strangely enough a patient instructor and a skilled sparring partner. It got to a point where Feliciano was able to keep up with their movements almost fluidly. However, when it came to practice with actual weapons, he refused much to his brother's annoyance. The young heir's explanation was simple though, he absolutely refused to lose control of himself again. If there was a way to solve things peacefully then he would much rather go down that path than violence.

Of course, this only made his men tease him. One had even gone as far as to give him a white flag but Oswaldo quickly barked at them to shut up. Feli, though, had taken it all in stride. It was the seemingly meek ones that one should always be wary of after all.

February 7th

Beads of sweat rolled down Feli's face, his breath coming out in steady shallow breaths as he took a breather. Looking out the window, he brought his water bottle to his lips and took long deep gulps, a few drops making a run for it down his chin. Oswaldo had to force himself to look away but his brother was less tactful. Bernardo took a quick film and sent it to Ludwig with a winky face making the younger roll his eyes.

"How do you even have his number," whispered Ozzie as he polished Feliciano's knife set. They'd been pulled out of storage a while ago in hopes that seeing the gleaming silver would entice him to use them. It had not.

Bernardo snorted, "How do you not? He practically forced it on all of us so that we could report back in case his beloved liebling got hurt. It's sweet actually seeing how much he cares for our little cousin." His brother grumbled something unintelligible but he chose to ignore it in favor of recording Feli stretching and, god, he was going to hell, zoomed in on his hip bones before sending that to Ludwig as well. Had he mentioned that Ludwig and he were getting along great?

Knuckles cracked and Feli padded back to the center of the training room, his black sweats clinging to his hips. Lovi raised an eyebrow before ducking low, Feli's body mirroring his in sync as they started their dance. Fingers were poised perfectly as if holding a gun while their arms moved in perfectly calculated arcs that, if they were in a real battle with real weapons, would be very lethal.

It had impressed the older twin how dedicated Feli had been with his training. If he were honest, he thought he would've quit weeks ago but to his delight, Feli had been very focused. Though, he supposed that this was mostly due to the aggression his brother was obviously repressing. If that night with the Russian assailant were anything to go by, he'd say that Feliciano was a ticking time bomb.

Too many years had gone without him so much as showing anger let alone aggression. One had to wonder just how much he had pent up. And despite his best efforts, Lovi also couldn't help but wonder when the last time his brother had gotten laid. Shaking his head in horror, the older twin continued on to the next item on their regimen. Hand to hand combat.

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Ludwig’s face was burning after watching the latest video from Bernardo but he'd be lying if he said that he regretted giving the mischievous Vargas his number. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve
before ironing his red, gold, and black plaid blanket. During one of his cleaning endeavors he'd come across a door in his fiancé's upstairs studio. To his delight and shock, it led to a very familiar closet which was walled in by another door which led to his high rise.

One quick phone call to his cousin Lars confirmed that he had actually designed it that way, though he was more hesitant to explain where his head had been…or rather on what. Shrugging, Ludwig didn't question it further. It wasn't his business after all. Besides, he was more than happy with the new discovery. It meant that they didn't all have to be so cramped for space in Feli's side.

Of course, it had taken some coaxing but Feli had agreed to bring the social worker in so that they could examine Ludwig's home in order to get permission for Alex to freely move between the two. They'd allowed it of course because technically it was no different from a large house.

The doorbell rang on Feli's side and he rushed to silence his dogs before answering. Arthur and Alfred were there with Daniel and Sammy, who immediately latched on to his 'Uncwle Luddy'.

"Heh, sorry about that," said Arthur sheepishly as he entered with duffle bags followed by his husband and Daniel, "They were all pretty excited to see where Alex was living."

Ludwig smiled and took the bags, "It's fine. Thank you again for coming over to watch Alex for me. Feliks is working late tonight and won't be in till later."

"No problem, dude," said Alfred, smacking Ludwig with a hearty laugh, "Anything to make y'all's date special." He winked at his friend. Things had cleared up between the two men after Feli announced that they were engaged much to everyone's relief. Lunch was once again pleasant for everyone who had to share the lunch table at the cafeteria and Alfred was once again able to help himself to the sweet pastries Ludwig would bring. Speaking of which, Alfred reached out for a brownie only to get smacked away by his husband.

Alfred whined, "But Artie!"

"Don't be rude, you git," hissed Arthur. He frowned, "Ask."

"I-it's ok, Arthur," assured Ludwig as he motioned to the plate, "Help yourselves to whatever is here. Feli and I went grocery shopping yesterday so the fridge is full. There are water bottles in here, we have some juice for the kids and there's beer in the fridge. Also, Feli prepared some lasagna and burger patties. They're in the freezer and only need to be thawed and cooked. Snacks are in the pantry and—"

"I think we'll manage, dude." Alfred helped himself to more brownies, breaking one in half to share with Sammy. "I know my way around the kitchen." Looking over to Arthur he whispered, "I had to learn else we'd all starve."

"I heard that!" Arthur poked his head from the couch and glared at Alfred.

"Heh, well, have fun. Be sure to lock the door so the kiddies don't try to sneak into your place and see things that they're too young to even think about."

"What things, daddy," asked Sammy, green eyes wide with innocence and cheeks smeared with chocolate.

Both men blushed and stammered for a response. To their relief, Arthur saved them from further embarrassment and said that Ludwig and Feli had a lot of work that they needed to catch up with for the hospital.
"Speaking of which," he said, giving Alfred a pointed glare, "I brought your paperwork so that you can work on it here."

"What?!" Alfred pouted, "But it's supposed to be a slumber party with games and movie marathons."

"For the kids. Anyway, don't worry about a thing, Ludwig. We'll take care of it from here." He pushed him towards the stairs, "Have fun."

Before he forgot, Ludwig dug his heal into the floor to stop Arthur from pushing him through the closet, "Who's looking after your dog?"

"Dog?"

"I think he means Cerberus, Artie." At Ludwig's look of disbelief, Alfred realized his mistake and quickly corrected himself, "Crazy name, right? She's a black Labrador Retriever with these amazing eyes. She also had two identical sisters and they reminded me of the three headed dog, ya know? Also cause she's so protective of our home."

Ludwig nodded slowly, "Ok. Well, have fun." He saw Alex jog up the stairs and knelt down to hug him, "Gute nacht, son. Be good for them, ok?"

Alex's black hair fell to his eyes as he nodded happily, "I will, vati. Tell papa I love him."

After making sure that everything was perfect for his date with Feli, Ludwig picked up his keys and rushed out to V Enterprises to surprise Feliciano. Bernardo had mentioned that that was where he was training with Lovino. Something about the office building having a penthouse at the highest floor level. Ludwig parked his car and smoothed his hair back. This was the first time coming to the intimidating building and he didn't want to make a poor impression.

Satisfied that he looked relatively good, Ludwig went inside. The lobby was dimly lit though he supposed it was because it was well past normal working hours. He tried to look around for the security guard but the cubical was empty. Shrugging, he went ahead and signed himself in and took a guest pass before getting into a waiting elevator. The panel on the wall took him by surprise, or rather, the retina scanner did. He tried to press the level sixty-sixth button but it seemed to be stuck.

"You're kidding me," muttered Ludwig as he tried harder to press it. He moved on and pressed level sixty-five. It glowed silver in acknowledgement and the elevator started its trek upwards. Ludwig continued to press sixty-six until a computerized voice spoke.

"Hold," it said.

Ludwig frowned, "Eh?" He figured that perhaps he was supposed to hold the button down so he did. Heat and a gentle hum pulsed against his finger pad making him jump back.

"Fingerprint, not recognized. Hold." Unsure what was going on, Ludwig was about to move closer when a blue light scanned him over.

"Processing," interrupted the voice, "Beilschmidt…is that your name?"

"Um, ja."

"Beilschmidt…is that your name?"
"Ja."

"Yes or no. Beilschmidt...is that your name?"

"Yes!" irritation brewed in the German's belly. Honestly...in the event that Feliciano and his grandfather did want him to take over the company for them, the first thing he was going to do is teach the damn elevator some German. Why the hell did it want to know his name anyway? Creepy little—

"First name, please."

Ludwig crossed his arms across his chest and stubbornly remained silent.

The computer gave a hum as if annoyed, "First name, please."

"...Ludwig."

"Ludwig Beilschmidt...processing." The light washed over him again though this time it went around his person as if it was looking for something. It finally settled on to his side where his imperial eagle was tattooed before moving to his face.

"What are you doing?!" Damn it, he'd never felt more violated in his life. A screen above the retina scan flashed photographs of his older brothers, Matthew, Tino, Elizabeta, and finally Wolfgang before going blank.

"Name, face, not recognized."

"What the hell are you talking about?" He pressed the button again. And again.

"Please refrain from pressing the button, Mr. Beilschmidt."

Scoffing, Ludwig glared at the screen and pressed one last time. He'd teach the damn thing to be rude to him. The elevator suddenly came to a stop, "Are you going to take me to Felician—"

"You were warned." The lights in the elevator turned red before plummeting downward.

Ludwig absolutely did not scream.

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"Those Acidanthera freaks are impossible to get a proper hold of," said Lovino as Feliciano dried off from his shower. He held out his clothes for his brother as he continued his rant, "I mean, I know mercenaries were slippery bastards but damn! Every time my men catch their scent, by the time I'm able to pursue, it's gone. And don't even get me started on how shady that Collins family is. Did you know that their patriarch received a large donation from a mysterious backer during the senatorial election? We're tracing it to see if it'll lead us to whoever is pulling the strings but it might take a while."

"Ve, it's been quiet out there, hasn't it?" Feli slipped a soft black sweater over his grey t-shirt before sliding into a pair of dark jeans.

"Why the hell are you putting those on?"

"Luddy said to dress casually."

"Tch. And why are you wearing so much black lately?"
"I've always worn black, fratello," chirped Feli as he ran a brush through his hair. His complexion looked a tad bit healthier now that he was getting his sleep without being haunted by night terrors. Aside from that, he could see the effects of his late nights. He just hoped that Ludwig would too. "Any way, I'll see you next week, maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Si~ I get to go back to work. Let me know about any progress you make, Lovi. Goodnight guys!" He made his way to the elevator and pressed the button to summon the lift, looking over his shoulder when his brother called to him.

"Here," said Lovi as he handed him a thick file, "That's everything we've found so far. And here's that thing you wanted me to make for you from the recording you did last night."

"Oh, um, grazie~" Feli took the file and placed it into his bag but pushed the little black box back to his brother, "You hold on to that, fratello. Pray that you guys never have to give it to Ludwig."

"Tch, don't be stupid. You're not going to die anytime soon. Does he even have the key to access what's inside? Cause' I'm not about to—"

Feliciano giggled, "It’s ok~ The diamonds in his engagement ring are they key but like you said, I’m not planning to die any time soon.” He hugged his brother tightly, “Te voglio bene, Lovino.”

Heat rushed to the older twin's face and he pushed his brother towards the elevator, "Y-yeah, yeah. Just get going. Wouldn't want to keep your macho potato bastard waiting, right?"

"Ve~"

The room lit up with bright silver lights and a shrill alarm cut through the air. Their men stopped talking, hands going to their weapon of choice as they watched the elevator like hawks waiting to swoop in to whoever would walk out. Bernardo slid along the kitchenette counter and pulled up the surveillance feed, "Oh, shit!" He jumped off the counter and dashed out the pent house without an explanation to his confused cousins.

Feli wandered over to the abandoned screen and gasped, "Dio mio!"

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Ludwig was beyond sick by the time the elevator stopped at the lobby. As soon as the doors opened, the German crawled out only to be harshly lifted from under his arms and shoved against the wall. His eyes widened when he realized that they were men dressed in business suits, "Wh-what—?"

One of the men pulled his fist back, but a hand rushed out to stop it before it could even pierce into Ludwig's personal space. Sweaty from having run down sixty-six flights of stairs, Bernardo's golden eyes were tight around the edges as he pushed his way to stand in front of Ludwig protectively, "What the hell are you doing, Dalmatian?"

"He triggered the alarms, sir," said Dalmatian with a huff.

"He is a Beilschmidt!"

"Who the system didn't recognize."

Bernardo studied the men before him and shook his head, "That doesn't matter. You should've
recognized him. He's Alpha pup's fiancé. You were about to beat up your boss' lover!"

Ludwig was nauseous. He tried to keep up with the Italian being said before him but it was being spoken too rapidly. He finally caught sight of Feliciano when the elevator gave a pleasant chime to announce his arrival. His fiancé took one look at the scene before him and glowered, "What the hell is going on here?"

"Feliciano," cried Ludwig from behind Bernardo, "Feli, what on earth is happening? Who are these people?"

Feli didn't answer him, his gaze was on Dalmatian, "Answer me."

"I-I'm so sorry, sir. I didn't realize that this man was your—"

"My fiancé."

"...yes."

"And that would make him your boss as well, right?"

Dalmatian glanced over his shoulder at Ludwig and nodded stiffly, "I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"For your sake, it better not." Feli pushed his way past and tugged Ludwig out with a smile, "I'm sorry about that, bello. The security in our building is really strict but," he shot the men a nasty look, "from now on, they'll know better, isn't that right?"

"Th-that's right, my prince."

Before Ludwig could question anything else, Feli tugged him out of the building and towards his car. Once inside, Ludwig just sat there. He stared ahead blankly, combing through the recent events and trying to remember his Italian to piece together what Bernardo was telling the security. Feli reached out hesitantly, "Luddy?"

"Explain to me what just happened," snapped Ludwig as he finally turned his car on.

Feli sighed, "You triggered the security."

"Yeah I got that. My question is why does your company need so damn much? Why were they going to beat me up? And more importantly why did it recognize my family but not me?!"

"My grandpa sometimes lives at the top floor. Your dad sometimes visits him. Elizabeta's uncle is my grandpa's friend so it makes sense that she and him would be registered as well as Roderich. Tino received a grant from my grandfather so that's why he's registered. Berwald is married to Tino so that's why he's registered. Oh! And Gilbert is registered because of Matthew, whose mom and dad are old friends of my grandfather."

Well that was easy. Ludwig had expected for Feli to put up more resistance for some odd reason but was greatly relieved that he didn't. He felt Feli rub his shoulder, "I'm sorry, amore. That wasn't supposed to happen."

"Hm…"

"Ve, you wanted to surprise me, didn't you? I'm sorry."

"It's fine."
"No, it isn't. I should've told Bernardo to add you to our system." Feli leaned back and watched his fiancé closely, "I'm sorry."

"I said its fine, Feli."

"But you're mad. I can tell 'cause your brow is all—"

Ludwig gripped his steering wheel, "I said I'm fine!"

Cowering back, Feliciano turned to look out the window, pressing his body as far away from Ludwig as he could, "I'm sorry." He bit his lip and cradled his face on the seat belt, closing his eyes so that he wouldn't have to see anything.

It was silent during the drive home. Guilt was already eating at Ludwig. After all, it hadn't been Feli's fault. He shouldn't have raised his voice. Setting his car in its designated spot, Ludwig turned it off and turned to Feli, "We're home."

Sniffing, Feli pulled his seat belt off and climbed out without a word. Ludwig scrambled after him, "Feli, wait." He pulled him into his chest, "I'm sorry, I yelled."

"You were right to," mumbled Feli as he hugged him back, "I'm sorry that happened to you, Luddy. They know better now not to touch you again. If they do, they'll be sorry."

Ludwig smirked, "What, are you going to hurt them to defend my honor?"

"Yes."

"That's cute, liebe, but I think you're forgetting that I come from a military family. Just because I didn't actually get a chance to enlist doesn't mean that I don't know how to defend myself. I'm very good at it actually."

Grinning, Feli looked up at his beloved, "Really?"

"Mhm." Ludwig led them up to their penthouse, well his side of the joint high rise, "Welcome home."

The Italian revelled in the warmth that was Ludwig's hand and squeezed it lovingly, "I've missed you."

"I-I've missed you, too." Ludwig stopped so that they could remove their shoes, "Take off your shoes, Feli. I have a surprise for you."

Feli did as asked, taking his jacket off as well, and slipped his hand back into Ludwig's, "What is it?"

"Close your eyes and I'll show you."

"Ve, okie dokie!" Feli gave a yelp when Ludwig picked him up bridal style but kept his eyes closed, trusting that Ludwig wouldn't do anything to scare him. He felt him climb up the narrow staircase that would take him to the upstairs office. "Can I open them yet?"

"Nein. Be patient, my little fox." Ludwig carefully ducked his head and walked into a makeshift tent he made with black sheets.

Feli could smell the herbal aroma from whatever food Ludwig decided to make for them and his mouth instantly watered. A loud grumble from his belly made his beloved chuckle before
depositing him on a nest of cushy pillows, "Can I open them now?"

"Ja, you can."

The sight felicitated a gasp from Feliciano. Bowls of pasta, pizza fresh from the oven, and other side dishes and sweets were laid out in a picnic style with a bottle of wine sitting contently in its ice bath. Food aside, what had truly taken his breath away was the way Ludwig had strung fairy lights onto the roof of their tent making an illusion of twinkling stars. The candles in mason jars of various blue hues only added to the romantic atmosphere Ludwig had in mind. Feli turned to Ludwig with his mouth slightly parted.

Shyly, Ludwig looked away and played with the hem of his sweater, "D-do…do you like it?" In response to the question, Feli leaned over and pulled Ludwig in for a slow loving kiss. When he pulled back he pecked the tip of his nose and nodded with a cheerful "ve. Ludwig smiled, "I'm glad."

"It's perfect, Luddy, but the wine…"

"It's grape juice," said Ludwig quickly. He pulled the bottle out and showed it to him, "I know you can't have wine right now but I saw this bottle in the market and thought you would like it."

"You're so cute, Luddy." He curled up next to Ludwig and picked up his plate, "Did you make all of this yourself? Mm! The pizza is so yummy!"

Pride swelled in Ludwig's chest and he couldn't help but preen at the compliment, "I did. I'm glad you like it."

As the couple ate, they discussed their day. Ludwig had had a temporary partner at the hospital, some new resident who had been assigned to Berwald as well. He was a decent doctor save for the fact that he wasn't very good at talking to the nurses. Apparently, he was one of those doctors who thought anyone who didn't have MD after their names were automatically inferior to them. The fool was all talk though because when Elizabeta overheard him snap at a nurse she drilled him with post-op protocol questions that he had no clue how to answer.

Feli giggled, "Lizzie must've really given it to him, huh?"

"The pregnancy's only made her less tolerant of stupidity," said Ludwig with a chuckle of his own, "She's been even less tolerant of Gilbert and Roderich's bickering at lunch which is funnier."

"Heh, I bet." Feli listened with an affectionate smile as Ludwig continued to tell him about everything that's been happening at the hospital in his time away. Annoying residents aside, the others have missed him, especially Kiku. Feli nodded, "I need to get him something as a thank you gift for that tea he sent home with you. It really helped." And speaking of which…Feli pulled out a small silver box and emptied its contents into his palm before taking them with his juice.

Ludwig watched, "How are you feeling?"

"I'm ok, it's just that I have to keep my schedule. If I don't, I could relapse…or something like that."

"I love you."

Feli smiled, "I love you too!" He nuzzled his arm before resting his chin on his shoulder, "Hey, are we going to have sex?"

Using all his will, Ludwig had to fight with his body to keep from covering his face in embarrassment. He half won that battle. Speaking through his fingers, Ludwig looked away,
"Don't say things like that all of a sudden!"

"Ve…but Ludwig looks too cute when he's all flustered," purred Feli, nipping on his red earlobe. He asked again, "Well, are we?"

"…After we clean up."

That seemed to please Feli enough. He got up and helped Ludwig store away the leftovers while Ludwig washed the dishes. They worked in peaceful silence until Feli wrapped his arms around Ludwig and pressed his face to the German's back. A soft smile blossomed on Ludwig's face and he patted Feli's hand, "I'm almost done. Why don't you go to our bedroom? I'll be right there in a sec."

Feli trailed a warm finger down Ludwig's neck before reaching up to peck him just behind his earlobe. He made sure to trace the lobe with his tongue, coaxing the reddening flesh in between his lips for a teasing nibble, "Don't make me wait too long, my love," he whispered in German.

Winking, he walked out of the kitchen.

Surprised, flustered, and aroused beyond reason, Ludwig quickly shoved the rest of the dishes into his dishwasher and set it on auto before wiping his hands on a dish towel and rushing over to his fiancé. He took a moment to gather his wits about him and calmly opened the door to his bedroom. The sight made the desperate heat in his belly intensify. But instead of need to fully consume Feli, he wanted to pull him into his arms and never let go.

Feliciano had lit small candles in the same fashion as when they had first made love, the light making his skin glow almost gold. He had also rid himself of everything aside his shirt which he barely covered his adorable bottom. What really made Ludwig's heart skip a beat was how Feli was gently dancing with Johan. The black cat purring loudly, his baby blue eyes not leaving Feli's face as the Italian hummed softly with the song from Ludwig's dock, "Hmmm, so this is love, hmmm. So, this is love. So, this is what makes life divine."

Entranced, Ludwig closed the door as silently as he could and quietly padded closer to Feli. He bit back a smirk at the annoyed glance his cat sent him and wrapped his arms around Feli, molding their bodies together so that he could dance with them. He tucked his head in the junction of Feli's neck and shoulder, moving them so that they could dance in front of a mirror.

Feli smiled, "I'm all aglow, hmmm, and now I know—"

"And now I know," sang Ludwig shyly as he nuzzled his face against his fiancé's warm skin. He felt a paw swipe at his nose and chuckled.

Johan was glaring at his master for interrupting his moment with Feli but soon found himself purring again when Feliciano lightly stroked his spine. He supposed he could give the two some privacy. The feline jumped out of Feli's arms and went in search for Gino instead.

Ludwig turned Feli around and rested his hands on the flourish of his hips while Feli wrapped his arms around the German's neck. The continued their slow dance, softly picking up where they left off, "The key to all heaven is ours."

"My heart has wings," cooed Feli as he nuzzled Ludwig's nose with his, "and I can fly." He smiled at the breathy laugh Ludwig gave. It was the closest to a giggle he would ever get out of him. Then again, they did have an entire lifetime together. Perhaps he would get a giggle out him yet.

This had to be a sign from above. Ludwig was sure of it and as much as he hated to part from his
beautiful little fox, he scurried to his jewelry box before pulling him back against his chest and coaxing them back into a sway. Feli covered his arms with his own but gave a soft gasp when he realized that Ludwig was holding out a small blue box.

Ludwig pressed a kiss to Feli’s temple, his deep tenor whispering as he opened it, "You'll touch every star in the sky." Inside was a white gold band supporting a small black geode. It glittered in the candle light making it seem as the small rock contained a galaxy.

Extending his hand out, Feli let his fiancé slip it on, "So this is the miracle that I've been dreaming of…Hmmmm."

"Hmmm…"

They rested their foreheads together and grinned, "So this is love."

Ludwig sat them on his bed and let Feli crawl into his lap, "I see Alex made some changes to your iPod. Think he sneaked over when Alfred pulled out our dinner from the oven?"

"Probably," murmured Feli as he admired his ring, "I guess he's picking up how to be a romantic from his Vati."

"I'm not really—" Ludwig blinked when his lips were suddenly covered by Feli's. He couldn't help but shake his head. This was Feli's way of telling him to shut up and take the compliment and he wasn't about to disobey a request, especially when it was being given to him with so much tongue.

Sighing into the kiss, Ludwig trailed his hand up Feli's neck and into his hair until it reached the curl. He wrapped it a few times around his finger and gave it a gentle tug. Feli whimpered and shifted so that they were on either side of Ludwig's thighs. Without breaking the kiss, Feli started working on Ludwig's own shirt while savoring the feeling of Ludwig tracing small circles into his hips.

It was Ludwig's turn to moan when Feli's mischievous tongue retreated into its own cavern, followed swiftly by Ludwig’s where it was instantly captured by equally mischievous lips. He felt Feli smile and, well, he couldn't help but smile back. They pulled away so that Ludwig could discard his shirt and flip them over.

Feli arched against his love's mouth as Ludwig placed open mouthed kisses down his chest, "Ve, Ludwig?"

"Hm?"

"Do you notice anything different about me," asked Feli breathlessly. He opened his darkened eyes and looked down at Ludwig as his fiancé released one of his nipples.

Teasing the other, Ludwig traced his tongue down the expanse of Feliciano's torso, "Uh-huh." He pulled away and licked his lips, "You got your belly back."

"What?!" Feli tried to sit up but Ludwig's laugh stopped him. It took him a moment to realize that his fiancé was teasing him. He puffed his cheeks out and crossed his arms around his midsection, "Ve!"

Ludwig wished he had his cellphone on him to take a picture of how adorable Feliciano looked at this moment. Sadly, it was all the way in the living room and he had no intention of leaving his pouting lover all alone. He spoke through his chuckles and pried Feli’s arms away and pinned them over his head with a gentle smile, "Don't be like that, liebe."
"I'm chubby."

"A bit—"

"Humph!"

"But you're still so cute," murmured Ludwig as he covered Feli's face in butterfly kisses.

Feli's annoyance started to melt but he refused to let Ludwig get off the hook so easily, "Ve…"

"You don't believe me? Ok, I'll show you but you have to promise to be good for me. Will you be good for me?"

What on earth was he going on about no—oh! Oh. It was all Feli could do not to whine at Ludwig's words. He licked his lips and nodded, locking his hands with one another so that he wouldn't be tempted to interfere with whatever Ludwig was planning. A sharp nip at his lobe brought him back, he whimpered, "Yes, I'll be good for you, Luddy."

"Good." Ludwig released his hold of Feli's wrists and continued where he left off, each kiss and nibble followed by praises. When he reached Feli's stomach, he nuzzled his face into it, reveling in how soft the skin was. True it was soft in the other sense of the word but he could feel the beginnings of muscles. If Feliciano kept up whatever training regimen he was working with there was no doubt in Ludwig's mind that he would lose the softness. The thought saddened Ludwig a bit and he was suddenly overcome with the need to do something incredibly childish.

Feli's eyes shot back open as he squealed, "Ludwig!" His fingers dug into the pillows in effort to not interfere with what Ludwig was doing but he couldn't keep his laughter to himself. Bubbles of giggles erupted and he squirmed under Ludwig's mouth as the German blew raspberries into his belly, "Luddy, s-stop! That tickles!"

Red faced and grinning, Ludwig showed mercy on Feli and hovered over him instead, "I'm sorry, liebe. Couldn't help myself."

"I'm going to tickle you when you least expect it, Ludwig Beilschmidt. Just you wait," said Feli with a glare or rather his half-hearted attempt at a glare. He had a feeling that the heat radiating from his eyes was the kind that was kindled by love.

"I'm sorry," said Ludwig again, "I'll be more serious now."

"I don't mind, tesoro." Blushing, Feli brushed his knuckles along Ludwig's cheek bone, "I'm actually enjoying this. I like seeing you like this."

"How? Making a fool of myself?"

"Happy."

"I honestly can't think of a time where I've been this happy," admitted Ludwig. He pulled his hand in to look at his engagement ring, liking how the light reflected colors from the facets in the diamonds. He laced his fingers with Feli's and smiled, "I love you."

"I love you, too."

(*)

The air around them became warmer as they looked into each other's eyes, the corners of their lips
twitched upwards as they met in a slow kiss. Ludwig released one of Feli's hand in favor of running his fingers through his beloved’s thick hair. He tugged him back enough to be able to mumble against Feli's lips, "You're so beautiful and sexy." He reached out to get the bottle of lube and spread some onto his fingers before pressing them against Feli, relishing the sharp exhale that cut through the air when they slipped inside, "And I don't think you know what you do to me."

Feli nipped at Ludwig’s chin and reached down in between them to wrap a warm hand around Ludwig, groaning as he held him steady, his thumb circled the dripping slit, "I know exactly what I do to you~"

Releasing a shaky laugh, Ludwig slowly rolled his hips against Feli's fist. He paced himself with his fingers as he continued to stretch Feli out, moaning, "God, I love you."

"I love you, too," whispered Feliciano. He suddenly felt empty but before he could whine about the loss of Ludwig’s fingers, Ludwig was already hovering over him.

Ludwig coated himself with more lube and wiped the rest on his discarded shirt. Glancing down through his lashes at Feli's flushed face, he smiled and slowly slid in. He watched Feli's carefully.

A part of him wanted to close his eyes to heighten the feel of his lover's greedy heat tighten and tug him further in, but he liked this better. He liked seeing how Feliciano's eyebrows altered from going up in relief to down in desperation. He liked seeing how his cheeks reddened from the intimacy between them and how his lips parted to release quiet moans and praises. God, he just liked seeing Feli.

Ludwig waited as patiently as he could until Feli finally wrapped his legs around his hips, locking his ankles at the small of his back to let him know that he was ready. He pulled out, slow, steady—he could feel Feli involuntarily clench in protest—only to slam back in at full force. He did this a few times—each time taking care that he brushed Feli's sweet spot, and given the way his fiancé was clinging to his shoulders, nails raking across his moist skin, he'd say that he was hitting his mark—before falling into a languid rhythm.

Their mouths found each other as Ludwig's hands moved to pin Feli's back over his head. Feli’s moans and whispered sighs were like the chorus to the symphonic sounds of skin slapping against wet skin. His brow was beginning to furrow and Ludwig knew it was only a matter of time before he started to beg for him to move faster.

For some reason, it always drove Ludwig crazy when Feli would beg him to devour and completely ruin him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Ludwig remembered the security guards and how frightened they appeared to be of Feli and how commanding his love had actually been. What had they called him? Boss? No…principe? What did that mean again? Oh, that's right…

"Principe," cooed Ludwig, his voice wrapping around Feli's already taught skin like smooth leather.

Feli’s eyes shot open, "Wh-what?"

"That's what they called you, right? At V Enterprises, the guards called you principe. That means prince, doesn't it?"

"Ludwig, I—"

"Why did they call you that?" The fact that Ludwig hadn't stopped moving made Feli's mind whiplash. He wasn't sure where he was going with this but before he got a chance to ask, Ludwig
continued, "Is it because you're rich?"

"Uh…"

"Or because you secretly really are the prince of crime?"

Feli's heart stopped but Ludwig still hadn't stopped moving. He didn't seem angry either, if anything, his pupils seemed to get even bigger at the thought. The Italian trembled under Ludwig's slow thrusts and nodded slowly, "And if I am?"

A choked mewl escaped him when Ludwig suddenly snapped his hips forward harshly. More. He wanted more of that and he wanted it now! Ludwig’s chest rumbled with chuckles and Feli realized that he must've said that out loud. He peeked up from under his bangs and gulped. Ludwig looked absolutely ravenous.

Running his tongue along his lip, Ludwig lifted himself up, pulling Feli with him towards the edge of the bed. Feli whined, "Ve, Luddy what are you doing?"

Ludwig sat at the edge and sat Feli on his lap facing him outwards and bending his legs so that his knees where on either side of his thighs. He kissed his neck and forced Feli to face the mirror, "Look at yourself, liebe. What do you see?"

Feli blinked a few times to see past his lust filled haze. His reflection was an absolute mess. Auburn hair in complete disarray, skin shiny with sweat and marred with love bites, lips swollen and red, and arousal stiff and pointing upward, needy for attention. He looked at Ludwig through the mirror and whimpered, "Please keep going, please."

Ludwig's breath tickled Feli's skin as he nodded, "I will, but first—" He blinked at the loss of his lover. Feli had squirmed out of his lap but before he could complain, Feli was back in it, this time facing him and hovering over his length. "F-Feli—"

Feliciano silenced him with a kiss, all teeth and tongue, arms coming up to wrap themselves around Ludwig's neck. By the time Feli was done with him, Ludwig looked almost as bad as he did. Feli pulled back and smiled, "I said, keep going. I don't like to be kept waiting." Leaning forward, Feli nibbled Ludwig's lower lip and whispered, "Tend to your prince, Ludwig."

Blue eyes looked like pools of space, dark and deep as Ludwig did just that. He glanced over Feli's shoulders to see their erotic image in the mirror and quickly became hypnotized by the image of Feli's sweat soaked form moving up and down on him, his rump making delicious smacking sounds with every bounce. A strangled moan escaped him and he gripped his hips to help him along, "You're perfect, Feli. So good for me…"

"God, Ludwig," gasped Feliciano. Ludwig slammed his hips down and Feli had to bite his shoulder to keep from screaming when his lover did it again and again.

Ludwig kissed his neck, "Mhm. You're fucking strong and powerful and smart. I bet people wish they could have you like this."

With each word Feliciano’s breathing became sharper, the sounds he made louder, his cheeks and chest blushed darker. Ludwig's words were hardly helping Feli pace himself. True, people probably wanted to see him like this. On the edge and desperate but he only trusted Ludwig to push him. He said as much.

"Me?"
"Si," panted Feli, back arching and muscles trembling. He pressed himself as close to Ludwig as possible, "Because you're my queen, tesoro. You're the only one who will see me like this."

Being called a queen shouldn't have aroused Ludwig nor should it have pulled at his heart strings but it did. Thrusting upwards powerfully, Ludwig held Feli tighter. Close. He was so close! Forcing an eye open, he looked at their reflection again as Feli whispered hotly into his ear, "Everyone will fear us, Ludwig. Crime syndicates will bow to us."

Gasping, Ludwig tossed Feliciano back onto the bed and buried himself back inside, losing himself into a frenzy as his hips moved desperately, almost mercilessly. Ecstatic cries beneath him only fueled his desire to push them over the edge. The sound of blood rushing echoed in his ears and he could practically smell the sparks flying from their skin. Wrapping his arms underneath Feli's back, Ludwig pressed his hard form against him one last time and tensed. Feli's own release echoed through him in the background of his heartbeat pulsing in his ears.

(*)

They stayed like that, Ludwig still buried deep inside Feli and Feli's arms wrapped around Ludwig’s frame on top of him as they caught their breath. Ludwig kept his face buried in Feli's neck, snuffling his skin with loving kisses because, to be honest, that had been the best they'd ever had. At least he thought so. He carefully pulled himself out and settled back on top of Feli, far too content and warm to move.

On Feliciano’s part, once his lust had been sated and he started to come down from his high, all the things that he suddenly said, confessed—he glanced down at Ludwig and licked his lips—what would he say when he woke up and realized what—no! He had to tell him. Shaking his fiancé awake he said, "Ludwig, look at me."

"Hm?"

"Tesoro, about what I said...about me being a mob prince and you—about the crime syndicates bowing before us?"

"Mhm?"

"My family and I—that is to say—what I said, it was just...we pretend— It's not real!"

Ludwig rolled his eyes and settled back, "I know."

"Ve?"

"I know you were just pretending. It was a role. A hot one might I add. We should do that again. Power is sexy on you."

If it were any other situation, Feli might've laughed at how adorably honest exhaustion made Ludwig. Right now though, it was making him anxious because Ludwig wasn't listening, "But—"

"Feliciano, I love you," said Ludwig as he lifted his face up to glare at his fiancé, "I know you're not a mobster. We've already been over it." He kissed his collar bone because he was just too damn comfortable to move from his spot and added, "And even if you were, oh well. I love you regardless and so long as it didn't actually put any of us in danger, and you made it back home for dinner, I would be fine with it."

Well shit. If Feli wasn't sleepy before, he sure as hell wasn't now. But he knew better than to test Ludwig's patience any more than he already had. So instead of pushing the issue, Feli allowed
Ludwig's weight on him calm him down and before he knew it, he joined his beloved in the world of dreams. He could always try again later.

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**Three days later**

Marcello watched Lovino drown his whiskey. That had been his eighth one and he was starting to worry that he would have to send for another bottle soon. The young Italian sighed and leaned against his counter, "Lovi, I didn't want to say anything but we're starting to seriously worry about you. Why hasn't Antonio been around?"

"Fuck that asshole," slurred Lovi as he shook his now empty glass in his cousin's face.

Sighing, Marcello reached for a bottle of diluted whiskey and poured it into his glass, "Did you two get into a fight? Is that why he hasn't come over to play?" Lovino muttered something under his breath and tossed his head back to swallow the bitter liquid. Marcello sighed, "Did you two break up?" He jumped when Lovi suddenly slammed the glass on the counter, "Lovi?"

"Ima go dance."

"There's no musi—it's barely mid-day, cugino! We haven't opened yet."

"Then turn up the music and I'll dance by myself!" Lovi leaned over and turned on Marcello's radio until he found something in Spanish, something about a black shirt or something. Bouncing on his feet, he pushed himself away and started to dance with a bouncer. The bouncer sent a confused look to Marcello but he motioned for him to keep his older cousin entertained while he went downstairs to rummage through his bag for a clue as to why he was so depressed as of late.

Dumping everything onto the floor, he shuffled through the contents. Candy, tiny empty bottles of cheap liquor, his gun and badge, and a couple of knives...ah! Marcello picked up the cell phone and sat on the floor to go through it. Various messages to and from their family members later, Marcello found a few from some of the local gangs who were just busted by a government agency a couple weeks ago. He rolled his eyes. Apparently, they were begging Lovi to convince their grandpa or Feli to not give up on them.

"As if they're of any use to us," muttered Marcello, "Though there is that issue with all those damn drugs just sitting in the open...I'll have to ask what they're going to do with that." He checked the emails but only found the usual kind from their associate, "Lovi, where on earth did you find the time to get all of this done?" Sighing, he collected everything back into the bag and moved to put it back next to Lovi's coat. The slight movement made an envelope fall out of the inner pocket.

Confused, Marcello picked it up and held it to the light, "The hell? Oi, Terrier!"

A shout from the other side of the room came back, "Yeah?"

"Did anyone come in here?"

"I don't know, boss. I just got back from lunch."

"Fucking perfect..." The Italian pulled on a pair of latex gloves and took the letter to the steel counter to open it. Inside were two sheets of stationary written front and back in messy cursive that he instantly recognized as Antonio's handwriting. As he read it, Marcello could feel anger bubble
in the pit of his stomach. His brows furrowed further and further with every sentence he read, "That fucking stupid son of a bitch!"

The surgery was going to start in a few minutes. First year surgical residents dressed in periwinkle blue scrubs sat in the circular observatory room that looked down into the surgery room. They were a noisy bunch much to Roderich's annoyance. Elizabeta glanced at him and giggled, "Stop mean mugging them, dear."

"I do not mean mug, love," he sniffed as if scandalized by the very notion, "I glower."

Shaking her head, Elizabeta shooed away two residents that were going to take the last two seats at the end of the row, "I'm sorry but those are reserved."

Matthew looked up from a patient file at the residents and smiled in sympathy, "She's right. Why don't you go sit at the back, eh?"

To his left, Tino bounced in his seat, "Isn't this exciting, guys? I can't wait to see him do this." His husband glanced up from his own file and frowned at him. Tino smiled, "You know that's not how I mean it, Bear. I'm simply excited for Gilbert. He's finally going to lead his own surgery all by himself."

"Hn," said Berwald as he checked his phone. Ludwig texted him that he and Feli were already there. The two residents from earlier came back.

"Why can't we just sit here," asked one of them.

"Because we're going to sit there," answered Ludwig. He gently nudged Feli into the seat next to Matthew and he slid in to his. "Sorry we're late. Mr. Lez wouldn't stop showing us pictures of his cats."

Feli giggled, "They were pretty cute cats." Tino immediately wanted to know more but the resident interrupted him.

"You're fucking kidding me," he said indignantly. "How the hell does a first year medical resident get a better seat than me? The dude's been MIA for like a month!"

"He's family," said Berwald stoically. It was probably the wrong thing to say but he didn't care. It was true.

The resident did however and he crossed his arms angrily, "That's bullshit! Dr. Wolfgang—"

"Won't care either," snapped Roderich. He glowered at the resident, "My father won't care if Dr. Vargas sits in the first row with us because this row is reserved for us Beilschmidts and whoever we damn well want to share our seats with."

"But that's not fair."

"Be that as it may, it doesn't change the fact that he and my brother will be sitting in this row."

Roderich pushed his glasses further up his nose and fixed a level gaze at the resident, "Now, either go take your seat or get out. This observation area is designed with you students in mind so you will get to see every bloody detail. If you can't see then direct your gaze to the screens above." He pointed to several large flat screens now showing Gilbert and his team washing their hands while
the scrub techs triple checked the room. Alfred was securing Gilbert's ridiculous Gilbird medical cap on and fixing his glasses.

Roderich stood up and turned to address the rest of the residents, "The surgery you all will be witnessing is that of Mrs. Cynthia McAdams. She is a forty-five-year-old female who needs a valve replaced in her right atrium. The surgeon leading this procedure is none other than my id—than my brother and your colleague, Dr. Gilbert Beilschmidt. The assistant surgeon is Dr. Alfred W. Jones…"

As his brother continued to give the residents details about the surgical team and the surgery itself to the residents, Ludwig placed his phone on silent, "Don't forget to silence your phone."

"Kk," chirped Feliciano. He took out his cell and saw that Oswaldo had texted him. Smiling, he texted back and put it on vibrate.

At the conclusion of Roderich's speech, Gilbert glanced up at the observers. The skin around his red eyes crinkled as he gave them all a thumbs up before slipping on his mask. He also sent a wink to Matthew who responded by blowing him a kiss. A few minutes later, the patient was fast asleep and Gilbert picked up his scalpel.

Everyone seemed to be holding their breath until the shiny tip of the sharp blade pierced through the skin like a hot knife through butter. Feli and Tino were engrossed by the albino's technique and how well he was communicating with his team to make the procedure go as smoothly as possible. Berwald and Ludwig shared amused long suffering looks over their loved ones' heads before glancing back down.

An hour into the surgery, not a single complication had risen which meant that the procedure would only be a couple more hours. It was cold in the room so Ludwig extended his arm around his fiancé, "How are you holding up," he whispered.

"This is amazing," said Feli without taking his attention off of Gilbert's careful movements. "Gilbert is so awesome!"

"Yeah, he is."

"Is surgery something you'd be interested in," asked Matthew.

"Ve, I'm not sure. I like being able to talk to my patients you know? Surgery is kind of too distant for my liking."

Matthew nodded in agreement, "I can see that. Gil will probably try to convince you to try for a fellowship. He's been after me and Ludwig for a while now. Alfred started his as soon as we arrived and even he's trying to get Arthur to become a surgical nurse."

"Ve~"

Another hour into the surgery, Feli's phone began to vibrate in his pocket. He ignored it in favor of seeing Gilbert carefully slip in the new valve. However, his phone kept ringing to the point that Roderich sent him a warning glare. Feli cowered, "Sorry." His cell buzzed in rapid succession and Feli decided to just turn it off. The screen lit up with various messages telling him that he had thirteen missed calls from Marcello. Frowning, he opened up a text message he just received:

"PLZ CALL ME, ASAP!"

Followed by:
I KNOW WHAT'S WRONG WITH LOVI!

Feli gripped his phone and quietly stood up, ducking as to not block the people behind him as he moved around Ludwig to leave.

"Where are you going," asked Ludwig as he gripped his fiancé's arm.

"I have to take this call. It's—its important. I'll be right back."

Ludwig let go of Feli and watched him leave. He tried to pay attention to what was going down in the operating room but there had been something about how Feli looked. It was almost as if he was nervous about something. Shaking his head, he leaned over and whispered to Matthew, "I'm going to go see what's wrong with him."

Berwald glanced over his shoulder in worry but Tino placed a soothing hand on his knee and smiled. Sighing they turned back around to watch the rest of the surgery.

"Can I sit there now," called the resident from earlier.

Roderich growled back, "Nein!"

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It was times like these when Ludwig kind of hated how big the hospital was. He'd been searching frantically for Feli for the past ten minutes and so far nothing. The first place he checked had been in the corridor around the observation room but there had been no sign of his wayward Italian. Next he checked their office before giving up and paging the nurses.

Arthur paged back that he saw Feli taking the elevator to the private baths and Ludwig frowned, "Why the hell did he go there?" Perhaps he wanted some privacy? Regardless, Ludwig jogged to the elevators and slid his badge over the sensor to take him up. As soon as he stepped out, he heard Feli speaking in rapid Italian. He sounded angry. No, Livid.

Confused and perhaps even a bit...not frightened per se, more concerned than anything, Ludwig hid behind one the lockers and tried to follow what Feli was saying.

Feli snapped into his phone, "Well did you check the cameras? Does my brother know?...No? Ok, let's make sure it stays that way. Don't worry, I'll find a place to hide it in the meantime." He twirled the cord of his badge clip as he listened to Marcello continue to relay what he read in the letter. Apparently Antonio had fled to Spain, "Bring him back. I'm issuing an order, Marcello. I want him brought back to—No, there's no time right now to tell grandpa. I'm telling you to get it done!"

Ludwig's eyes widened as the hostility in Feli's voice elevated. What on earth was going on?! All he could pick up from that were names and whoever had his beloved riled up, apparently something to do with Antonio or his grandfather...was he talking to Marcello? The German didn't have to decipher what was said because what followed was in clear English and it was enough to make him lose function of his thought process.

"I don't care how or when," snarled Feliciano, his hand balling into a tight fist, "but someone better go fetch him. Just...just don't send Cerberus. Send the French Bulldog. He'll be reasonable in the amount of punishment dealt without killing him... Yeah, no, I want him alive...For answers, Marcello...yes, well the sooner the better. Keep me posted...ciao."

Feli turned off his cell and stared at a point on the ground for a few minutes. That monster he
thought he had managed to tame was awake again and prowling behind its cage and before he knew it, he was slamming his fist to the locker and shouting curses in every language he knew.

Ludwig's heart was racing a thousand miles a minute. That—that didn't sound like someone who wasn't in bad business. Cerberus? French Bulldog? What the hell were those?! And more importantly who the hell did he want back so badly that he had to make sure to emphasize that they were to be left alive? He thought back to what Natalya had told him about the Vargas being notorious gangsters, a family feared by all. Was Feli truly the heir to a mob family?

Gripping his head, Ludwig felt a horrible headache coming on. The only consolation he had was how Feli stressed the fact that he and his family were not in fact mobsters. And as much as he hated to seek comfort in Feli’s discomfort whenever he thought he didn't believe him, he did. He wouldn't be so distressed for him to believe him if he were lying…right?

Ludwig shook his head and thought, ‘No, Feli is a good man. Whatever is happening, I'm sure he has a good reason for saying all the things he said.’

Rapid shallow breathing caught his attention followed by whimpering and muttering. Ludwig peaked around from his locker and gasped silently. Feli was on the floor leaning against the locker with his arms draped over his knees. He was staring blankly ahead with tears running down his rounded cheeks. His lips were pursed in a devastated pout and Ludwig couldn't help but gravitate to him, "Liebe?"

‘I'm such a fool,’ thought Feliciano angrily, ‘to think he wouldn't find me.’ He wanted so badly to snap but he bit his tongue; Ludwig didn't deserve his anger. Still, that didn't change the fact that he felt like a monster ready to burst. It was scratching at his walls, howling. Always howling.

"Feli?"

"Please stay away from me, Luddy," said Feliciano finally. He tilted his head back and looked at Ludwig, "I'll be down in a bit." Please go. Please.

"No."

Ludwig saw Feli's eyes flash angrily but Feliciano didn't act on his anger. Instead he said, "I'm really angry right now. I don't want to take it out on you."

"I can take it."

"I'm not going to yell at you and you don't have to be here right now." That was true. He didn't have to. Strangely enough, Ludwig wanted to. So, he took a seat across from his brooding fiancé and crossed his arms. Feli stared for a while. He tried to imagine what Ludwig would say if he just told him the truth, just pour out all the secrets he'd been harboring. The thought made him chuckle dryly, "You have no idea what you're getting yourself into by marrying me."

The German rose an eyebrow, "Really? Because here I thought I was getting a man who thinks he's too good to eat boxed macaroni and insists on leaving his dirty clothes all over the floor despite how many times he is told that we have five hampers located in both apartments."

"Ludwig..."

"A man who, as I seemed to recall, risked losing his medical license by conducting a risky blood transfusion to save a dying man. Who always goes above what is required of him here in the hospital and at home. Who loves his family and friends with more heart than I've ever seen a person capable, and believe me I know because my mom was a saint." Ludwig opened his arms out
in an invitation for Feli to crawl into his lap, "I thought I was getting involved with a man who loved me."

Another sob escaped Feli as he all but dove into his beloved's arms, "I'm scared!"

Wrapping his arms tightly around the shivering man, Ludwig wiped his tears away, "Of what, liebling?"

Feli stayed silent as he thought about how to go about answering. Things would be so much easier if he could just tell him everything but...but—Damn it, he couldn't! He wasn't allowed until he was told he could. But there was something else he could confess to; he just hoped that Ludwig wouldn't think him insane despite he himself believing that he may be.

"Feli—"

"I'm hiding something."

"...What?"

"In here." Feli tapped his temple and looked at Ludwig sadly, "It was supposed to be a secret but I can't lie to you, Luddy." He bent his fingers like claws and raked them through his hair, tugging it every now again as he glared at the lockers across from them, "It's a secret side of me that I've kept locked away because I hate it because it makes me someone I don't like. You've never seen him. Only Ozzie has but the last time I was like that—it was years ago. Back when I was dealing with my grief over my father."

Ludwig blinked. In all honesty, he hadn't thought Feli would share anything like that but he was happy he did. Rubbing Feli's knee in comfort, he nodded, "So it's like a defense mechanism. Your mind made a new person for you to be in times of extreme stress."

"Si," exclaimed Feli, eyes wide with surprise that Ludwig had understood. They dimmed when he realized that he understood, "Si..."

"Hey," lifting Feli's chin, Ludwig pecked him on the lips before resting their foreheads against each other, "there is no shame in doing what you have to in order to keep yourself safe."

"Ve..." Feli wondered if he should tell him what the little beast had been doing as of late. Thinking perhaps it was for the best he ducked his head under Ludwig's chest, "He wants to come out, Luddy, but I don't want him to."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want you or Alex to ever see me like that. That's why I went back on strong medication but right now, right now, he's awake and he wants out and I'm afraid I'll scare you."

Ludwig was starting to get scared but not of what he was learning. Rather, it had him wondering what could have happened to make Feli's stress levels elevate to the point of triggering his defense mechanism. The fear must've been evident in his eyes because Feli ducked his gaze again, "I'm sorry." He tried to get away from Ludwig, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. You think I'm a freak, don't you?"

"Never! I would never think such a horrible thing of you." Ludwig pulled him back and went as far as to lock his legs around him, "I love you."

"I love you too, but I shouldn't burden you with all this. Oswaldo knows about it...I should just go
"It's good that you're telling me. That's what I'm here for."

"Mh…"

"Please tell me more. How do you know that this… thing is trying to come out? Do you feel any different?"

Feli nodded and showed him his arms, "I can feel rage pulsing just beneath my skin, like it’s racing against my blood. I'm so angry right now but I don't like being angry. Anger makes my tummy twist into thorny knots and fingers itch. It feels like something dark is tainting something that shouldn't be. Like black ink in a chalice of water."

Ludwig took Feli's arm and kissed it all the way down to his swelling knuckles, "Then be mad, liebe. It's ok to be mad."

"I have been angry. Just not like this. I've never—I've never…" He wanted to say that he'd never wanted to kill a man before. At least, not for nearly a decade. Shaking his head, Feli groaned, "I was on the phone with my cousin, Marcello. He told me that Antonio did something really douchey."

"Is that why you're feeling like this?"

"That bastard…he's so stupid! He left the country without telling us. It doesn't look right."

"Feli—"

"He ripped by brother's heart out of his chest and shredded it, poured gasoline over it, and lit it on fire before putting the still flaming thing back in."

"Oh my god…"

"And that's not even the worse part!"

"There's more?"

"Yeah." Feli curled his lip in disgust and told Ludwig everything he could. He made a mental note to ask his grandfather to give him clearance to finally come clean about everything. Ludwig deserved to know the truth about him, about them.

Lovi stumbled through V Enterprise's doors and waved his hand at the guard who stopped him and reached under his cubicle, "Mr. Vargas, something came in for you this afternoon." Taking the parcel from the guard, Lovi rose an eyebrow in silent question. The guard shrugged, "I'm not sure, sir. The delivery man just handed it to me and left."

"Thanks, I guess," muttered Lovi as he tucked it under his arm and made his way to his temporary home. Saul and Mico ran up to him with welcoming meows. He patted them each on the head before tossing his things aside. Damn it, he needed a drink but he was pretty sure that he would die from alcohol poisoning if he drank another drop. Not that he particularly cared but he was sure that his dad would spank him on the other side if he killed himself.

The high rise felt lonely now that his brother had started working again. Lovi wondered if perhaps he should pick up where he left off and keep checking out new gangs sprouting about town. His
men had been doing just fine without him but he really needed to find a new way to distract himself.

A pile of work was stacked on his grandfather's desk and Lovi decided that perhaps it would help stave off his desire for liquor or do something irrational. Sighing, he took a seat and opened the package. Inside was a thick folder which contained profiles. Lovino sat up straighter as he flipped through them, his blood pressure seemingly unable to decide whether it wanted to rise or fall. One thing was for certain though, he had to do something quickly before he killed somebody. Picking up his car keys, Lovi rushed out of the building and headed straight for his apartment.

It smelled pretty bad. Rancid tomatoes and the stench of whiskey overwhelmed him but Lovino went to his and Antonio's bedroom. He rummaged through the drawers, tossed clothes everywhere until he found a latch to a secret compartment. He and Antonio always kept their important things in the compartment like passports, money, and the such. Lovi poured all of it into a duffle bag and went to his closet where he kept a modest armory.

"That fucking son of a bitch," he muttered as he bypassed the guns and went straight for his favorite, the twin Sai. Unconventional as they may be, he shared his brother's preference for knives but had wanted, no, *needed*, to be different from the future head.

When Feliciano had first been introduced to his knife set, the boy had instantly taken a liking at throwing them. Something about long range fighting had made him feel safer apparently. And Oswaldo had been right, Feli was a prodigy with sharp things, knives or swords or what have you.

"If only he would just pull his head out of his ass and utilize his capabilities…"

Lovino on the other hand, enjoyed just about any weapon he could get his hands on but the Sai had been his favorite. Knives, you'd have to go fetch them eventually but the Sai stayed with you even after delivered a killing blow. They protected you but there was a certain skill one had to have in order to properly use them. There was always the chance of losing a finger or thumb but that was precisely why Lovi loved them so much. They forced you to stay focus at the task at hand.

Shaking his head, Lovi carefully rolled up his Sai and tucked them into the duffle bag before making his way back to V Enterprises. As soon as the elevator doors opened for him, he pulled out his Sai and locked himself in the Zen room.

The clock in Feli's art room chimed ten in the evening as he dipped his fine detail brush into a metallic smoky grey he'd made on his palette. Downstairs, he could hear Ludwig and Alex giggling amongst themselves as they baked, based on the aroma of vanilla drifting up the stairs, cupcakes. Jazz was accompanied by the duo's conversation and he could occasionally hear the dogs bark in request for a taste which of course Ludwig would give them a stern *nein* in response.

Feliks hadn't come home yet and Feliciano suspected that it was because he'd stayed with Monika to work on gowns. The wedding dresses were already under construction as Felicia had put it and they still had to finish the stuff for fashion week along with gowns for the Fall’s masquerade ball. Truthfully, Feli worried about their work load but Felicia and Feliks both assured them that they would be just fine. Apparently, a friend of the girls was going to come in from Japan to help. Haruka, he thinks she was called.
Feliciano dabbed away the excess paint before stroking fine lines onto his canvas. He pondered things that didn't make sense in the collection of information his brother and canines had gathered for him. His mind cross examining and comparing the data with the inconsistencies his family as a whole had tried to feed him. It was dawning on him that perhaps he was turning a blind side to the truth, something his dad had been telling him as of late. Now it was only a matter of determining which truth it was that he was choosing to ignore.

A kiss to his head pulled him away from his concentration. Feli sniffed and smiled, "Hey Ozzie."

"Ciao," responded Oswaldo as he leaned against him and looked at the painting, "That's beautiful, angel."

"Grazie."

Feli continued to work on his painting in silence while Oswaldo took in every stroke, every choice of color he made. The painting truly was beautiful, but it looked so sad. It was obviously a close up of someone's eye and cheek, all painted in hues using a monochrome palette. Careful attention was placed on the slight droop of the eyelid to indicate sadness. Not that it was needed, there were tears cascading from the corner of the eye with more clinging to the thick eyelashes like constellations desperate not to get sucked into the black hole that was the pupil. Around the pupil, thin chaotic cords of color were circling like a hurricane.

"I want to tell him," said Feli after a moment of silence, "Will he still love me if I do?"

Oswaldo sighed, "I—I think that if he loves you like the way I've seen him love you, that he will still love you even after learning the truth about us. We aren't bad people, angel."

"We do bad things."

"We do bad things, yes but only because we have to. Think of the bigger picture, love. That's really all we can do. It's more than you, more than us." Oswaldo kissed his hair again, "I know it seems like the darkness is creeping in but you have to push through."

"How?"

"We all have our light. You're mine just as Berwald is Tino's, Wolfgang is Grandpa's, my mom is my dad's, my brothers are each other's and so on and so forth. Ludwig is yours, Feli. When you feel like it's too dark, just look for his glow. It'll pierce through the veil and guide you back out. You'll see."

"Will this darkness pass?"

It took Oswaldo a moment to figure out that Feli was referring to the attacks on their family before nodding "Yeah. Everything does eventually. We've just got to hold on for a bit longer."

"But more will follow."

"That's true but we all have each other to help us endure it. It'll be ok." Giving his angel one last kiss, Ozzie whispered ti amo as he pulled away to go back downstairs.

"Te voglio bene, Oswaldo," Feli continued to paint with a trembling hand as he pondered Ozzie's words. A pale hand reached out and held it steady for him. Flecks of dried pastry dough on the hand made it rougher than usual but it brought a sense of comfort to Feli. Smiling, Feli leaned back on Ludwig as he guided their hands across his canvas.
Ludwig bent down and kissed down his neck, leaving a lingering kiss at Feli's pulse point, "You know, this is probably the very first time I can say that I've helped paint something and it not come out looking a disaster."

"Ve~"

Resting his chin on top of Feli's head, Ludwig took in every detail of the painting and frowned sadly. His beloved had been up here for a few hours now and had politely declined baking with him and Alex. Oswaldo wandered up after being chastised for licking the cake batter off the beaters only to come back down with a pout. Of course, Ozzie then shooed him out of his own kitchen and said that he should go check on Feli, offering a wink to Alex and raising the icing covered spatula.

Ludwig didn't need to be told twice to see Feli but now he was sad that it hadn't occurred to him to come up earlier. Feliciano had been uncharacteristically quieter than usual and now he knew why. Licking his lips, Ludwig held Feli tightly, "Liebling, I want you to know something." Feli stopped painting and looked up to meet Ludwig's eyes. "That," he nodded at the painting, "that's what you're feeling right now, right? Like you're being sucked into a vortex—"

"Black hole," mumbled Feli.

"Black hole then, or like a black hole that's just sucking the light and colors from the world.

Feli nodded, "Yeah."

"Sucking you in?"

Plump lower lip trembled as Feli nodded, "Yes."

"I'd jump in after you, liebe. I won't let it take you away from us. From me." Ludwig held Feliciano and pressed their foreheads together, "I'm not stupid, liebling. I remember you telling me that you have secrets. Do those have anything to do with what you're feeling?"

"...A part of it, yes."

"When you're ready to tell me, I'll be here. I won't turn you away. Hey," Ludwig gently turned Feli's face back to him, "I'm here with you, Feli. I won't leave you."

"P-promise?"

"Promise."

The corners of Feli's lips tilted up before he shook his head with a toothy smile, "Luddy, do you realize that you've condemned yourself to me and my neediness. I'm going to want you beside me to hold me whenever I want."

"And whenever you need," added Ludwig with a grin of his own. "I wouldn't have agreed to marrying you if I didn't know that. Besides, don't think you're the only one getting something out of our union. I was very lonely before I met you, remember? I didn't know what it meant to have a friend or someone to depend on as much as they depend on me. I like it."

"You're too good to me, Luddy."

"If you say so."
"Were you serious about helping me run V Enterprises and the business we have?"

"Of course."

"Would you—" Feli stopped himself and poked his fingers together shyly, "would you like to take a look at them with me some time? I promise they won't be mean. They know better now."

A playful smile made its way to Ludwig's face, "What? Did you tell your men I'm your princess or something?"

Feli gave a stern nod, "Yes."

"Feli!"

"Well something along those lines," said Feliciano with a laugh, "but seriously, they know you're not to be treated that way again. They know what'll happen if they touch you."

Something about how his fiancé said that made blood rush southward and Ludwig was pretty sure that it was supposed to have the opposite effect. But what could he say? He supposed that maybe he had a power kink that he was just now discovering. Shrugging it off, Ludwig tugged Feli out of his stool, "Come downstairs and try what Alex made. Hopefully that idiot cousin of yours didn't let him eat all of the icing from the—" Ludwig was caught off guard by the sight of Ozzie and Alex's chocolate covered faces and an empty bowl of buttercream frosting.

The two exchanged glances before pointing to each other, "It was his idea!"

Feliciano couldn't help but let out a bubble of laughter. Especially as his twenty-eight-year-old Ozzie argued with his seven-year-old Alex about whose idea it was to eat a bowl full of frosting while Ludwig scolded them both about eating too much sugar. He caught Oswaldo's eye and the older Italian winked at him lovingly. Smiling to himself, he wondered how he could ever imagine that his world would be void of color when he had so much light in his life to scare away the dark. Taking the icing covered spatula from Alex, he tapped some onto Ludwig's nose before kissing it away and doing the same to Alex and Ozzie.

Feliks stood outside of Ludwig's bakery wondering if he should go in or not. During work, he'd gotten a text from Toris in which he was practically begging to meet him. Monika had been sympathetic and allowed him to leave work early and now he found himself staring at the cute bakery. The only lights were those from the establishment itself and from the water fountain just ahead making the usually welcoming ambiance seem haunted. It didn't help that there was nobody inside due to closing time.

His hair fell into his eyes when a sudden gust blew past him. He chewed his lip, "Like, I guess I better go in and see what the jerk wants." Feliks straightened his oversized sweater and smoothed out his leggings before marching straight into the bakery. The bell tingly to alert the staff that someone had entered but no one came out to greet him.

Relief surged forth his person, followed by annoyance. And here he thought Toris was going to try and salvage their relationship. The sound of dishes clinking drew Feliks' attention to the kitchen. He looked around him before quietly pushing the door. There was no sign of Emma or Lilly but he could hear Toris mumbling. That surprisingly brought a smile to his face. Perhaps he was giving himself a pep talk.
Feliks walked into the kitchen and around the island towards the pantry where Toris' voice became clearer. He was about to make his presence known when Toris suddenly punched the wall.

"What the hell do you mean I can't have him," growled Toris into his cellphone, "We had a deal!"

Toris' breathing became strained as he struggled to keep his emotions in check, "I have done everything you told me to do. Every—I'm close to losing someone special to me because I'm ashamed of all the crap you've made me do but I've risked his love because you said you would give me—you can't go back on your word, now!...No, I don't want to do it anymore...Our father was an idiot...Yeah he gambled with that life and look what happened."

Toris gritted his teeth, "Listen to me, I refuse to be a part of this anymore. Ludwig and Feliciano are great men and they don't deserve this...Because Ludwig's never treated me the way you do and he's not even my brother..."

Feliks stared at Toris' back in shock not wanting to put two and two together. As Toris continued to shout into his cell, Feliks' turned on his heel and ran out of the kitchen. He tripped on a chair and fell, the sound alerting Toris of his presence.

Toris glanced over his shoulder and sighed, "Whatever it is you want me to do this time, I won't do it unless I have signed documentation that Raivis will be in my care from now on. He hates living with you. You neglect him...He's only eight! He's not a dog, Eduard. You can't just give him food and water and expect him to be alright!" He walked out of the pantry and locked it as he listened to his brother. When he was finished, he sighed, "I'll do it, but only after I receive documents stating that Raivis is under my sole custody, and you have to promise me that nobody is going to get hurt. I can't...I can't have any more blood on my hands."

Feliks jumped up and nearly ran out of the bakery when the kitchen door snapped open. He froze at the sound of his name.

"Feliks, you came!" Toris couldn't help but smile happily, "Listen, I have to let you go." Snapping his phone shut, he shimmied out of his apron and slowly hugged Feliks from behind, breathing in his scent, "I've missed you so much, Fe."

Stiff as a board, Feliks couldn't help but whimper at how tightly Toris was holding him. Under any other circumstance he would've revelled in this treatment. Maybe even make the man go to further lengths to earn his forgiveness but now all he wanted to do was to get away. Feliks felt himself get turned around and he was face to face with Toris' blue eyes staring him down.

"I'd ask if you missed me too, Fe, but I know that that would be too selfish of me. I'm so sorry that I've been ignoring you."

"Why," asked Feliks in the barest of whispers, "why did you do it?"

"I've been really busy. My brother is going to give me custody of our little brother but he's been making me do...things in exchange." Smiling weakly, Toris looked away, "You know how much of a hardass he can be."

"I guess...wah!" Feliks nearly toppled over, Toris was suddenly on his knees with his arms around his waist and face buried in his belly, "Like, what are you doing?"

"Please forgive me, Feliks. I didn't—I wasn't...please! I'm sorry, I never wanted to hurt you. I just really need to get my little brother away from him. He's all I have left and there isn't anything I wasn't willing to do for Raivis. I should've told you how bad things were instead of just pushing you away. I see that now but please give me another chance."
Feliks stared down at the weeping brunette and into his pleading eyes in confusion. His heart was torn. On one hand, here was someone who he really did love but on the other…this man also hurt his best friend however unintentionally. Weighing his options in his mind, Feliks nodded slowly, "Alright. I—."

He ran his hands through Toris' long hair. Deep down, Feliks knew that he would have to tell Feliciano about what he overheard. Maybe it would be just a huge misunderstanding on his part and everything would be ok. His fingers brushed against a heavy bandage by his neck; or maybe not.

"I'll forgive you but you have to be completely honest with me." Feliks knelt down in front of Toris and cupped his face, "Now, tell me everything."

Lightning flashed outside of V Enterprises followed by a crack of thunder. The flash illuminated the pages tacked onto the creamy walls of the Zen room. Lovino had posted every single page in hopes to see the bigger picture. And as soon as he had read and reread everything, he pushed the cushions, tables, and other decorative things out of the way, leaving spacious room for him to meditate.

He needed to do this. His father had been the one to teach him how when he was a boy and often threw tantrums when he didn't understand something or things didn't quite go his way. Right now, he was doing it to reach a decision, one that he wouldn't be able to do in his anger-high.

The city's heartbeat, the sound of traffic and sirens and people, became one with the rain outside as he slowed down his breathing. Lovino cleared his rumbling mind of the storm and instead focused on the rhythmic sound of his heart slowing down to a calm beat. Knelt down before a black mosaic mural of his family crest, he kept his face bowed and eyes closed. His fingers brushed against the cool metal of his Sai as he reached forward him to pick them up, his face still bowed.

His hands immediately held them lovingly and respectfully before his arms moved in a slow stretch to his sides with the blades tucked parallel to his forearms. Lovino loved feeling the heavy weapons in his hands and relished at the intimacy between the metal and skin. They helped get him to where he wanted to be.

With a single fluid motion, he stood up and twirled his Sai, careful not to pierce the sacks heavy with rice around him. For hours, he'd poured over the information hidden away on the pages scattered on the walls. Information regarding under the table transactions conducted by the Fernandez-Carriedo crime syndicate in Spain and, this was the most troubling, plans to challenge Feliciano after he ascended the throne to the criminal empire their grandfather had built.

Lovino opened his eyes, calm anger illuminated by a flash of lightning. Like hell if he'd let that happen. He sliced at the sacks closest to him, swiftly and deftly moving along to the rest. Each sack had a name and a family crest painted on it. The first ones had had the name Carolina Fernandez, Antonio's grandmother and a terrible woman known to be cruel enough to have had children murdered in her younger days. She was going to die anyway. His grandfather had been counting on Antonio inheriting the syndicate before doing away with her.

But there was Antonio’s brother and cousins to take care of first. Lovino stabbed two sacks with the names Eduardo and Sebastian. Hooking his Sai’s handles against the knots, using the blades to provide leverage for a back kick at the sack that dropped above him, Julio. Those three were always starting shit for Antonio to clean up and as of late had started bugging him to convince the
Vargas to open more cocaine channels into Genovia. If it weren't for the Vargas constantly displaying their dominance, no doubt the trio's mischief could rival that of their grandmothers.

Next would be his uncles who, god knows why, had gotten involved with doing favors for terrorist groups. True, Lukas and his own group had taken care of taking out major mercenaries but, because the Fernandez-Carriedo family was under Vargas protection, they were left untouched. Lovino dug his blade into the bellies of the sacks with their names written on them.

Pulling out his Sai, Lovi took slow deep breaths. Those bastards, *them* he had no trouble killing, sic Cerberus and the hounds on them.

There was just a problem…or was it even a problem?

The sun inked onto his right pectoral and the paw prints that were to be branded once Feli took over said no. Because he wasn't loyal to anyone who wasn't his family; he wasn't born to be the prince. He was born to be the knight who protected his prince. Who would slit the throats of their enemies with unwavering hands, just as easily as the sacks of rice he had destroyed.

That didn't stop his traitorous tears from betraying his feelings as he maneuvered one of his Sai until he had it by the blade.

There was still a problem.

Yes, he was a knight. Yes, he was playing the role of Victrola's Boss. Yes, he had a pack of deadly hounds at his command. But when he was with his Spaniard, he was more. He was a man in love. And he'd been pretty positive that those feelings were reciprocated. Hell, he was sure that those feelings had been there before he could admit to his own. They'd been fiercely loyal and rather possessive of one another that it was never questioned if one or the other was available. They'd also understood and were patient, well Antonio had more so than him, but most importantly they knew each other.

There was still a problem.

Lovino's Sai trembled in his hand as he thought about it. They *knew* each other. Antonio's ability to handle him was on par with Oswaldo's ability to handle his brother. The fucker was his light when he was lost in the darkness inside his head. They'd grown up together and, during his own agoge, they'd found each other in Barcelona. He'd be lost without him if he hadn't found him and god damn it, he loved him! They were supposed to be family. They've killed to protect that institution and each other. Th-they would've *died* to protect that institution and each other. But wasn't it the same thing? His family had accepted Antonio as one of their own, so it had to be. Right?

But there was still *one* fucking problem.

And it finally dropped behind him, the sack swinging wildly back and forth before his family's all-seeing crest with a single name written on it.

Lovino gritted his teeth. Everything he felt, all of it had been built on nothing but lies.

So *no*—his hand stilled again, Sai dripping rubies from the firm grip he held it with—it wasn't really a fucking problem.

His loyalty was where his heart was, and his heart was with his family and his family alone. Turning around he threw his Sai with deadly accuracy, where it pierced through the heart of the sack, the heir to the Spanish syndicate.
Antonio.
February 11, 2014

Nimble fingers worked across the screen’s keyboard, typing out a heartfelt text to a certain beautiful blonde German who was in need of her declarations of love…even if she didn't come out right and say so. Monika, with Feliks' help, had recruited a whole fleet of seamstresses to help her with her designs for fashion week in the summer. Unfortunately, they had to push their wedding a few more months later than they liked but both women found that it was best that way for their sanity sake.

Felicia slouched into the plush seat of the Grand Opera Theater and plopped her feet on the seat in front of her as she smirked and sent another, more risqué, but no less loving, text to her fiancé. She played with her engagement ring eagerly and squealed in delight when she read what Monika wrote back.

"Really, Licia," whispered Eric in exasperation when the casting director sent him a warning look. He nudged her gently, "Put it away if you're just going to be sexting with your future Missus."

Felicia sighed blissfully at the sound of that but made no indication of doing what Eric said. Instead, she sent out a final text before opening up a game, saying in Italian, "I'm sorry, cousin, but this is going so slow. Why are you even auditioning? You've been the phantom for, like, ever. You know you're getting the part again."

"I'm not. I have seniority here so I'm already cast. We're just looking for a Christine."

Looking up from her phone, Felicia squinted her eyes at him, "Then why am I here if it's not for moral support?" At Eric's grin, she shut her phone down and shook her head, "I'm sorry but not happening."

"Why not? We would sound beautiful together. It would be a crime not to share our voices with the world."

"Because I promised Monika I was retiring for one." Felicia pulled her black leather jacket closer around herself and nodded towards the stage where a girl was singing Think of Me. She whispered, "Besides, even if I wanted to, these girls have way more talent than I do. I shouldn't rob them of their chance in the spotlight."

Eric frowned, "Who said anything about robbing? You'd have to audition. I have no say in who they pick; I just think that you would be wonderful. Besides, most of these girls aren't armatures. If they don't get casted for this show, they'll just move on to other projects. Also, I already asked Monika. She said she'd be thrilled if you were Christine."

"Really?"

"Si~" Eric bit his lip before adding, "There is a song I think that, coming from you, would mean
the world to all of us."

Felicia's eyes misted, "Wishing You Were Here…"

"Yeah."

Her phone buzzed with a response from Monika and Felicia tapped on the attachment before
smiling. Monika had taken a picture of herself with their dog and a small sign wishing her luck.
She shook her head fondly, "My opera voice is a little rusty but I guess it won't hurt."

"That's my favorite cousin," cheered Eric quietly. "He took her bag from her and shooed her
towards the stage after her name was called. As expected, she did wonderfully. Her voice earned
her, and him, a few disgruntled glares from the other singers but they were brushed off. It would be
a few days until either of them would know the results but Eric had a feeling that she had it in the
bag.

Oswaldo was in Feli's egg swing on the balcony, swinging gently while playing on his guitar. He'd
just gotten back from dropping Alexander off at school and since no one was home, he figured that
he could play. The sun was just beginning to rise over the horizon while people were already
bustling below the building dressed in lighter clothing. It was starting to get a little warmer now
that the seasons were changing. He and his brothers would have to go shopping for some clothes
soon.

"That is if they don't make us go away again," muttered Oswaldo as he lazily plucked on his
guitar. Setting it down to rub his hand over his face, he glanced at the sun inked onto his arm and
smiled before bringing it to his lips. It had been done by his father, just as his brothers’ had been,
but it had been something gradual and would only be fully completed when Feli took over.

His smile became soft as he thought about his angel, his heart all but melting. It was perfect now.
His angel now had someone who could give him everything he couldn't and that made him
incredibly happy. Oswaldo pushed the swing again, thoughts now shifting towards Ludwig himself
and the warmth escaped him, making him feel hollow.

No things weren't perfect.

Not yet.

Pulling out his diary, he opened it to a blank page and placed a pen by it before picking up his
guitar again. Oswaldo played a few cords, "Since we've kissed the first time, since we've slept on
the beach. You were too close for comfort; you were too far out of reach. I walked away…I
should've held you." Shaking his head, he switched gears and tried again. Ozzie cleared his throat,
"You can be a million miles away from me. You can be kissin' another man's lips but I'm your
man…I'm your man—fuck!"

Oswaldo bent down to pick up his pen before writing down the notes into the journal. Placing his
fingers accordingly, he tried again, "I pray to God, I pray for time, I pray I could hold you in my
arms. Pray with me, eternally. Time is forever ours." Closing his eyes, Oswaldo imagined Feli and
allowed the warmth to engulf him. Mental visuals of Feliciano's bright smile made him smile
through his song, "It's the way that you smile, the way that you cry, why I always want to be your
man. It's the way that I feel when I feel you inside why I always want to be your man~"
His brothers often asked him why he did this to himself. Ludwig's even given him looks as if asking him the same thing but he couldn't help it. He wasn't ashamed of what he felt and it wasn't like he was going to try anything. Feli was fine with him being close and he was fine with what they had now. Writing more notes into his journal, Oswaldo couldn't imagine being happier than how things were. Well, he could but that would…Shaking his head again, he kept going, "They can take away my heart and my soul. They can even tell me you don't love me no more but I'm your man, I'm your man."

Feliciano had so much blind trust in him that he sometimes didn't know how to deal with the sheer joy that knowledge brought him. Nor did he know what to do with the pain it was bringing as of late. He trusted him and right now he was sitting on something that would shatter that trust should he ever find out. And he was going to find out because he was smart and despite how much they were trying to push him in the opposite direction—perturb him from the truth if you will—he was going to find out. And when he did…Well, Oswaldo didn't want to imagine what would happen when he did.

Licking his lips, Oswaldo leaned back, "I won't give up or let you down. I promise to always be by your side. Pray for faith, pray for you, pray that we'll always be... It's the way that you smile. It's the way that you cry why I always want to be your man. It's the way I feel when I feel you inside why I always want to be your man."

He recalled once, a few years ago, that Bernardo asked him why he loved Feli so much. At the time, he hadn't been able to find the words but now they were flowing right out of him, "It's the way your weak, the way that you're strong why I always want to be your man. It's the way you believe and the love that you give why I always want to be your man.

"I pray to god, I pray for time. I pray I can hold you in my arms. Pray with me eternally, time is forever ours…"

Ludwig was just getting home when he heard Ozzie's Italian accented voice. He had parted ways begrudgingly with Feli but his fiancé had insisted that he had something important to discuss with his grandfather and that it couldn't wait. But then again, Feli had also promised to be quick so it didn't bother him too much. After all, Feli's been able to go long periods without sleep and he was sure to crash as soon as he came back. He himself was actually pretty tired but Oswaldo was singing and that in itself was a rare treat.

Usually, the older man would be either playing video games or out and about when not harassing him to bake him sweets. Ludwig rolled his eyes and went upstairs to cross into Feli's apartment with his box of recipes that needed organizing, "Honestly…it's like I've gotten another Gilbert for a cousin-in-law." He froze in Feli's art studio and griped the metal railing as he listened to what Oswaldo was singing.

"It's the way that you smile," cooed Oswaldo, his fingers flying over his acoustic guitar, "it's the way that you cry why I always want to be your man. It's the way that I feel when I feel you inside why I always want to be your man. It's the way that you're weak, the way that you're strong why I always want to be your man. It's the way you believe and the love that you give why I always want to be your man."

"How can you do that," asked Ludwig quietly as he joined Oswaldo on the balcony. He took in the Italian's simple dark jeans and plaid shirt and the way his hair was messy but intentionally so. Then he tried to imagine how he looked to Ozzie with his wrinkled scrubs and tired eyes and hair…Well, the hair was Feli's fault.

Oswaldo eyed Ludwig and gently pushed himself on the swing, "Do what?"
"How can you put your feelings for him into words so easily?"

"Still singing that tune, are you?" Shrugging Oswaldo plucked random chords, "I was a musician remember? It sort of comes naturally to me. Why? Are you still having trouble? I already told you that you're making him happy."

Ludwig sighed and took a seat next to him, "I know, and I know that I more than make up for my inability to write poetry or songs like you. Still, sometimes I wish that I could serenade him like he does to me or like you would him.

"I do serenade him."

Ludwig rolled his eyes as he opened his box of recipes, "Of course you do." He ignored Oswaldo's curious look and started to sort through all the new recipes he collected that week so that he could test them in the weekend.

Oswaldo watched Ludwig work diligently, flipping note cards this way and that before filing them away in their little compartments, "Do you want me to help you? It looks like you have a lot."

"Sure." Ludwig handed a stack of desserts over, "These are cookies and breads. Separate them by type."

"Type?"

"Hn. Like chocolate chip or shortbread or butter cookies and the breads by whether it has nuts in it." To Ludwig's surprise, Oswaldo didn't tease him like he thought he would. Only Gilbert and Berwald actually took his organization seriously, though he suspected that it had to do with the fact that they shared that trait.

"You know, I think it'll actually make Feli really happy to have a new love poem from you," said Ozzie casually as he sorted through the note cards as well. "Did you know he carries the little notes you two exchanged that one time before you guys got together?"

"Really?" No, Ludwig hadn't known that but it was nice to know that he hadn't been the only one to do so. "Ja, I would like that." As they worked, Ludwig couldn't help but feel a certain comradeship with the man next to him. He hoped those feelings were mutual, so he tested the waters, "Feliciano has been acting different. It's subtle but I've noticed that he's been getting cranky again."

"Yeah, I've noticed that too. The same with Marcello but they haven't said much about why other than Antonio and Lovino broke up." Gripping the note cards tight, Oswaldo added, "Hell, if someone hurt one of my brothers too, I wouldn't be a happy pup. There would be hell to pay even if the one who hurt them was one of our own."

"Hn." Ludwig filed more recipes away before he realized something, "Wait, you were a musician? Meaning you're not anymore?"

Oswaldo glanced over at Ludwig, "That's generally what a past tense conjugate of a word means."

"Don't be an ass."

That made Ozzie laugh, "Ok. Yeah, that one song I did with Felicia was my retiring thing. Seraph and Bernardo too. Truth be told, we haven't really done much in like two years now. That's almost an eternity in fan time. Mostly, we're just dust in the wind as far as they're concerned."

"Why?"
"Why what?"

"Why did you quit?"

Shrugging, Oswaldo took more note cards, "I don't know, man. I guess we just got tired of that shit. It was fun for a while, but afterwards it just got boring. Eric made it big in his debut as the phantom in the Phantom of the Opera which of course meant that he'd be traveling a lot with the company, and, of course, Bernardo wouldn't let him go alone so he was the first to leave our trio. He's like his manager slash bodyguard. Seraph and me used him leaving as an excuse. Can't be Cerberus with only two heads, you know?"

Cerberus… Cerberus… Cerberus! Why was that blasted name everywhere these days? Ludwig bit down the question and asked instead, "So what are you guys doing now?"

"Eric is doing the Phantom of the Opera here in Victrola so we'll be here for a while," Smirking Oswaldo nudged Ludwig in the ribs, "I'll be staying here with you guys! Isn't that great?"

"…I guess." Ludwig stifled a yawn and glanced at his watch, "Feli mentioned once that you guys do philanthropy. What kind of work do you guys do?"

Oswaldo laughed, "What's with all the questions?"

"I'm curious about the family I'm marrying into. Feli keeps telling me that I'm making a mistake but I don't see how."

Ozzie's laughter ceased immediately, "He what?"

"He told me," said Ludwig with a frown as he looked down at his hands, "that I have no idea what I'm getting myself into by marrying him. He's been acting strangely too. Jumpy, sad…angry. I've tried—am trying and will continue to support him but I have no idea what's wrong. Every time I ask, it only seems to make him more frustrated. Like he wants to tell me something but is fighting against himself. And he's told me you know." Ludwig turned in the swing, recipes temporarily forgotten, "He told me about how he fights with himself internally."

Ozzie's fingers twitched around note cards as he tried to process everything Ludwig told him. Of course, he'd noticed everything Ludwig just described but…Feli was telling him that he was making a mistake? Now that was news. Oswaldo gave the organized cards back to Ludwig, "What are you really asking me?"

Ludwig opened his mouth to speak but the words died on the tip of his tongue. What was he asking? He had too many questions with very little answers. And sometimes the answers he did receive were vague and choppy followed by quick denials and—

"You're not questioning his love for you, are you? Cause I made that mistake once, in regards to our family, and he got mad at me for doubting him."

"Nein. If there is one thing I know, with every fiber of my existence, is that he loves me."

"Then, your question…"

"How can I help him," asked Ludwig. He bore his gaze into Ozzie's and silently pleaded with him for some advice. If anyone knew how to help Feli during his troubling times, it was sure to be him. "I've…I can't think of any other way to show him that I won't abandon him." Ludwig noticed how Oswaldo flinched at the word abandon, "What?"
Despite the years, nearly twelve to be exact, the guilt he carried after he had abandoned Feliciano when he needed him the most was still strong. It was something that he'd never forgive himself and would spend the rest of his life making up to his precious angel. Oswaldo crossed his arms, "Nothing. I—don't worry about Feli. I mean," he started to correct himself as soon as Ludwig frowned, "The first thing you need to understand is that Feli is under a lot of stress—"

"I know that much already."

"—and that's stirring his depression awake again. His medication helps a lot but what I would do back when we were kids was to simply hold and talk to him when it got super bad because he would leave his body."

“…What?”

“Um, well, that's how I think of it. He goes somewhere inside his head and it takes a while for him to come out. It doesn’t happen a lot—actually I can only think of two times that it did. Also, all depression is different but with him, he also has anxiety and he gets bad thoughts telling him shit that isn’t true. So, I would tell him stories and distract him with things that he liked to get his mind off the gloom.

"F-Feli said something along those lines to our graduating class. He said that kindness can tip the scale on a person's life or something like that."

"And you have no idea how much truth there is to that, man. You ask me what you can do to help him? You're already doing a beautiful job, despite what happened with that Russian woman. Love him. That's all I can say. Love him with everything you've got because I can assure you that he's loving you and everyone else important to him with everything he's got."

If Ludwig wasn't sure of the feelings of comradeship were mutual before, he was now. He reached over and awkwardly wiped away a few tears from Oswaldo's face, "You really love him, don't you?"

"God, more than I should."

"Don't cry. Feli will probably yell at me if he finds out that I made his favorite cousin cry."

Chuckling, Ozzie shyly wiped away at his own face, "Yeah, although you've got to admit, the way he puffs his cheeks out to the point his eyes squint has to be the most adorable thing you've ever seen. The guy could probably cure cancer just by giving it that look."

"Not nearly as adorable as the pout he gets when he thinks he isn't getting pasta for dinner."

Oswaldo forced himself to stop smiling but Ludwig could see the corners of his lips twitching from the strain, "Hey now, pasta is a sacred dish among us Italians. We need it to live!"

Rolling his eyes, Ludwig placed all of his note cards neatly in his box, "Please. Potatoes are a more staple food source."

"You take that back!" Acting as he was scandalized by the very notion, Oswaldo stood up and picked up his things as well, "The next thing you'll say is that beer is tastier that wine."

"…It is."

"Dio mio!" Ludwig laughed along with Oswaldo as the two made their way back inside Feli's penthouse. Ludwig sat his box in the kitchen before making his way to his and Feli's room.
Oswaldo called out to him, "Hey, seriously though?"

"Hm?"

"I'm happy that he found you. Even if you can't see it, you really are good for him. You give him everything I can't, and, in my eyes, that makes us brothers."

Feliciano watched his hounds train in their sub terrain headquarters. Another pack had just returned victorious in whatever errand his grandfather had sent them on, their laughter and cheers of celebration could be heard just down the hall. Feli sighed and moved away from the window, choosing instead to look around his grandfather's office.

There were a few pictures of their family hung around the room, including a few of Romulus and Wolfgang and some of them in their younger years with Antonio's and Francis' fathers and Elizabeta's Uncle Magyar. Feli smirked and shook his head as he picked up a picture of his grandfather and his friend.

Magyar, like all the people in his life, was a self-made man. Once a bar owner, he propelled himself to congressman to senator ambassador with no doubt the presidential office being his end game. He was a good man and his family owed him so much. He placed the picture back on the desk when his grandfather walked in with his uncle, "Ciao, zio. Ciao, nonno."

"Feli," cried Romulus ecstatically, pushing past his son to embrace Feliciano warmly, "I've missed you so much!"

"Ve~"

Paolo chuckled, "Papa, please."

"What? Aren't I allowed to embrace my adorable grandbaby?" Romulus tightened his hold on Feli and nuzzled his face in his hair, "Adorable~ Did you come here to spar with your brother? Or perhaps one of the hounds?"

Feli gently pushed his grandpa away, "I'm practically falling asleep on my feet, nonno. No, I just came to ask a few things."

"Oh?"

"Ve, first, any news on anything?"

"No, but then again things have been quiet ever since the bust with those two gangs."

"Si, Marcello told me about that." Furrowing his brows in confusion, Feli took a seat in one of the leather seats, his feet practically sighing in relief. "But I thought city cleanses only happened in the summer. Lovi kind of rushed it, didn't he?"

Romulus shrugged, "He has a list. Though I agree that he shouldn't have taken out so many at once, at least this gives us a chance to gerrymander the gang districts, keep those of similar factions as far apart as possible. That helps to keep them from organizing and rising against us. Not that they will but it also helps keep them from fighting amongst themselves for distribution territories."
Upon seeing his nephew's worried face, Paolo waved his hand in the air dismissively, "Don't worry. There won't be any turf fights 'cause the drugs are long gone and all their footmen are behind bars."

"Good."

"Si. It's dirty business but someone has to do it," grumbled Romulus tiredly, "Lord knows that this country's DEA is shit. Not as bad as others but still shit." He then smirked, "But then again if they weren't, we wouldn't be in business now would we?"

Feli nodded, "True."

"How are you feeling, nipote," asked Paolo as he took a seat next to his nephew. "Everything ok?"

"Si, I was just…I'm here to request permission to tell Ludwig everything about us and what we do." Feliciano crossed his arms and gave his grandpa a leveled look, "Not that I should, seeing as my brother told Willem everything without asking if it was ok to do so."

"Feli, we can't right now," said Romulus as gently as he could.

"Why not? There aren't any current operations in play; nothing major at least. Not from what you told me, unless, of course, you're lying to me."

Feli's tone took both older Vargas men by surprise. Paolo was first to mask it though while Romulus continued to frown, "Why would you think that?"

"Never mind," said Feli with a sigh. He yawned sleepily and stretched, "Please get me clearance. I'm planning on telling him soon." Gathering his bag, Feli kissed his uncle and grandfather goodbye. He paused at the door, "Oh, and one more thing. Could you tell the Australian ambassador to stop sending me things? If anyone should be getting recognition for finding his daughter last year it should be Lovi not me."

"He must be very happy with our work if he's choosing to ignore the silence clause."

"Hm, well, please do something about that. As much as Alex loves the bees the flowers bring, Ludwig is getting jealous."

Romulus chuckled, "Ok, Feli. I'll be sure to tell him."

Paolo waited until Feliciano was inside the elevator before turning to his father, "You do know he's, or rather they, are going to be pissed when they find out about what's really causing all these attacks on the family."

"We're far too close to just stop now, son," murmured Romulus. He pulled out a chocolate bar and nibbled on it, "We've got him where we want him, it's only a matter of time. Naya's Diamond Dogs spotted the merchandise on one of our slower rails in Slovakia."

"We're trusting the Diamond Dogs now?"

"Naya is family." The elder Vargas shrugged, "She's branch but the Sapienti were my supporters during our…family feud. I trust her loyalty to Nicola and my grandsons more than anything and I ask that you do the same. Do it for Cesare’s memory if nothing else."

Romulus pulled out a map and pointed to one of their train rails, "Now, I was told that the shipment was transported onto one of the faster trains so it should be here in three days. I want
Oswaldo and Bernardo to go inspect the freights. They aren't to engage should there be anyone there to pick these up, but I do want hounds to follow each crate to their final destination. We pick the most remote location and send in a group to challenge whoever is picking it up. I want them captured and brought in for interrogation. If things go well, then we'll finally get what we've been waiting ten years too long for."

"Understood. I'll be sure to relay your wishes to Lovino and my boys."

"Speaking of Lovino, where is my other adorable grandbaby? As a matter of a fact, why are all of my grandbabies staying everywhere but home? First my three-headed pup, then my opera singers and now my little Lovi. I heard that he just barely left my penthouse here and that he did so in a hurry. Was it because Antonio requested time off to go to Spain?" Romulus tapped his chin, "It's odd, isn't it? That he went to Spain without Lovi?"

Paolo frowned, "You mean he didn't go under your command?"

"Of course not. I was under the impression he went because the she-devil grandmother of his refused to give him his blessing so he's going to pester her until she does. You know how traditional he can be with those things and how tenacious he is when it comes to Lovino. There isn't a damn thing he won't do for that boy."

"Reminds me of a certain someone I know."

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In Spain

A few red drops of virgin sangria clung to the bottom of Antonio's cup. They ran along the circumference of the cup's bottom as Antonio swished it around slowly, his eyes following the sticky sweet liquid as he thought about the man he loves more than his own life. He clenched his jaw and continued to observe his prey out of the corner of his eye. They may have been blood, but Lovi was more; he was family.

Antonio pressed a kiss to his boyfriend's forehead before gently squeezing his hand, "I'm going to go with my grandma. I have something important I want to discuss with her and you know how she can be." He kissed Lovi once more and ran after his grandmother, "I'll be home as soon as I can, tomate!"

"Hurry up, mi hijo," said Carolina. She scooted over to allow her grandson to sit next to her. The drive back to the hotel was silent. Antonio watched other cars drive by as he contemplated how to ask his conservative grandmother for his father's engagement ring to his mother. After they both died, it had fallen into her clammy possession but now it was time for it to come back to Fernandez’ hands.

Carolina could tell that Antonio was anxious to ask her something so when they finally arrived at her room, she sat down in one of the plush chairs and motioned for him to do the same. Raising an eyebrow, she smiled and asked, "What is it, Antonio?"

The Spaniard could hardly keep the excitement from his voice, "I've asked Nicola and Romulus and they said yes!"

"Yes to what?"
"They've given me their blessing to marry Lovino! Isn't that wonderful?"

To his surprise, Carolina smile grew wider, "That is wonderful news. I suppose that means you want that pitiful excuse of a ring your father gave my daughter."

"Eh? That ring meant the world to mama. She—" he cut himself off and glanced down at his feet. He glanced back up and said calmly, "Abuela, I know that it goes against your beliefs," he had to bite his tongue, less he said something that would piss her off, "but I love Lovino with all my heart. Please give me my mother's ring so that I can ask him to marry me."

To his surprise, Carolina smiled again, "Of course, mi hijo." She got up to retrieve it from her suitcase, "I was actually wondering why it was taking you so long to ask me for this."

Antonio eyed her suspiciously, "You were?"

"Si! I had hoped that you would have done this a lot sooner. Things are going to be tricky now that his brother is no longer participating in his agoge but I think we'll manage somehow."

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you don't expect me to allow you to enter an abomination of a marriage without getting something in return."

Abomination? The word cut through Antonio's heart. He should've known better than to think that there may still be a sliver of good in the older woman but he'd been sorely mistaken. Antonio snatched the ring, not wanting it to be in his grandmother's possession any longer, and glared at her, "Is the knowledge that Lovino makes me happy not enough? You're on thin ice with Don Romulus. If I were you, I—" This time he was cut off by a harsh slap. He took a step back, his hand to his stinging cheek, "What's wrong with you?!"

Carolina's dark eyes narrowed "Don't raise your voice at me, boy. I am your elder." Sighing, she sat back down and said, "That Lovino has been nothing but a bad influence on you but never mind that now. I must inform our family at once. We will have to tread carefully but I believe we can do it."

"Do what," cried Antonio in exasperation and fear.

His grandmother didn't respond quickly. The silence was deafening to Antonio as various scenarios, each worse than the last, filled his head. Finally, after a few agonizing moments, Carolina smiled, "Do you remember Remus Vargas?"

Antonio nodded, "Don Romulus' older twin. What of him?"

"I've known of the Vargas long before your father got involved with them and have even personally dealt with the two brothers myself." Carolina rocked in her chair and wrapped her shawl around her plump frame as she recalled her glory days fondly, "When I first saw them side by side, their appearance, much like Lovino and Feliciano, was uncanny at first. And yet, like those boys, you could tell that they had something about them that sat them apart from each other."

Carolina chuckled heartily, "Romulus was a man of action. Whether it was working the vineyard, the railroad, or even taking out anyone who got in his father's way of progress, he liked to get his hands dirty. Remus on the other hand, was just the opposite. He liked to wait in the shadows and study his prey. I was smitten with the pair but obviously Romulus was more my type." A dark look crossed her face, "But then he went on his agoge...when he came back he wasn't the same."
Antonio knew this story. Everyone did. He smiled softly, "Love changes people."

"Love? No, Antonio. What Romulus had with his wife was love. What he had with that—th-that German," spat Carolina spitefully, "was not. Beilschmids and Vargas go way back but that was disgusting. Alas, what can be done? Thankfully, his father sat him on the right path and he married a fine girl."

She waved the thought away with a face that he once saw Feli make when Lovino tricked him into eating marmite. "Any way, my point is that I lost respect for Romulus when he lost his drive. Remus took advantage of his brother's weakness and made the Vargas even greater with his vision. He expanded the business and he did so in a way that left the rest of us in awe. Everyone praises Romulus for building their empire but it was really Remus who deserves the credit."

Growls rumbled in Antonio's chest, "What does any of this have to do with me and my wanting to marry Lovino? He's waiting for me at home and I'd really like to get back to him."

"My point is, boy, that my respect for Romulus, like many of the council, plummeted when I witnessed his weakness and failure to lead the Vargas crime syndicate. My loyalty was to Remus only to be re-birthed by what had to be one of the greatest moments in underground history."

Carolina's eyes were glistening with too much excitement for Antonio's liking as she said, "Romulus ran out from the shadows like a black wolf and dug his teeth into his brother's neck, twisting and mangling him until only he was left standing."

She grinned, "Romulus shot and killed Remus in cold blood and took that empire back. Granted, the main reason he did so was because Remus sold out their associates and the branch members of their family but still! For a man to kill their own blood, their twin brother no less, now that was a person I could stand behind and bow. So, I did. We all did. It was brilliant, what he and his supporters did. And that's why I've put up with his ridiculous notion that Feliciano will one day rule over us. I may be old but I ain't stupid."

That remained to be seen. Antonio felt ill having to hear that twisted story of Romulus' ascent to power. If only she knew the real reason he killed his brother. He was so caught up in his thoughts, he nearly didn't catch what his grandmother said next. Heart stopping, Antonio prayed he heard wrong, "Wh-what was that?"

Carolina rolled her eyes, "I said, that once you marry Lovino, and Romulus steps down, you are going to help your husband take his rightful place as the true king."

"B-but that would mean—Feli would have to be—h-he'd have to be…"

"That's right, Antonio. Feliciano Vargas would have to be eliminated. You will give council to Lovino. Say what I will about the boy but I will have to admit, you do have the little bastard wrapped around your finger."

"You're crazy," whispered Antonio almost inaudibly when his grandmother's plan finally registered in his mind.

Carolina's leathery face darkened again. "What did you say?"

Licking his lip, Antonio clenched his jaw and fists. "I said you're crazy! What makes you think that I'll even entertain the idea of participating in your plot?"

"Because I am your last remaining direct tie to your mother, may god rest her soul, and because as old as I may be, I am the Don of Spain. I control the Fernandez-Carriedo syndicate still and you,
as a member of that syndicate, will do as I say."

Antonio shook his head, "Lovino loves his brother. He would never do anything to hurt him."

"It's a lot simpler than you think to turn a brother against his own."

"I won't do it. The Vargas are good to me. I'm family to them."

"You're family to me! For what it's worth, at least we won't have to worry about gaining their trust. You're already in the nest. It's just a matter of—"

"I'm not doing it." Antonio's heart was breaking at the thought of what he was going to do but he didn't let it show on his face. "I refuse."

Perhaps it was the tone of voice he'd used or maybe it was how steady his hands were that had Carolina rethink her next move, "What do you plan on doing?"

"What does it matter? The important thing is that he won't have Feliciano's blood on his hands and neither will I. There was a reason why Don Romulus chose Feli as his successor and neither you nor I have a right to challenge that."

"Feliciano is a pathetic excuse of a man. He's weak, has no ambition, and no drive. He's nothing."

"You're wrong about him, abuela," said Antonio quietly. He pocketed the ring sadly before leaving the hotel room, "And as long as I'm around, you will never harm a hair on his or Lovi's head."

Three men ran over the clay paneled roof tops of Spanish homes while a fourth stalked them agilely. Antonio had left the bar shortly after his targets did and now he chased them towards a trap. The face Lovi had given him when he told him all those terrible things had nearly been enough to make him forget his plan and tell him everything. He couldn't though, not yet. Lovi was overseeing the current job his grandfather had in play and couldn't risk distractions.

Antonio smirked under his mask as the three men fell through a hidden hole and right into his pit. Walking over it, he could see his three cousins writhing in pain in a net. He threw in a tracking device along with a long list of their deeds and covered the hole again. It was strange; he thought that perhaps he would feel some guilt about what he was doing but there was none. If anything, he felt light, content even. They would die soon and then the authorities would find their bodies.

"As it should be," he muttered as he finished covering the hole. He froze when he felt the cold metal of a barrel of a gun pressed to his head. No! It was too soon! Pick up for the scum in his trap wasn't supposed to arrive for another two hours or so—

"Bonsoir, mon ami." Francis struck his friend with the back of his gun and caught him before he could hit the ground which was more than he deserved for breaking his young brother's heart.

Holstering his gun, he motioned for his assistant to help him lower Antonio to ground level and get him into his car. Francis sighed, "You have a lot of explaining to do when you wake up, mon petit Catalan Sheepdog." He slid into the passenger side of his car and glanced at his companion, "When we arrive, pull around the back and take him to the interrogation room."

"What about the three he trapped, sir," asked his partner as he put the car in reverse.

Francis shrugged, "Leave them for the others to pick them up. They were on grandpa's naughty list anyway."
Feli woke up feeling odd. His arm had fallen asleep from where Ludwig had rolled onto it to hold him. He carefully slid out of his fiancé's embrace and rolled over to check the time on his old school Felix the Cat alarm clock, an early valentine's gift from Feliks. It read a quarter to six.

Sighing, he put it back and rolled over to face Ludwig who had rolled onto his back. He smiled softly and carefully traced a finger over his brow, brushing his fringe aside. His finger explored down his stubbled cheek until he felt Ludwig's warm lips under his pad. Damn was he lucky to have such a beautiful man next to him; not just aesthetically but as a person too. Feli stopped touching his face and instead had his entire hand explore the vast of his fiancé's chest. The smooth skin of his chest brought comfort to the Italian as he thought about their day's activities.

They were both going to go check out the businesses the Vargas had in Victrola and afterwards Feli was going to tell Ludwig the other thing they did. His grandfather had given him a call saying that he could tell Ludwig but that he wanted to see him first. The thought of finally telling Ludwig everything was both nerve wrecking and relieving at the same time. Feli watched Ludwig's content face and wondered how he would take the news of what he and his family did for a living when not cashing in on their importation, winery, and so many damn other business ventures that it gave him a headache just thinking about them.

A wry smile made its way onto Feli's face. Oswaldo was right. It wasn't as if what they did was bad. Not really. If anything, they were their nation's dark knights; hounds even, diligent creatures that kept a watchful gaze of their territories so that other predators didn't attempt anything foul to their charges. It was all about looking at the bigger picture which, admittedly, was sometimes a whole lot harder to do when he had so much to lose if things went wrong.

Feli stopped petting Ludwig when he shifted under his hand. Pulling back, he cuddled close and feigned sleep. He felt Ludwig's chest rumble with sleep laced chuckles and his arm wrapped around him to pull him in closer. Ludwig kissed his forehead, "I know you're a wake, liebe."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are." Yawning into his other hand he reached over for his cellphone and grunted, "We need to get up."

"Do we have to?"

"Ja. You need to go see your grandpa and I'm having my day with my bruders at the bakery. They're going to help me get some stuff together for Valentine's Day. Also, we're getting inventory in today. Hopefully it'll get in early so that I don't have to get Toris to sign for it." Ludwig sat up and ran his hands through his hair combing his fringe back into its usual style.

Their door sprung open and Oswaldo ran in making airplane sounds with Alex over his head, "Nrroo, nrooo, reee! We've arrived at our destination; thank you for flying Uncle Ozzie Airlines and as always please have a wonderful day~" Oswaldo lowered Alex onto Feli's bed and saluted them, "Later, guys."

Ludwig ruffled the boy's hair before hopping out of bed and pulled his t-shirt on, "You're heading out?"
Oswaldo kissed Feli and Alex on their cheeks, "Yep. Me and Seraph have to go run some errands."

"Bernardo isn't going with you guys," asked Feli as he got up as well to brush Alex's hair and help him into his new prosthetic arm.

"He'll meet up with us later. Right now, I think he's going to go pick up our Uncle Drew from the airport."

"Oh."

"Mhm." Oswaldo saluted again before taking off. Ludwig made the bed while Feli and Alex went back to the boy's room to finish putting on the rest of his school uniform. He was already in the kitchen making breakfast to go by the time they came out and were all ready to start their day. Giving Ludwig a hug goodbye, Alex swung his backpack over his shoulder and walked out the door.

Feli pecked Ludwig on the lips, "I'll pick you up from the bakery in a few hours."

"Be sure to text me before you get there," said Ludwig as he locked the door after them.

Romulus was in his office deep below V Tower. In his hands, he held a small tattered picture of his brother Remus and their little sister Lucrezia. He stared at it as Remus' immortalized face stared back, his final words to the bastard before he put a bullet in his heart, still as vibrant as the day he said them, ringing in his ears. Only God forgives. I am a Vargas, we never forgive.

To this day, only a select few knew what happened the day the first pair of Vargas twins became just one. His children, of course, and their children, his very close and personal friends, and Wolfgang. Sighing, Romulus locked the picture away in a drawer. There was only one person who he'd spared that knowledge and that was Feliciano. After what the poor boy had gone through with the loss of his father, Romulus had been unable to bring himself to tell him who had been the one responsible for Cesare's death. It had been painful having to live with the knowledge that it had been his own fault that so many died without having to endure that hate of his heir for looking exactly like that man that ordered the massacre of their family.

A gentle knock at the door pulled Romulus away from his thoughts. It opened and Feliciano walked in with a tray of sweets and coffee. Romulus' eyes lit up, "Feli!"

Feliciano smiled, "Ve, I brought us some treats. Ludwig made them."

"If he's anything like his mother, then I'm sure they must be tasty," said Romulus as he helped himself to a cookie.

"You knew his mother?" Feli sat his messenger bag aside and made himself comfortable in a leather chair across from his grandfather.

"I did. Maria was a wonderful woman. Very kind and very pretty with a sense of humor that was perfect for Wolfgang." Shaking his head, Romulus added, "Not that Wolfgang was the stick in the mud he is now. Actually, he was but not when I first met him. Imagine Gilbert's prankster tendencies and add in Berwald's soft heart, Lilly's kindness, Ludwig's awkwardness, Vash's stubbornness, and Roderich's aristocratic air."
It was hard to contain his amusement but Feli tried as he spoke through his giggles, "So his offspring are literal embodiments of Dr. Beilschmidt's personality."

"Exactly!"

Feli ran a finger around the rim of his orange juice as he thought about what he learned. Glancing up at his grandfather he asked, "Do any of us remind you of our fathers, nonno?"

"Your brothers remind me so much of your mother," said Romulus with a small smile, "especially Lovi's temper. Fabrezio has her patience and strange love for ketchup and the sea. You...you actually remind me so much of—"

The door to the office echoed with firm knocks before it was swung open to reveal Paolo. The dark haired Italian grinned at the sight of his nephew and walked in with a green haired man following close behind. He reached out and stepped aside. "Drew, this is the nephew I was telling you about. He's a doctor, too!" Paolo nudged him forward and stood behind him with just about as much pride as he had when he introduced his own sons to people.

Feli blushed at the gesture and shook Drew's hand, "Dr. Blaze, a pleasure to meet you."

Drew shook it back and smiled kindly, "Pleasure is all mine. I was wondering when I'd meet you. This one and his son wouldn't shut up about you—"

"He means Ozzie."

"—which of course piqued my curiosity." Drew shifted his steel briefcase from one hand to another, "Have you given any thought to what you want to specialize in?"

Feli shook his head, "Not really. I had thought to stick with general but we'll see."

"Seeing as Ludwig is going to help you, I say the sky's the limit." Romulus walked around his desk and leaned against it with his arms crossed. He grinned, "That boy hates the thought of being a doctor as much as you hate the thought of being cooped up in this stuffy building in meetings."

A seed of worry flew by Feli, "Would it be terrible if I let him help me? He'd be overseeing V Enterprises."

"I don't think so." Placing a gentle hand on his grandson's shoulder, Romulus said, "I think that it's a wonderful idea."

And just as that seed flew by it flew far away. That was a relief. Feli grinned and hugged Romulus, "Ve, grazie!" He pulled away and eyed the briefcase Drew was carrying, "What's that?"

"Your new guns," answered Drew. He opened it up revealing twin handguns. The shiny black metal gleamed under the cool lights of his grandfather's office. Next to them were two extra magazines filled and ready to go. Drew offered them to Feli, "I was supposed to bring them in on my way back from Russia but something came up and Cindy forgot to bring them up last time she was here."

Feli stared at the guns blankly, "Thanks?" He moved his hand to hover over the grip and pulled back, "Thank you but I don't know if I can use those."

Winking a violet eye knowingly, Drew handed the case over to Feli and pulled out a smaller one from his coat pocket. He opened it and pulled something that looked like a mini speed scanner. He showed it to Feli, "See this? This is every emergency doctor's dream. It's a scanner, kind of a like
Paolo rolled his eyes, "Chad told you to bring that, didn't he?"

"You know him. Business is always on my brother's mind."

Feli took that one eagerly, "This is amazing!" He rolled it in his hands looking at the other buttons on it. One read as disinfectant and the other had a picture of a staple, "It does stitches too?"

"Dissolvable ones, yes. They're meant to hold minor wounds together or to keep the more serious ones from getting worse until the patient gets to the hospital. And as for these guns, they're just like all the ones issued to the Hounds. They'll only respond to you."

At the mention of the guns, Feli sighed and handed the little apparatus back to Drew who shook his head and pushed his hand back, "That's for you, too."

"Ve, really? Grazie, grazie, grazie!" Feli's smile returned tenfold and he placed the device into its small white case before tucking it into his messenger bag. When he turned around, the briefcase was in his face, "Er...grazie." Taking it reluctantly, he placed that into his bag as well.

Romulus pulled out a black leather pouch, "And these, too. Oswaldo polished them up for you."

Ah. His knives...Feli took those as well, their weight making his messenger bag heavier on his shoulder, "Grazie. Ah, and the passes for Ludwig?"

"They'll be waiting at the front desk."

Feli nodded and kissed his grandpa and uncle goodbye. He waved at Drew, "Thank you for everything, Dr. Blaze."

"Hold on, I'll head out with you," said Drew. He waved at Romulus and Paolo, "I'm going to go settle into my room at the hotel. See you two later."

Paolo turned to his dad, "The train is here."

"I know." Romulus stretched his shoulder, "Oswaldo and Seraph are there with the other hounds as we speak."

Dressed in black, Oswaldo and Seraph were leaning against the wall of the platform as they watched the dark train slowly enter the station. They waited until people from other trains exited the area before approaching the locomotive. The engine gave a relieved hiss as they boarded through the cargo end. Dozens of boxes, all marked with large purple N.I.N.B letters, lined the car. Seraph reached out his hand and Oswaldo handed him a crow bar. The older brother pried open a box only to find smaller boxes of prescription samples of some antibiotic inside.

Shaking his head, Seraph moved to another box and opened it as well. And another and another. Oswaldo dug through the boxes, "Look, here it is." He pointed at the Acidanthera symbol painted in the far corner of the box. He took one of the boxes of antibiotics and opened it to find that they
were really containing bags upon bags of white powder.

The two brothers exchanged glances. This was it. Finally, after months of planning and waiting and lying, it was finally here. Oswaldo opened one of the boxes in another crate and sure enough, it was filled with cocaine. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small rectangular case containing tiny trackers. Seraph took some as well and started to embed them into the crates, pausing only to answer a call from his wrist communicator, "Yes, we found them, boys. Go back to headquarters and assemble the pack. You know what to do." He cut off communication and helped his brother seal the boxes again.

"We need to get the manifest papers," said Oswaldo.

Seraph yawned, "It's cool. I'll go get them. You go get the car."

"Ok."

A man watched from the corner as the two brothers parted ways. He held his cellphone to his ear, "Yeah, man. The stuff's arrived. Two Vargas brats where just here snooping around the crates. Don't think they found anything suspicious, though 'cause they just left without taking anything. What do you want me to do?"

In Russia

"I want you to take them to Ludwig's bakery," said Ivan cheerfully into his cell. He leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling, his seat swiveling as he moved himself gently. Natasha waddled into the room in her lab coat and a cup of tea. She sat down across of her brother and smiled at his happy expression. Grinning, Ivan added, "And make sure that they know who sent them. I want Ludwig and Feli to know how I feel about their engagement…Yes, thank you. Do svidaniya."

When he hung up and grinned at his older sister, "You're getting even more beautiful every day."

Natasha giggled into her tea, "What are you up to, brother?"

"Just sending Ludwig and Feliciano a gift to show that there are no hard feelings between us." Ivan got up and walked around his desk to touch Natasha's belly, "How is my little nephew doing?"

"I think he's taking a nap; he was kicking me all morning. I couldn't get a thing done in the lab."

"Good. You two shouldn't be down there any—" Ivan was interrupted by the doorknobs rattling. He cowered behind his sister, "You locked it, yes?"

"I did."

"Good."

Outside the door, Natalya scowled. She could've sworn she saw Natasha go into Ivan's office. Oh, well. Pulling out her phone she tried calling Dimitri but as usual it went straight to voicemail. Shaking her head, she stormed over to Eduard's office and took a seat across from him, ignoring the fact that he was on the phone.

Eduard's eyebrow furrowed, "No, I'm still here. Listen, just call Kevin. He knows the details. He can text the guys for pickup and delivery…No, I wasn't aware that Mr. Vargas was considering him as head of the facility. Good for him…A man has to make a living somehow…Well, the way I see it, it's like a security net for him…Yeah, just—I guess…fine! Yes, if he doesn't listen to you
then I'll call him. Just—however this goes down, this has to go down tonight. My brother already agreed so you just have to show up...yes, bye-bye."

He hung up his phone and rubbed his face tiredly, "Good god, help these days isn't what it used to be."

"Tell me about it," grunted Natalya. She leaned forward and pushed her phone towards Eduard, "I haven't heard from Dimitri in weeks. Last time I did, it was from Donovan who said that Feliciano had beaten the crap out of him."

Eduard looked at his sister-in-law through his fingers, "...Feliciano beat him up? Feliciano Vargas?"

"Which other Feliciano is there?!"

"Right, sorry. Why didn't you tell me about this sooner?"

"Why should I have? It's not like he was working for you."

Eduard continued to stare at Natalya until he pulled his hands away from his face. "It doesn't matter. In a few hours, Ludwig will be yours again."

"How?"

"You helped me get Natasha's drugs into Genovia and I said that I would help you get Ludwig to see the kind of person Feliciano really was. That's all."

"Should I go down there?"

"I don't really see a point. I think you should wait until they come for you."

"Do you really think they'll come all this way?"

A small smirk made its way onto Eduard's face as he spun his chair slowly, "Sis, they'll be bursting through those doors and taking you back so fast that you and Ivan won't know what hit you."

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**Victrola**

After he parted ways with his little fox and Alex, Ludwig had driven to his bakery. He'd enjoyed being woken up the way he had but couldn't help but feel that something was off. He had a kink in his neck that probably happened because he slept on the wrong side of his pillow. It had felt nice at the time, having Feli in his arms and breathing in his scent. Just thinking about it was enough to make him forget the slight pain in his neck. Perhaps Roderich would help him with that later.

He pulled into the parking in the back and walked over to his bakery, frowning at a small red flower graffiti on the bakery's back door. Ludwig grumbled to himself as he unlocked it to let himself in, "Damn lights go out and suddenly the walls are public canvases." Well, at least it looked nice. He flicked on the lights and turned on the ovens. He had another half hour at least until his brothers would start arriving.

As predicted, as soon as he was done pulling ingredients for the recipes they wanted to try out, they
started to pool into the kitchen. Gilbert, unsurprisingly, was first to arrive followed closely by Berwald and Roderich. Ludwig greeted them pleasantly and pointed to the closet where he kept their aprons. Gilbert, of course, cackled at the one Roderich had, "I bet Lizzy made you buy that."

"Lilly actually made it," sniffed Roderich as he secured his black and purple apron around his person. He glanced down at the cute drawings of animals playing instruments and shrugged, "And it was a gift, thank you."

Gilbert neatly folded his coat and tucked it away, "Whatever. How is Liz doing anyway? My awesome nephew is getting big in there."

At the mention of his wife and baby, Roderich visibly relaxed and—well, Ludwig really wished he had a camera because the look of pure joy and pride never looked so good on him. Roderich sat in his stool and started to prep the filling for his fruit roll cake, "She's getting more beautiful by the day. Her cravings aren't terribly bad but she does tend to get emotional over silly things lately. Just yesterday, I had to pull us over on our way home because she saw a kid drop his hot chocolate and she just started crying. The only way I could get her to calm down was by giving the child money to buy a new one."

"Aw."

"Indeed."

Clasping Berwald around his shoulders, Gilbert hoisted himself up and beamed, "What about you, big guy? How's married life treating ya?"

Berwald's stoic face twitched until it relaxed with a thoughtful smile, "Tino wants ta adopt."

"Really?"

"Hn."

"That's wonderful news," beamed Roderich.

Berwald blushed and nodded, "We're gonna start lookin' fer a lawyer ta help us."

"You should use the one Feli and I are using," said Ludwig as he rolled out puff pastry dough for his fruit and cheese pastries. "Her name is Michelle and she's really good. Super-fast too. I believe the one helping Alfred and Arthur with their two boys."

"Man, that sucks!" Gilbert kneaded his dough roughly onto the floured counter, "My three little bros are beating the awesome me in the family department. I want a kid, too!"

"Kids aren't toys, East. They're a huge responsibility."

Lifting his red eyes to look at Ludwig, Gilbert nodded, "I know that, West, but I think me and my Birdie would make awesome papas."

Roderich sniffed, "You finally completed your fellowship for cardiac surgery, Gilbert. Don't you want to further your career before you start a family?"

"I guess...but what's the point of being an awesome surgeon and bringing in all this dough if I don't have a mini-me to spoil? Besides, I think Matthew wants to have kids. He's really great with Sammy and Daniel."
"Maybe ya should talk to 'im," said Berwald. He was mixing a batter for chocolate mousse, "Children are a huge responsibility and will change yer life forever."

The four brothers worked on their pastries and continued talking when Toris arrived with Emma and Vash in tow. Toris paled at the sight of Ludwig and scurried to the back where the inventory was. Ludwig passed it off as him being uncomfortable with the knowledge that he was now sort of living with Feliks as well. Perhaps he could talk to him later and see if there was anything he could do to help the poor guy.

Vash hung up his messenger bag and pulled on his forest green apron with a sigh. His brothers waved at him and Emma before returning back to their conversation. Emma put her things away then went back to the front to open up for business. He took a seat next to Roderich and pulled out his recipe for a cheesecake. Lilly had developed such a strange craving for all things cheese, and when she heard that their bro day was going to be at Ludwig's bakery, she had requested cheesecake.

As he worked, he listened in onto his brothers' conversation. Gilbert cackled, "So, West, how are things with you and Feli?"

The youngest Beilschmidt glanced over curiously to see what Ludwig had to say. To his surprise, he saw a look on his older brother that he'd never seen before. Bliss. He clenched his jaw and smashed the cream cheese and sugar together.

Ludwig bit his lip to keep from grinning stupidly and glanced down at his hands to hide his blush. He felt Gilbert nudge his side and he couldn't help but shake his head fondly, "Things are amazing." He left it at that knowing that his brothers would only beg to know more in their own unique ways. They certainly did not disappoint. Gilbert started to obnoxiously demand for more details while Roderich offered a brief description of one of his own less risqué dates with Elizabeta, his more subtle way of asking by giving as a token for getting. As for Berwald, the man simply sat up straighter and met his eye to let him know that he was listening.

"I'll admit that things have been stressful because of the fire but ever since then, and that time he was mugged, we've been good. If anything, I think that our relationship has gotten stronger." Ludwig felt a slight pang of sadness as he confessed, "But I do think that there is something else that's been bugging him. Lately he's been keeping to himself in his art studio and when he's not doing that, he's reading through some documents that he keeps locked away in a safe."

As he cut out hearts from his cookie dough and placed them into a pan, Ludwig missed the looks exchanged by his older brothers behind his back. Gilbert cleared his throat, "Er, has he said anything about what he's been working on?"

"Not really. I mean, I know he wants to but something is keeping him from talking. He keeps telling me that he loves me and it's almost as if he's worried that I'm going to leave him if he tells me."

Berwald furrowed his brow, "Would ya? Leave him, I mean, if he tells ya what's botherin' him?"

"Hell no. What could possibly be so terrible that would make me leave him?" Shaking his head, Ludwig rolled up the excess dough to make a braid, "Nein, I would never leave him. I love him too much and—"

"...and?"

Ludwig suddenly turned very red, "...and he's the wind beneath my wings. I—I can't imagine my
life without him anymore. I need him just as much as he needs me. Without him, I'm afraid I'll just plummet down to earth and something will die inside me."

Vash glanced up at him with a frown and curled into himself as Gilbert and Roderich laughed wholeheartedly. Berwald chuckled, "You understand now why we didn't want ya t' marry Natalya. She didn't make ya feel what we feel when we're with our beloveds."

"Indeed." Roderich pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, "I remember when I first met Elizabeta, we were what? Four? Five?"

Gilbert chuckled, "Ja. She thought she was boy."

"That's right, she did! Despite how many times her cousin would tell her otherwise, she insisted that she was a male. Then puberty hit and it was like a whole new world opened to her. Well, whatever she decided to be, it didn't change how I felt about her and how she made me feel."

"You said something lame about it, too. I think it was along the lines of—"

"She inspired symphonies in my heart that the masters themselves would applaud," said Roderich with bashful chuckle of his own. "I was glad when you came out, actually. It meant I had a chance with Elizabeta."

The eldest Beilschmidt wiped his hands on his apron, "Yeah, well, then I went to America with my frat brothers and met my Birdie. He, uh, he was working at Disneyworld at the first aid center. I think I might have passed out because the next thing I know, I'm waking up to his freaking awesome purple eyes and it was like I was looking into the eyes of an angel. I remember falling in love with him was like watching a snowstorm. Flakes fell on me and before I knew it I was covered in them. Lucky for us we both love snow 'cause we blew into each other's lives like a blizzard. We can cuddle in front of a fire with some nice beer and just let the night take us where it wants. Whether it's talking until we can't keep our eyes open or sex is irrelevant because it's just awesome being with him."

"Tino also has purple eyes," mumbled Berwald wistfully. Blushing, he ducked his gaze under his bangs. There was so much more he wanted to say but was too embarrassed. No wait. This was bro day. They were in a safe place to confess their feelings and not get mocked. Peeking up, he smiled, "I don't know how t' say it like you guys but Tino makes me feel warm inside. It—he lit my soul up like a roaring yule log and keeps it burnin' with his love. Took a while to earn his trust and even longer ta earn his heart but now that I have it, I cherish an' guard it with my life."

Gilbert leaned back in his chair, "That's the thing in marriage and love, bruders of mein." He met Ludwig's eyes and said meaningfully, "We have to remember all we endured both in the pursuit of said love and what we've endured after. Those moments don't just disappear when our relationships find themselves go on rocky terrain."

The four brothers nodded in mutual understanding. Vash tossed his ingredients into his bowl and tried to drown out his brothers' conversation. Somehow after talking about everything and nothing for the next hour, Gilbert had led the conversation into what he had been dreading. Gilbert grinned mischievously, "So, I don't think anyone will speak about the elephant in the room so I am. Ludwig, Feli must be a sex god."

Yep. There it was. Vash groaned while Ludwig choked on his own spit. Ludwig's cheeks became so aflame with embarrassment that Berwald had to give him a glass of water to calm him down. Meanwhile Gilbert couldn't stop cackling, "Oh, you should've seen your face. It was priceless!"
Ludwig regained some of his composure, "Wh-what makes you say that?"

"I actually wanted to say something a whole lot earlier but never really had the time. But hey, man, there is no shame in getting laid. As a matter of a fact, I applaud that you finally got it in!"

Roderich's own cheeks were flushed but he raised his fist in the air to join Gilbert's paler one, "I join in this idiot's applauding. Good for you Ludwig."

"Hn," said Berwald as he too, lifted his fist into the air.

Vash snorted, "Yeah, congrats."

"Um, thanks I guess," muttered Ludwig in embarrassment. "Although, I do understand why you won't shut up about it, Gilbert. It does feel…really good."

Gilbert puffed his chest out in pride, "Damn straight it does. When Matthew does me, we—"

"Wait, what?"

"When Matthew does me—"

"When you word it that way, you mean he tops, right?"

Gilbert made a face, "Well, if you let me finish, you'd know. Yeah, he tops. We switch it up every now and again though to spice things up."

Ludwig drowned out the rest of the conversation as he pondered on that. All the times he and Feliciano had made love, he would always top and it was wonderful. Feli seemed to enjoy it as well but…Was it getting boring for him? Would he want to reverse it someday? Did he even want to be on the receiving end? Well, he'd be lying if it didn't cross his mind. Feli always responded so well and perhaps maybe…maybe it would feel really good for him too. And Feli did have experience in that role anyway, so it would surely be wonderful.

Images of an assertive Feli dressed filled his mind. Him dressed in his nice black business suit with enough buttons undone so that Ludwig could get a glimpse of his delectable collar bones and dark slacks that were tailored specifically to emphasize his long legs. His skin would glow golden in the candle light and maybe he could even hold a crop and run it along his lips like he did that time in his kitchen months ago. Oh, and his eyes would burn like dark embers still hot enough to light him a blaze. And he'd be so good to him as any king should be but also treat him as the queen he said he was. Holy shit, it would be so good, wouldn't it?

Just the way he'd run his hands all over him as if exploring him for the first time again. Caressing and loving him, kissing him along his jaw and down his neck, pausing there just to stake his claim for all to see. And then—aw, crap…Ludwig fidgeted in his seat uncomfortably. How did he let himself get carried away with thoughts of his sinfully wonderful fox? He was about to excuse himself when Vash suddenly lost it.

"Shut up," growled the youngest at his older brothers, "shut up, shut up! I've had it up to here with all your talk about sex and love and romantic bullshit! Why can't we ever talk about, I don't know the economy? Social issues or maybe even the damn weather?! Why is it always girly chit chat about your romantic lives?"

Not one to have his masculinity challenged, Gilbert growled back, "I'll have you know, girls aren't the only ones who talk about their love life and it's incredibly sexist of you to think that. Unlike you, I don't like talking about the economy or weather. As for social issues, well, I do that enough
at parties. When do I ever get a chance to talk about the nitty gritty details of my awesome life with Mattie? Believe it or not, outside of Antonio and Francis, I don't have that many friends I can talk to about this."

"We're brothers," said Berwald gravely. Truth be told he felt a little heart broken by Vash's sudden outburst, "If we can't confide in each other, then who can we talk about it to?"

Vash trembled in a silent rage, "And I get that. Honestly, I do."

"Do you?" Roderich crossed his arms over his chest, "Because every time you hear something so much as a tiny bit romantic, you go off on a tangent about how you're not getting married or whatever."

"I…I just—I hate hearing you talk about it. Warm? Happy? Wind under your wings? I hate it."

Ludwig turned in his seat, his sudden lust put out thankfully. He looked concerned, "Why?"

"Yeah," added Gilbert, "Don't you like that your brothers are happy?"

Vash looked away, his lip trembling, "It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm jealous, ok?! I'm jealous because I'm never going to have that or know what that feels like. I won't know what it's like to have warm air under my wings lifting me up into the sky. I won't know what it's like for my heart to sing symphonies or any of that other crap." Vash's face contorted into deep sorrow and his voice went up in pitch, "I w-won't…"

Shell shocked, the older Beilschmidts stared at Vash with different expressions. Roderich was the first to speak, "But…you said you weren't getting married. I don't understand."

"Don't you get it? I have no interest in sex. I mean, I get that people are good looking, some are even beautiful, but they don't do anything to me…down there. Or, on rare occasion, if they do, I have no interest in doing anything about it. But that doesn't mean I don't want to love someone or be loved by someone."

"We love you," said Gilbert softly.

"And I appreciate that, but it's not the same. You know it's not the same." A few large tears escaped from Vash's eyes but he made no move to wipe them away, "I only say that I'm not getting married because maybe if I say it enough times, I can convince myself that I don't want a marriage. Then when the time comes and I'm alone…maybe it won't hurt as much." He hiccupped miserably and hid his face in his arm on the counter, "Who would want to be with a broken boy like me?"

"Fuck, come here, kid." Gilbert rolled over and hugged their baby brother tightly, "Don't you ever say that, Vash. You ain't broken." He allowed him to bury his face in his chest and rubbed his back soothingly, "I'm sorry, I didn't know you felt like that."

Roderich scooted over as well and wrapped his arms around Vash, sandwiching him between him and Gilbert, "Gil is right. You're not broken, just different."

"Nothin' wrong with bein' different," said Berwald as he ruffled Vash's hair.

Ludwig lifted his young brother's face up by the chin, "We'd be the biggest hypocrites alive if we judged you for being different. You have three brothers who are in love with men and another who
would love Lizzy no matter what she was."

"Yeah," cried Roderich, "she could decide that she was a man after all and I would fight to the
death with anyone who would claim otherwise just because he’d be carrying our child. Aristocratic
blood in my veins be damned, I will step upon a soap box and proclaim exactly why my spouse
was infinitely better than they were."

Vash gave a broken laugh but managed a genuine smile as he imagined it.

"But in all seriousness, why didn't you tell us how you felt sooner? We would've toned it down a
bit."

"I didn't want to be a bad brother," admitted Vash as he leaned his head on Gilbert's shoulder, "I
thought that maybe I could just keep it in."

Ludwig pulled away to put their things into the oven, "It's not good to keep things bottled up inside.
You'll explode."

"I think I just did…sorry about that."

"It's ok."

Roderich pulled back as well to start clearing up the mess, "Besides, there are a lot of people with
the same preferences as you. You just need to go out there and find them."

"Did ya know Lukas was asexual, too," said Berwald.

"Really?" At his brother's nod, Roderich turned back to Vash, "See? They're not as uncommon as
you think. Though, don't think that you have to get together with another asexual person. I think
that when you find someone who is meant to be your partner in life that things will work out on
their own. Just look at us. Our own spouses or, in Ludwig's case fiancé, aren't perfect despite the
praises we sing about them. They are each unique gems with flaws and secrets but everything
worked out because love and understanding and patience allowed it to. It'll be hard work but you'll
find someone."

"The trick is not being shy to take the chance."

"Yeah, unlike a certain someone we know," said Gilbert with a pointed look at Ludwig.
"Thankfully, Feli has enough balls for the both of them."

"Ve~" The Beilschmidt brothers turned towards to the door to see Feliciano casually leaning
against the door frame dressed smartly in dark pants, black business shirt with a steel grey vest and
a dark grey tie. He smiled brightly at the men before him and shifted the briefcase from one hand
to another as he waited for them to speak.

Ludwig blinked once before checking his watch, "Is it time already?"

"I'm sorry, Luddy. I called but you didn't pick up." Feli watched Vash pull away from Gilbert and
return his focus on the cheesecake batter, "Do you mind if I leave my things here while we go
out?"

"Not at all. Just put them in the pantry. They should be safe in there."

Roderich peered over his glasses, "What do you have in there?"
"Just things my grandpa gave me," said Feliciano as he walked towards the back of the bakery to deposit his guns in the safety of the pantry. He missed the look shared between the three eldest brothers but had a feeling that they weren't comfortable with him leaving his weapons where Ludwig could find them. The closet door opened from behind him, making Feli jump in shock but it quickly wore off when he saw that it was Toris.

Narrowing his eyes, Feli pulled him inside the pantry by his collar, "You."

"S-sir," whispered Toris fearfully. Feliks had forced him to tell him the whole truth. Had he gone and told Feliciano? Shaking in the Italian's arms, he held his arms up, "Please, M-Mr. Vargas, I can explain!"

"You broke my best friend's heart," hissed Feliciano as he shook Toris by his shirt. "You hurt Feliks."

"Feli," called Ludwig from the kitchen, "what are you doing in there?"

Feli stared Toris down before replying cheerfully, "I'm just eating a snack. It's ok, though right? I mean the truck comes by today with more stuff."

Outside, Ludwig paused as he slid their things into the oven while Roderich and Berwald washed the dishes. He turned towards the pantry, "How do you know that?"

"You were muttering about having to bribe the driver to get first pick, amore mio."

"Ah, well, yes that is true." Checking the kitchen clock, he scowled, "And he's late. I had hoped to get my things by now so that Toris and Emma could prepare the pastries for Valentine's Day tomorrow."

Feli smiled as he walked out of the pantry and hugged Ludwig, "Would you like me to do something about that? Talk with him, perhaps? Maybe I can get him to see that it's not wise to keep a baker from his trade because he's too inconsiderate."

Unable to keep the smirk from his lips, Ludwig shut the ovens tight and turned to his little fox. He made sure that his brothers were occupied before pushing Feli back into the empty pantry. The door closed with a small click and before Feliciano knew it, Ludwig lifted him and pinned him to the wall, his lips claiming his jaw and neck. Feli hummed happily and tugged his head back by his hair to properly kiss him.

Ludwig securely gripped Feli by the upper thighs before moving them to the steel island he used to sort out his ingredients; he was going to have to instruct Toris to just use the one in the kitchen for today. The thoughts that previously ran through Ludwig's mind replayed and he couldn't help but whimper in desire.

Feli's eyes shot open at the sound of Ludwig's sudden urgency. He poked his fiancé on the cheek, "Ve? Did I not satisfy you last night, tesoro?"

"…Ja." Reddening, Ludwig buried his heated face into the cool steal of the island.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I let my sudden…urges get the best of me."

"Don't apologize for that, Luddy." Feli kissed his cheek and grinned, "I love it when you're horny~"
"Feliciano!"

"Ve~"

Ludwig leaned back up as he brought a hand to his face, his cool fingers doing little to soothe his embarrassment, "I…I'd like to request something."

"Anything." Taking Ludwig's hand into his, Feli kissed the top of it before purring, "Anything for my beautiful queen."

"A queen? W-well, per—perhaps, then, my king should take care of his queen," muttered Ludwig shyly, desperately hoping that his clever fox would understand the innuendo. He was not disappointed. Feliciano's eyes widened and he started to fidget where he sat.

Lips parting in a silent gasp, a pink tongue licked quickly along the bottom lip. Ludwig watched it hungrily as it left behind a shiny trail along the skin before going back inside its cavern. Feli let out a sudden shudder and said with a noticeably deeper voice, "Do you know what you are asking, Ludwig?"

"Ja."

"A-and you really want me to?" At Ludwig's nod, Feli could practically feel his pupils dilate with need. Shaking his head, he tried to calm down. "Ok, but obviously we can't do that here. Don't worry, Luddy, leave it to me! I'll make it a special day for you. We can go on a date and everything." Feli smiled and hugged Ludwig tightly, "Ve, I love you bunches!"

"I love you too."

"You're going to like it, Luddy. I love it so I'm sure you will, too."

Happy and satisfied that Feliciano didn't make a bigger deal out of his request; Ludwig pulled away fully and helped Feli straighten his clothes out. They stepped out of the pantry together, Ludwig was happy to see that Berwald had ushered their brothers to the front of the bakery where they could hear Emma teasing Gilbert about one thing or another. He turned to Feli, "I'll be right back. I have to go change out of this shirt and into my good one. Wait for me in the front?"

Feliciano shook his head, "I'm ok here."

"Ok. Be right back."

As Ludwig stepped into his small office, Feli looked around the kitchen. So, this was where Ludwig truly felt at ease. He didn't blame him. There was something incredibly rewarding about baking. The way you had to carefully measure things out and use certain techniques to get the perfect consistency. The way you had to be patient and, even if things seemed questionable, trust in your skill and the recipe to produce the perfect outcome. The whole craft screamed Ludwig. He wondered if that's why Wolfgang gifted the bakery to his son.

There was another part that wondered if Wolfgang was simply testing his son by giving him a taste of something he truly wanted to see if Ludwig would pursue it. Some could see it as cruel as a man hanging a large piece of juicy meat in front of a hungry dog that is chained to a post. But that was far from the truth. As far as Feliciano could tell, Wolfgang was giving Ludwig a gentle nudge towards his true passion by giving him the bakery. Perhaps he wanted Ludwig to challenge him and do something that actually made him happy.

Now that he thought about it, Wolfgang would seem like the type of person to do that. After all,
wasn't it he who paired them up with each other and readily allowed them to be together? He did allow Ludwig to break up with Natalya with absolutely no repercussions at all. It was almost as if he had been counting on it just as he had been counting on Ludwig to make use of his bakery as much as he liked. But why would he do that?

You know why, said his inner voice. Deep, deep, down you know. You know but you're purposefully ignoring the truth. It's right in front of you.

Feliciano shook his head, "Ve..." A knock came from the back and Feli glanced over to the door leading to the front where everyone was. He waited for one of the Beilschmidts to go open it, but when they didn't, and Toris seemed to have vanished, Feli went to do it himself.

A lanky man nervously handed him a clipboard, "I am so sorry, Mr. Beilschmidt! My orders where backed up cause my truck was giving me issues and—and you're not Mr. Beilschmidt..."

Feli stared at him for a moment before smiling. He reached out for his pen and made sure that the man could see his family crest pressed into the gold ring he wore on his right hand as he signed for the deliveries, "I'm sure you are aware of what tomorrow is?"

"V-valentine's day sir."

"Mhm. And you know what my bello is? He's a baker. What do bakers sell on Valentine's day?"

"Sweets?"

"Si~" Feli smiled again and patted the man on his back, "Please be more considerate of your timing in the future. I'm sure it's not just my Luddy who needs their orders in a timely matter. Perhaps I can help insure that deliveries are made on time?"

The man stared at Feliciano nervously, "I—"

"Here's the card to my mechanic. Tell him that I sent you and he'll fix your truck free of charge, if it can't be helped then have him call me. My family made its fortune by transporting and delivering you know." Feli's eyes warmed as he patted the man's shoulder playfully, "I'll give you a new one! Maybe then you can be on time~"

Of course, he knew the Vargas. Who in Europe didn't? The man however also knew of how strange they could be, at least the older ones, always watching the city from the shadows. He had a cousin who knew a guy who got into trouble with Lovino and apparently, he was never heard from again. Then again, it was probably because he was also dealing drugs to minors so maybe the cops just picked him up and he was serving his time. Regardless, the man cautiously took the card he was being offered and glanced up at Feli.

The Italian was still beaming up at him and he looked genuinely eager to help. Finally, the delivery man smiled back, "Thank you, Mr. Vargas! You have no idea what this means to me."

"I'm glad I can help. Do you know where Ludwig puts his things?"

"Usually he tells me to put them in the pantry for him."

"Ve, okie dokie."

Feli went back to the pantry to hide his things inside one of the cabinets before stepping aside to allow the delivery man to do his job. Ludwig stepped out of his office just as the last box was deposited safely inside and Feliciano handed the man a large bill discreetly. Clearing his throat, he
asked, "Are you ready, liebe?"

"Uh-huh." Taking Ludwig's hand in his, Feli led him out through the front, pausing only to wave goodbye to the other Beilschmidts and Emma. They drove through the busy streets of downtown Victrola, passing by people scurrying to their destinations. Trucks from various shops were out and about in larger numbers, no doubt to make their early valentine deliveries if the hefty flower arrangements going in and out of buildings were anything to go by.

Ludwig caught Feli looking out the window wistfully and reached out to hold his hand, "What's on your mind?"

"Ve…"

"Hm?"

Smiling softly, Feli squeezed his fiancé's hand, "It's nothing, Luddy. Just thinking about everything we're going to do today."

"Is it really going to be that bad?"

"Not really but I'd much rather be doing other things on our day off."

The suggestive tone Feli used was enough to send his blood into whiplash, some of it wanted to go to his face whereas the rest wanted to go down south. Licking his lips, Ludwig spared a quick glance over to his fiancé before returning his attention to the road ahead of him, "M-maybe after? When we get home, we can take advantage of our time together?"

"Of course~"

Ludwig pulled along V Enterprise's entrance where the man he recognized as Dalmatian waiting patiently for them. He opened Feli's door first, "Welcome back, Dr. Vargas and Dr. Beilschmidt."

"Ciao," greeted Feliciano with a curt nod, "Everything in order?"

"Yes, sir. Except your brother, Mr. Lovino, isn't here and we were unable to locate his whereabouts."

Feli gave another nod, "It's ok. I'm not taking Ludwig to his level yet." Grinning up to Ludwig, he looped his arm around his and tugged him inside after Ludwig gave Dalmatian his keys.

In proper lighting, Ludwig could really see every detail of the building's interior. The Vargas family crest was mosaicked onto the floor in black and gold tiles. There was a sitting area a little ways away from the receptionist desk and even a small bistro where he could smell the familiar aromas of herbs and tomatoes. That got Ludwig to bite back a smile. Leave it to a Vargas to have a source of good food easily accessible to them.

They walked towards the elevators and Ludwig felt himself tense with the memory of that cursed thing sassing him. Feliciano bounced on the balls of his feet, "I can't wait to show you off to everyone and to show you what my family does. Are you familiar with our businesses?"

"A bit."

"Mh, well be prepared to be amazed, heh! Some of these things can be dated back to the fifteenth century." Feli giggled at Ludwig's expression and pulled him inside the elevator as soon as it opened only to raise a brow at Bernardo who was already inside it.
Dressed in a light blue dress shirt and grey slacks, Bernardo was leaning against the back wall casually reading over a file. He glanced up and quickly stood straighter, his hand going to his side to hide his gun and badge from view, "Heh…uh, h-hey you two. What are you doing here?"

Ludwig looked around the elevator in confusion, "I don't understand. We were waiting out here for the elevator. I didn't see you come down."

"That's because I didn't come down." Bernardo glanced between his cousin and Ludwig before saying slowly, "I…uh, I came up…from the basement."

"The basement…"

Gently pushing Ludwig inside the elevator, Feliciano said, "Si. We keep all of our information down there. I guess you can say that it's the heart of our operations." He motioned for Bernardo to step out, "I'll see you around, cugino."

Bernardo tucked the file in his hand awkwardly over his hip to hide his gun and shuffled out, "Yeah, ciao~"

"Why was your cousin here," asked Ludwig curiously as he eyed the buttons in the elevator suspiciously.

"Well, they gotta work somewhere silly." Feli swiped his badge on the elevator and pressed the second to last button to take them to the top. "He and his brother's collect data for us. That's why they travel a lot."

"Oh." Ludwig stored this information for later and looked out the elevator to see people bustling in and out of the building. It was hard to tell but he could've sworn he saw Bernardo staring at them.

"Okie dokie, see these here?" Feli motioned to a cluster of buttons of the lower levels, "This is all customer service, floors two to eleven. It's two for each business we own."

Ludwig couldn't help but smirk, "Only five businesses?"

"Ve~"

"I've read up about what you guys have but it's kind of vague."

"The vineyard?"

"Ja."

"We have two. The one my grandpa has here in his villa and then there's one in Italy. That was our original golden goose. That's the one that dates back to the fifteenth century. Back then, we Vargas were only simple wine makers and unwilling mercenaries." The wistful look that Ludwig had seen on his beloved's face returned, "According to our personal history books, my ancestors witnessed an unjust trial for a man who was accused of stealing from a noble. They were going to put him to death and take what little land he had but my ancestor was able to get proof that it was the noble who set things up to make him look guilty."

Standing taller with pride, Feli said, "You see the noble had caught his oldest son fooling around with him and that hadn't sat well with him; things weren't as nice back then."

"What happened," asked Ludwig.
"The prince of the land was impressed with my ancestors so he rewarded them with more land for their vineyard. Word got around that they were able to extract information so they were often called upon to solve crimes others couldn't...sometimes in ways that were less than legal by today's standards."

The elevator stopped at their floor and the couple stepped out. Ludwig looked at the pictures hanging on the walls in the hallway, making sure not to get in anyone's way, "So you mean to tell me that you guys went from doing police work to mob?"

"We were never police, just mercenaries. My family didn't like to deal with things like that so they went back to tending to their winery. A few hundred years later, during one of the agoges in the late eighteenth century, another ancestor—foolish and brave that he was—braved a storm across the Mediterranean on his boat because he wanted to expand his exportation business. On that voyage, he—"

"He came across a nation in the making and made the Vargas name even greater." Ludwig stopped before a painting of a young man with a scar starting from his hair line, going down across his face and the corner of his lip. Despite the scar, Ludwig could see the family resemblance. The Italian had Feli's eyes and cheerful expression. The painting showed sun rays radiating high into the collarbone which meant his tattoo was just over his heart, marking him as next in line in their patriarchy.

"Yes. He was also the first to make contact with one of your ancestors. It's from my understanding that our families go way back."

Ludwig chuckled, "Ah, not by much though. It's not like they fought side by side in a war or anything."

Feli couldn't help himself. He tugged Ludwig down by his tie and pecked him twice on the lips before walking forward and pointing to a piece of metal inside a glass case, "This is from the first railroad my family laid down. After the war, my ancestor went back to Italy to take care of the family business."

Out of the corner of his eye, Ludwig saw Feli reach out to touch the glass encasing the metal. He fought the urge to embrace him and settled for giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze, "That sounds familiar."

"Mm, no, he actually wanted nothing more than to do that. Vincenzo actually did what he did for Genovia in large part because he wanted to prove to the family that he was capable of leadership. Some years later, his son Lorenzo brought the railroad through here, bringing with it trade. It didn't take long for the Vargas to become successful traders in Europe and even less for our wine to become extremely popular with the world. Tino's family became partners with the Vargas and their boats helped get our stuff around."

"And the mob life started..."

Feli gave him a peculiar look, "You're really interested in that part of our life, aren't you?" Shaking his head, he said, "Well, as well off as we were with our business, the real money, at the time, came from smuggling. Our trains would bring in goods to avoid the taxes. During the prohibition in America, my family managed to smuggle their wine over to them. That was my great-great grandfather. He and the Jones—"

"Jones? Like Alfred's family Jones?"
To Feliciano, it felt like he was walking on thin ice. He didn't want to incriminate his friend's name never mind how much truth there was in it. Then again, both he and Matthew had expressed their consent to speak freely about their family's past because it was, after all, in the past. After a pregnant pause, Feli nodded.

As soon as Feliciano started to tremble, Ludwig shook himself out of his shock and pulled him into his arms, ignoring the giggles from a group of women walking past him. He kissed his forehead, "Guess that's why you said you were a prince of crime. I bet you would look really handsome in an old school gangster suit and fedora.

"Ve..." Feli leaned in to Ludwig's warmth and, "Do you realize you'd be helping me manage a lot, Luddy? The Vineyard, our imports and exports, and we still haven't even scratched the surface. My grandpa started a real estate company in his youth. His partner in that was Elizabeta's uncle. It first started with a bar that once belonged to Lars' father which was later turned into an inn, which was then turned into Olympia hotel. And of course, you already know that we own a nuclear power plant in Italy, but don't worry about that one. My mom is in charge of it. Come on, I'll get you reports from this quarter in all of our divisions and I'll introduce you to some of the managers."

"Do you have a board?"

"Not really. This is a family company and as such we manage it ourselves."

After retrieving the documents, the two men walked around V Enterprise, politely greeting the workers and making small talk with the higher management. If Ludwig didn't know better, he would say that Feli was trying to stall. Stall for what he didn't know but it was rather strange that Feliciano was practically meeting with each of his employees the way he was. Ludwig shrugged it off and marked it up as Feli being Feli. As soon as they were done, they left and made their way back to the garage where Feliciano's car was parked.

For once, Feli was driving like a sane person and slowly eased out of his spot, pausing at the lower level of the garage only to allow a group of black Urus to exit. He gripped the steering wheel tightly and bit his lip, quietly waiting for Ludwig to mention them. It didn't take long before Ludwig asked, "Who are they?"

Licking his lips, Feli answered, "They work in the basement. Keep things down there and out here running smooth."

"Oh." They made it to V Research Facility. There, his aunt Marzia was eagerly waiting for them.

The Italian woman pulled her nephew in for a tight embrace before doing the same to Ludwig, "Feliciano, my darling~"

"Ciao, zia," greeted Feli cheerfully.

"Your grandfather told me you were coming down to visit me...finally."

"Ve, I'm sorry, zia, but I've been really busy. As I'm sure you know."

Marzia sniffed, "I do." Shaking her head, she grinned again and looped her arms through both men's before tugging them inside. She prattled on and on about their work while Ludwig tried his best to stay interested in what was being said. As Feli hung to every word, Ludwig glanced around the pristine facility. Its earthy décor gave it a homey feeling as opposed to so many other research facilities he'd visited, not that he'd visited many to begin with.

The three walked the halls, politely visiting with any researcher or staff member they came across.
during the tour. When they finally stopped by the older Italian's lab, Ludwig was amazed to see how incredibly neat she was.

Her lab was essentially a small greenhouse with various plants neatly lined up according to healing properties. A heavy red journal with sketches of flowers and notes was sitting on her work station with a feather quill and inkwell not too far away from it. Marzia noticed Ludwig eye it and she smiled, "My husband gave that to me the day I got accepted into the master's program at the university. He said that I reminded him of a witch."

Ludwig tensed. Was this a test? Was she testing him? Oh god. What was he supposed to say to that? He immediately relaxed when he heard her giggle. Feliciano joined her and he leaned over to peck his cheek, "He didn't mean anything bad by it, amore."

"He didn't," agreed Marzia. Her giggles settled after a while, a far-off look slowly blooming onto her face. "Octavio was a beautiful soul. I remember he and your father, Feli, and Paolo always tried their best to make me and your mom happy despite their teasing when we were growing up. Everything I do here I do in his memory and for my two babies." Running her slender fingers through her straight dark auburn hair, she ginned, "And of course, I also do it for you, nipote. Our little prince," she said as she pinched his cheeks.

Blushing, Feli stood still and allowed her to do as she pleased. He was used to his aunt treating him this way ever since he was a boy. She was even worse with Felicia and Marcello, not that they minded, they were really touchy feely as well. Her green eyes shined with joy when she finally let go and went over to her table to show Feli her newest serum, "I finally developed a substance that is perfect to suspend transport proteins as well as phospholipids without being rejected by host cells!"

"Dio, mio!" Feli's own eyes widened in excitement as he shook Ludwig's arm, "Did you hear that, Luddy! Oh my god, zia, you're brilliant! Do you know what you could do with that?!"

"Si! Imagine it, boys. We can create microscopic bandages for cells damaged by poisons or other lysomic toxins. Want to see it in action?"

Ludwig smiled and reached out to wrap an arm around Feliciano, "It would be our pleasure." He watched as Marzia became giddy as she took out a petri dish from her incubator and fluttered about her lab grabbing small vials and other tools to use. It reminded him of his mother when she was excited about a new recipe she came up with and was eager to try out. As for Feli, well, the man was bouncing to the balls of his feet which in a way reminded him of himself when he was a boy and watched his mom bake.

Pleasant warmth settled in his belly and his earlier overwhelming feelings at being trusted with the Vargas' company was squashed. He himself wasn't a fan at being a doctor or a scientist if he was truly honest with himself, which at this point, he was because if Feliciano had taught him anything it was that speaking with the truth, especially to yourself, was very important. The only reason he put up with it at first had been for his father's sake and even now it was only bearable because Feliciano was his partner.

And now as he watched Feliciano's eyes sparkle with wonder, as he watched the screen, as his aunt attacked cells with poison followed immediately by her green serum, which seemed to tug on the cells and gather the working parts before sealing it once again and expelling the toxins out, he knew that he would do anything to keep his beloved happy. If that meant working as a doctor or taking over as his CEO, then so be it.

Ludwig listened as Feli asked questions and Marzia readily answered while he walked around the
lab careful as to not disturb anything. After a few minutes, he felt Feliciano tug on his arm again, "Ve, come on, Luddy. Let's go see your new office. Ciao, Zia. I'll see you later."

"M-my office?" Ludwig managed to wave goodbye to Marzia who waved back before going back to her research.

"Si~ well, technically it's Kevin's office but until you get your own at V Enterprise you'll be using his."

"Who's Kevin?"

"He is this facility's current junior administrator. My grandpa had considered promoting him to senior administrator but when I mentioned that I wanted you to do it, he jumped on the idea."

"Why? Uh—not that I'm complaining."

Feli shrugged, "It's probably because all of our businesses have always been run by a family member. We feel more comfortable like that and it helps keep our visions for them pure."

"I see. Well, yes, that makes sense. It's like with my dad. He wants Roderich to take over Asclepius when the time comes for his retirement."

"Dr. Roderich would make a wonderful Dean of Medicine~ But what about Gilbert?"

"Gilbert loves being a surgeon too much and Roderich is better with the residents."

"Ve," cooed Feli with a nod of understanding. They continued on unaware of the presence that had been silently following after them after they left Marzia's lab. When they made it to an office in the far left corridor, Feli knocked once before letting himself in. To his surprise, the office was empty, "I guess he's out on lunch. Oh, well."

Ludwig glanced around the spacious office, "This is bigger than the one we have at the hospital. It even has a window."

"Mhm," said Feli offhandedly as he looked over the desk for the folder he asked Kevin to put together for the visit. He picked up a flyer for the Phantom of The Opera with Eric's face on it and placed it aside.

"Is it really ok for you to be going through his things?"

"Technically this belongs to me, Luddy." Unable to find the folder, Feli sighed and walked back around the desk to sit on the edge, "He probably forgot about it."

"Well he is busy running this place, liebe."

"Ve…" Feli folded his arms across his chest. He closed his eyes and tried to will away the growing tension in his heart. The sooner they finished their visit here, the sooner they would be going back to the bakery to pick up his things before going home together. No wait. Somewhere between going now and then, he had to come clean about the work his family did for real. Everything he'd shown Ludwig had been side things…a sort of insurance for future generations or the innocents on their family like Eric, Felicia, and Fabrezio, and his mother and aunt should anything happen to him and the others.

'Should anything happen to him and the others', thought Feli sadly, 'like that time they beat me up…' What if they decided that the best way to get to him was to harm Ludwig or Alex? It would
kill him if anything happened to either of them. He knew it and he was pretty sure anyone with 
eyes knew it. They already killed so many of his family members in the past and it had nearly 
destroyed him. If push came to shove, what would he do to prevent something like that from 
happening again?

The tension grew and Feli felt his stomach bubble uncomfortably, making him twitch on the desk.

Ludwig noticed this change in Feliciano and immediately went to him, "Feli? Feli what's wrong?" He 
rested his hand gently on his beloved's shoulder and threaded his fingers through his auburn 
hair, coaxing his head back only enough so that he could meet his gaze. Feli's eyes were literal 
windows to his soul and despite his insistence that he was fine, Ludwig could tell that he wasn't.

A vast pool of emotions swirled in the dark golden eyes much like Feli's painting. It was as if they 
held all the sadness in the world and were so anxious looking that it broke Ludwig's heart to know 
that his little fox was feeling like that. So, he did what he always did when Feli felt this way. He sat 
down in the leather seat and pulled him into his lap to embrace him tightly; accidently making 
Feli’s cell phone fall out of his pocket but neither cared. Feli trembled in his arms but made no 
move to pull away. If anything, he burrowed further as if he was trying to force himself inside his 
body.

It was painful to see Feli teeter on the edge of a break down. He was muttering something in 
Italian; Ludwig strained to catch it, "What?" Feli repeated himself though he only knew this 
because he felt his lips move as he did against his neck. Sighing, Ludwig nestled Feli’s head back 
and pressed his forehead against his, "What did you say, liebe?"

Feli's downcast eyes met Ludwig's concerned blue, "I don't want to lose you, Ludwig. I can't lose 
you, too. Please don't leave me."

"Why do you keep thinking I'm going to leave you, Feli," asked Ludwig gently. He wiped away the 
tears from Feli's cheeks, "I love you."

"My papa loved me too and told me that he would always be with me and they took him from me."

"No one is going to take me from you, Feli. Look at me," Ludwig blushed as he pecked Feli's nose, "Don't be afraid, liebe. I'm here with you and I'll always be here with you." He picked up Feli's 
hand with his ring on it and kissed it too as he continued to whisper words of love and safety to 
him, each declaration of love doing more and more to relax the man in his arms until he was 
practically purring with contentment.

Kevin stood outside of his office with his back pressed to the door. His fists trembled in his lab 
coat pockets as he relayed all the information he gathered as he followed Feliciano and Ludwig. In 
conclusion? Romulus had lied to him. He wasn't going to get that promotion he had worked so hard 
and kissed so much ass to get. The others had been right to tell him that he was wasting his time…

The door knob twisted and Kevin rushed to hide behind the vending machines. He poked his head 
out and saw the young Vargas happily yip around Ludwig like a puppy eager and desperate for his 
master's attention.

"It should be other way around," whispered Kevin to no one. His brows furrowed, "That bastard 
Beilschmidt gets everything…” He waited until the couple was a little further ahead before 
sneaking into his office. There, he found a sticky note from Feli asking that he send over the file he 
asked. The fool had the nerve to leave a heart after his name and a happy face.

Kevin couldn't help but smile a bit at that. No matter what his boss or colleagues said about Feli,
the man was a beautiful soul and he had looked forward to working with him. He brushed his forearm where he remembered Feli kissing his bandages, thinking perhaps that he had cut himself. With little embarrassment, Kevin had to shake his head to free himself of the knowledge that he had kept those damn bandages in a safe box. Feliciano and Romulus had been the only ones to ever show him kindness.

In return for said kindness, he had worked so hard for them. So damn hard. He balled up the flyer for the Phantom of the Opera and tossed it over his desk, "It's not fair!" Little by little, things ended up flying from the desk as Kevin took his frustrations out on his office supplies. His cell phone went off just as he heard a chime from somewhere under his desk.

Growling he got on his hands and knees to search for the source of the chime as he answered his own phone call, "Yes?...What do you want?...Yeah, Collins called me already....No, I haven't, yet.....soon....Alright, fine! I'll do it, now!...Yeah. ..Bye." He hung up and checked his cellphone for the details he had been given for deliveries, one in particular that was going to change the course of Feli's little love story.

For once, luck had been on his side. He found the source of the chime and it weighed heavily in his hand like a gold brick. The background on Feli's phone, of course, had been a picture he'd taken with Ludwig and Alex and Oswaldo. They all had chocolate frosting on their noses and looked so genuinely happy. Kevin scoffed. These rich bastards. They could have anything in the world and the one thing he wanted was being snatched away from him.

A teardrop fell onto Feli's face on the screen, distorting the image and making it as if Feli only had one eye. Kevin let himself fall onto his rump and pulled his knees into his chest, "It's not fair," he whispered. Ludwig had practically cheated on Feliciano and here he was being given the key to one of the greatest empires in the business world and the heart of an angel incarnate.

"I gave them my best," mumbled Kevin into his legs, "made sure their damn vision stayed pure... and this is how they repay me? Denied me my right to administrator...betrayed my loyalty..."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the crumpled flyer for the Phantom of the Opera and he couldn't help but wonder if this was what the phantom felt when he learned that Christine chose Raoul over him. The door knob to his office twisted and he froze, relaxing when it was released instead. Outside, he heard Marzia cheerfully speak with her nephew and the sound of Ludwig's deep chuckles as they followed after her back to her lab.

Sniffing, Kevin pulled out both his cell phone and Feli's and started a new text message as he had been instructed to do. He typed out the number and message as he crawled out from under his desk and walked down the corridor. His finger hovered over the send button. A giggle pulled him from his internal debate of whether he should go through with it or not and he ducked into an empty lab.

Ludwig and Feliciano were walking out hand in hand while Marzia cooed over them. She mentioned that Felicia got the part of Christine and that Romulus was going to host a celebratory dinner at the villa to which both men readily agreed to attend. Marzia left them alone once again shortly after getting Ludwig to promise to make some chocolate cake.

As soon as she was gone, Feli turned to Ludwig, "Luddy?" He played with the buttons on his fiancé's shirt, "I'm ready to tell you my secret. I don't think you'll mind because, really, it's kind of awesome once you think about it."

"Ja?" Ludwig pulled Feli's hand away from his shirt and tugged them towards the entrance, "Come on, you can tell me on our way back."
Feli dug his heels into the floor and glanced around to make sure no one was watching before pulling Ludwig down for a kiss. It was short and sweet but enough to show him how grateful he was to have him in his life. When they pulled away, Ludwig's cheeks were tinged pink and despite his lack of a smile, Feli knew just by looking at him that his pretty his fiancé was feeling pretty happy himself.

"Ludwig?"

"Hm?"

"Do you love me?"

"You know I do."

"Tell me."

"I love you."

"Yay! I love you too~"

Ludwig shook his head and tried to get them to leave but Feli hugged him from behind, "Feli, what are you doing?"

"Tell me you love me."

"I love you."

"Again!"

"You—why?"

Feliciano grinned up at him and finally allowed them to walk out, "I love hearing you tell me over and over. I'll never get tired of hearing it so, again, tell me!"

"I love you, Feliciano Vargas."

"Yahoo! I love you too!"

Kevin gripped the cell phones in his hands tightly, "Idiots. Bastards!" Hearing their declarations of love for one another really didn't sit well with him. How was it fair that everything was going so perfectly for them while other normal schmucks like him were clawing their way for a better life? Well, thank god for his safety net.

Checking Feli's phone to make sure he didn't accidentally screw up the message, he glanced up at the retreating couple, "You will curse the day you did not do all that the Braginskys asked of you…" He pressed the send button gleefully and erased the message before chasing after Feli and Ludwig to return the phone.

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**South Victrola**

The final customer of a laundromat finally left and the owner locked the door behind him. Shane
sighed, "Finally! I thought she'd never leave." Pulling his glasses off, he motioned for his companions to shut pull the burglar gate across the door. Ever since the DEA busted them and their supply of cocaine disappeared, the Vargas had no longer offered them protection. This had made them an easy target for rival gangs.

"Tch," grumbled a larger man. After he locked the gate into place, he ran a hand through his greasy hair and glared at his leader, "I don't see what the point is of putting that wimpy gate up. If someone really wants in, that's not going to stop 'em."

They all assembled a small fold out table and started packaging what tiny bit of what was left of their stash. Maybe if they worked hard with what they had, then they could show the Vargas that they really were worthy of their time. Shane's crew had been reduced to his meager four. The majority had been picked up by the DEA and the rest by some stupid organization that went by a secret organization known as the Hounds of The Republic, or the National Guard Dogs by those in the streets. Those had been the unlucky ones seeing as that at least the ones who were picked up by the DEA were released after serving time. Those picked up by the NGD's were never heard from again.

Worst part of it all was that the Hounds were an elusive bunch; no one knew who they were or where they were located. As far as anyone was concerned, they were nothing but an urban legend. Regardless, it was probably in everyone's best interest to just hide behind the Vargas' shield. Whether it was a rival gang, syndicate or even the government, nobody fucked with them. And if you were lucky enough to be in their good graces, then you were set for life.

Shane's phone went off, the alert barely heard over the rap song being played in the background. He flipped it open and read the message, his green eyes lighting up at the message, "Holy shit!"

"What," asked one of his men.

"Holy shit!" Shane jumped up from his seat in excitement, accidentally knocking over their table in the process. He silenced his crew's grunts of disapproval with a hand, "Looks like the prince of crime himself is going to give us another chance boys. Come on!"

Meanwhile, across the city, Oswaldo and Seraph sat patiently in their Urus waiting for their people to show up. Scattered around in other less conspicuous vehicles or positions, their fellow hounds watched for movement in the warehouse. It was furthest away from the general public and closest to the waterfront which meant they could just use that as an escape route should something go south.

Oswaldo sighed and leaned back in his seat. He glanced over at Seraph, "What's up, fratello?" His older brother remained silent as he stared out the window and Ozzie sighed, "Not talking to me?"

"Our uncle is in town," murmured Seraph.

"Yeah? That's cool."

"You need to stop hanging around Feliciano so much." Ozzie tensed in his seat but said nothing. Seraph continued, "I'm not telling you this because I think it's sick cause I'm the last person to pass that kind of judgement on you, but you're only going to end up hurting yourself, man." He tore his gaze away from the warehouse and looked at his brother, "I don't want to see you hurt, Oz. Neither does Bernardo."

Oswaldo slid down his seat, "I'm not going to get hurt. I know where I stand and—I just want to be near him, ok? I don't know where the hell nonno is going to send us when this job is over. I mean,
you saw what happened to our guys at the house. There are people out there that can kill us and while we're pretty good…who's to say that that won't be me someday?"

Seraph frowned, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, in our line of work, our time here isn't guaranteed and I want to spend as much of that time with him even if that time is just spent as that of a friend."

“You mean cousin.”

“No, I mean friend. I can't even remember when either he or I saw each other as that.” Oswaldo grinned, "Plus, Ludwig makes a mean tiramisu and I love hanging out with Alex. So, as long as my angel will have me, I'll never leave his side."

"Hm." The older Italian shook his head but couldn't help but let his own smile peek through, "I love you, fratello."

"Yeah? Right back at ya."

Both men settled back into their seats and watched out their windows. Their radio crackled with life, "Cerberus?"

Seraph picked it up, "Yeah?"

"Beagle just sent me a message telling me that one of our perps from the south side got a message from our Alpha Pup."

The two Vargas exchanged glances before Oswaldo said, "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not sure but Beagle said that one of the phones, Shane's I think, received a message. We're not sure what it contained but Beagle said he'll call as soon as he has information. That's not what worries me though."

Oswaldo growled in annoyance, "What, pray tell, is it then?"

"Remember that Russian he nearly killed? His partner and their gang are on the move."

"So?"

"Sir, they're heading towards the Beilschmidt's bakery."

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Downtown Victrola, Ludwig's Bakery

Lilly finished putting away the last of the diced vegetables into the fridge and wiped her forehead proudly. After school, Emma had asked her to come help prepare the ingredients they were going to use on dinners for Valentine's day tomorrow. Toris had scampered off after five and Emma had to guiltily leave a few hours after she was done baking cookies and dipping strawberries in chocolate because Lars had needed her help convincing their baby brother to come back to Genovia for spring break.

The young Beilschmidt washed her dicing knife and board before putting away to dry. Truth be
told, she hadn't wanted to go straight home after school. Vash had been picking up on her symptoms and she didn't want to tell him about her pregnancy just yet. It was getting harder and harder to convince her family that her little bump had been due to the freshman fifteen she had gained. Lilly tugged off her apron and rubbed her belly through her large fluffy pink sweater, "You're getting big aren't you, baby."

She glanced outside and paled slightly, "Gee, it's really dark out…” Lilly shut off all the lights and made sure that the back door was locked before making her way to the front. She turned around to lock it behind her when she heard the sound of a gun's safety being removed.

"Now, now, young lady," said Donovan in a thick Russian accent. He and a group of darkly dressed men crowded around her, "Why don't you unlock that for us, da?"

"The fuck are y'all doin' here," growled Shane.

More clicks of safeties being released spooked Lilly and she pulled her purse away from her body and held it out with shaky hands, "H-here. I don't have much but please just take it!"

The two groups forgot their rivalry and eyed her with matching amused expressions. Shane spoke up, "Sweetheart, we don't want your purse. We want the goods."

"Our cookies?" Lilly curled into herself when their amused chuckles darkened.

~.~

Feliciano shuddered as a cold wind blew and cuddled closer against Ludwig's arm seeking warmth. During their drive back, he had tried and failed to find a way to come clean about himself and his family. They had parked a while away at his insistence hoping that perhaps a little walk through central park would induce some kind of courage. It hadn't but he was getting there. They were getting closer and closer to Ludwig's bakery; Feli had wanted tell him before they made it there.

Glancing shyly up at Ludwig, Feli marveled at his handsome features. The German's face was calm and peaceful under the starlit sky, a small smile playing at his lips when he caught Feli staring. He raised a brow, "See something you like, Dr. Vargas?"

Feli smirked, "Maybe~" He took advantage that they were alone and their only source of light was the water fountain's underwater light to pull him into a deep kiss. Ludwig let himself be tugged into sitting on the fountain next to his little fox. They pulled away but Feli held his hands. Licking his lips, Feli met his eyes, "I'm ready now, Luddy."

"To tell me your secret?"

"Yes." Feli took a deep calming breath before saying, "Do you remember what I told you that night when we made love? That was good by the way~"

Blushing in embarrassment, Ludwig rubbed the back of his neck, "What part?"

"All of it," said Feli cheekily.

"Feli!"

"Right, sorry. I mean the part about me." He glanced at their entwined fingers, smiling slightly at how Ludwig's paler ones squeezed his gently. It was his way of telling him to take his time.

The water from the fountain lulled him into a sense of peace and Feli nodded to himself. He was
ready. He glanced up at his fiancé, "I don't know if you noticed but during Christmas I kind of snuck out of bed after we made love. I went to the library to talk to my family."

"I remember."

"Well, we were discussing briefly about how sometimes people, when they get desperate, do things to make things happen. Especially when they know that the other party has a lot of influence over what they want."

Ludwig watched him silently. Patiently.

"We didn't go to the station but with every import, especially from countries whose relations with our nation aren't great...certain precautions are needed."

"...ok..."

Feli's lips trembled as he saw confusion slowly blossom on Ludwig's face. He held his hands tighter and scooted closer, "Ludwig, that basement has more information on things that you couldn't even begin to imagine. There is so much...so much and I don't know if I can do it." Tears misted his dark honeyed eyes as he pulled away from Ludwig to rest his elbows on his legs and face in his hands. He whispered through his fingers, "I don't know if I can take care of my family or our empire. I don't."

Wrapping an arm around Feli's shoulders, Ludwig said, "You won't do it alone. You have me. Hell, you have Oswaldo and your brother and the others. Whatever burden you feel you have, you won't be alone to carry it. Five businesses-"

"Luddy, importations? The research facility, the winery, real estate and that damn plant...that's not all."

"I can honestly say it would surprise me if it were."

"Tesoro, I'm serious. My family...you know our past."

"Only what you told me and my memory of what I learned in history class."

Feli laughed dryly, "Of course. You know we...we do so much more than anyone knows. We do so much for our country and no one knows because we don't tell."

"Well the numbers in the reports you gave me speak for themselves."

"Not that, amore. I mean the other thing...my secret."

Ludwig shifted in his seat on the water fountain, "Liebe, my little fox, if you aren't ready, then don't tell me yet." He kissed his hands to emphasize his point but that only seemed to upset Feliciano further.

"I am ready to tell you! I'm just-I'm just not ready for your reaction."

"I don't underst-" Feliciano and Ludwig nearly fell into the fountain at the sound of a gunshot.

Ludwig pulled Feli up and faced his bakery where Lilly was being roughly pushed out of the building. He narrowed his eyes angrily and ran towards them, Feli rushing after him. Ludwig stopped a few feet away and snarled, "Who the fuck are you?"

"Stay out of this pansy," said Shane rudely without sparing him a glance, his gaze was on a
sobbing Lilly on the ground.

"B-big bruder," she gasped. Her face was red and tears were streaming down her cheeks, "I'm so sorry! They made me open the bakery for them. I'm sorry!"

"Brother?" Shane and his group and the Russians finally looked at them, their expression changing to that of a mild terror as they spotted Feliciano behind Ludwig. "Sir! Sir, where is it?"

Feliciano eyed Lilly for any visible injuries before turning his darkened eyes on the men before him, "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb, Mr. Vargas. You know what we're talking about."

"Brother," Ludwig tensed next to Feli, "How do you know Feliciano?"

"He's our boss," said Shane offhandedly before returning his attention to Feliciano, "You sent us a text telling us that the goods were going to be here and they ain't."

"What goods?"

"Dude, no offense but I ain't talking to you."

Another man stood next to Shane and glared at Ludwig, "Yeah, since when do we need to listen to the queen? They're only there to be seen and to be fucked."

Ah. Now it felt dirty being called queen but before Ludwig could voice his disgust, Feliciano beat him to it, "How dare you speak to him this way? As a matter of a fact, how dare you show up here and treat Lilly like you are?"

"You told us to! And speaking of which, why did you tell them to come?" Shane spat at the ground by the Russians and sneered, "Fuck off, commies!"

"Feli, what are they talking about?" Ludwig turned to face Feli angrily, "Do you know these thugs?" Anger spiked when Feli didn't say anything but he squashed it down in favor to try and get his sister away from them, "You're lying. Feli would never do whatever it is you're implying he did. Leave now and I won't press charges."

"I don't lie." Shane pulled out his cell phone and showed the message to Ludwig. Feliciano's name was there as the sender but Ludwig refused to believe what he was seeing. Shaking his head, he glared at the man before him, "No. You could've easily just written his name as the contact name. I'm not stupid."

"Dude, no offense? But he's not just a fucking Vargas. He's the Vargas. He's the dude that is going to take over his grandfather's criminal empire as soon as the old man retires. Ever wonder why they get everything and anything? Why no one fucks with them? It's cause the old man is a cold ass mother fucker. He killed a man—and not just any man—but his fucking twin brother."

Feliciano felt Ludwig's eyes on him and he narrowed his own, "Shut up."

But Shane didn't shut up. If anything, he was growing excited as he retold the tale just about everyone in the underworld knew of Romulus Vargas with so much vivid detail it was as if the son of a bastard had witnessed it himself. "He shot him in cold blood because the fucker snitched on them. Damn shame too cause it was all that snitch's fault that they lost control of the human trafficking gig they had going on."
Bile was rising in Ludwig's throat as he recalled what Natalya told him about the Vargas. This wasn't happening. It was some horrible nightmare. There was no way that his father would associate himself with someone as terrible as that. No... No! Feli—Feli had admitted that they had been mobsters, had being the key word. It had been during the prohibition era. Things were bad but it wasn't terrible. Nothing like human trafficking and he sure as hell wasn't part of that life anymore. Or if he was, he would never use Ludwig or purposefully get them in a dangerous position such as this. Right? Right?

He shook his head weakly, "You're lying but even if you weren't, I don't believe that Feliciano would bring you to my doorstep."

A Russian spoke up with a deep accent, "Did you not read the text? It says that the drugs were going to be delivered here for pick up at nightfall. We're here for pick up but no drugs. Where are the drugs?!"

Ludwig shook his head, "There must be some kind of mistake. Feliciano would never send that out. Feli, tell them!"

"He's right, I didn't send you a damn thing," said Feli tightly. His eyes were like cold steel, boring into Shane's.

"Come on man, don't lie to us—wait." Shane broke out into a grin, "I know how to prove it."

As he fiddled with his cell, Feliciano stepped up next to Ludwig and stood tall, "Regardless of what you think I sent you, I want all of you to leave."

"Oh, we'll leave but not before getting what was promised to us."

One of the Russian's stepped forward, "Promised to you? Fuck no. It was promised to us!"

"Shit this again? I already said—"

"And I'm telling you all to leave this place," snarled Feliciano, startling everyone present. His breathing was starting to come out erratically. Everything he feared was happening now and he could see that Shane had managed to plant a seed of doubt in Ludwig's mind. He glanced over his shoulder at Ludwig and saw that he was fighting with himself internally, "Let Lilly go."

"Not until we get what we came here for."

Ludwig shook himself out of his inner debate and took a step forward, freezing when guns were drawn on him, "Give me my sister."

"You know we will," said Shane, "so long as we get our drugs."

Drugs...delivery? A memory form earlier that day flew into Ludwig's mind. Hadn't Feli paid the truck driver for something? That things he hid in his pantry or wherever... was that it? Shaking his head again, Ludwig balled up his fist, "There are no drugs here." What was he even thinking? Feliciano would... he would never—he wouldn't do that. Not to him. He loved him. He was freaked out that he would leave him if he found out his secret.

Don't worry, I'll find a place to hide it in the meantime.

Feli's words echoed in Ludwig's head despite his wanting them not to. Why was he remembering that? Shane looked between the two men before him, all trace of humor gone. Raising a brow, he extended his cell again, "I don't appreciate bein' called a liar when I ain't lyin'."
Ludwig glanced between the phone and Shane, "What do you want me to do with that?"

"Why don't you press call? If his cell phone don't ring then we'll go in peace and this never happened. But if it does...then we want what we came here for."

Grandpa has made a point to make it clear to the Russians that we don't want their business. I don't know about you but ever since that fiasco with cocaine smuggling via our railroads and that Estonian company, what was it called?

This time it was Lovino's words from their time in the cabin that flowed through Ludwig. He cautiously took the cell from Shane and shook his head, "It's not going to ring." Whether he was trying to assure him or himself he wasn't sure but he sent a silent prayer to his mother in heaven not to let Feli's cell phone go off.

"My phone isn't going to ring, Ludwig," said Feliciano stiffly though his voice quivered as if he himself wasn't too sure that was true.

"Where do you go at night," asked Ludwig quietly.

"What?"

"At night, where do you go?"

"Ludwig, now isn't the time for—"

"Answer me, god damnit!"

Feli drew in a sharp breath, "Lovi. I'm with my brother."

"Hm." Why was he doubting that? Bernardo always provided proof of that. He supposed he just wanted to hear it again. Looking down at his silently weeping sister, he glared at Shane defiantly, "His phone isn't going to ring."

Shane shrugged, "Check it, man. Don't hurt none to try. Just be ready to deliver what I was told would be here for me."

Trust and faith. He had both in his beloved.

Genovia's importation laws have gotten stricter and with it, ours...

No. He believed Feliciano. Ludwig pressed the green call button option on the text message Feliciano supposedly sent. Nothing. Sweet relief flowed through Ludwig's body and he released a breath he hadn't been aware he'd been holding when suddenly he heard it.

Feliciano had changed his ringtone so that it would buzz and chime to Mambo Italiano during their time at the cabin last year and hadn't had time to change it to something else. He hung up, refusing to believe it and redialed.

And there it was; the buzz and chimes mocking him to the tune of Mambo Italiano.

Ludwig refused to let tears so much as leave their ducts but damn it was it hard to ignore the pain in his chest.

And Feli could see it too. He could see that Ludwig had allowed himself to be convinced that he had sent those messages. Pulling out his cell, it was an unknown number, he ended the call and tugged on Ludwig's coat lapels, "I don't know how they did it, Luddy, but I swear to you I didn't
send it."

Ludwig pushed Feliciano away, "How could you do this to me?"

The cold tone in his beloved's voice was almost as sharp as a blade. Feli shook his head, "I did—"

"Not to interrupt your little lover spat," said Shane as he picked up Lilly by her sweater. He placed the tip of his gun at her head, "I'm getting awfully tired of repeating myself. Give. Us. The. Dope. Now!"

Feeling numb, Ludwig thought up a plan. If he could get his sister, then he could lock themselves in either his pantry or office. Both would provide them enough cover to buy the cops time to arrive. He nodded slowly, "Alright. Fair is fair."

"What," whispered Feli.

"Show them where it is."

"How am I going to show them where something that doesn't exist is?!"

"Stop lying, Feliciano. Just give it to them so we can all go home."

Lifting his hands up, Ludwig slowly inched towards the door of his bakery, "Easy. I'm just going to let us in."

Shane nodded, "Go 'head."

Ludwig mentally calculated how long he needed to pry his sister away and get them safely across the kitchen and into his pantry. Oh wait... The cellphone! Gripping it tightly, Ludwig didn't take his eyes off Shane nor Lilly, "Hey?"

"Yeah?"

"Catch!" Ludwig threw the cell phone at Shane who subconsciously released Lilly to catch it. In that moment, the older Beilschmidt grabbed Lilly and ran towards the back of his bakery, dodging the gunshots from the others. "Shit," he cursed as he felt one get him in his leg and another sudden burst of warmth through his abdomen. He fell to the ground, smacking his head against the hard tile.

Lilly screamed and tried her best to drag him the rest of the way towards the pantry. The door opened and Feliciano picked Ludwig up, only managing to get one of his arms over his shoulders before following Lilly into the pantry. He felt a bullet graze his side and cheek but he ignored the pain in favor of saving Ludwig.

Once safely inside the pantry, Feli dropped Ludwig and pushed the steel table against the door as an added measure. His fiancé was out cold which was causing Lilly to panic, "Why isn't he waking up?!"

Feli winced at the shrill screams as he searched on the shelves for his bag. Pulling it out, he heard the heavy briefcase containing his knives and guns fall open onto the ground. The Italian ripped open Ludwig's coat and shirt to look at his wounds, "The bullet is still inside him, I think. I don't see an exit wound." He took out the scanner Drew had given him and scanned his body before sighing in relief, "He doesn't have any internal damage to any major organs. That's good. Our major concern then is making sure he doesn't lose too much blood before help arrives."
Muttering procedures to himself, Feli cut out some gauze from his kit and made a large square, "Here, hold this tightly while I check on his—" Feliciano noticed how Lilly was holding her arms protectively around her belly. She was shaking violently but her eyes were trained on her brother and she was shielding her belly. He'd only ever seen women who were expecting do that. That knowledge fell on him like a ton of bricks.

"Oh, Dio mio…"

Lilly's gave him a pained expression, "Please don't tell anyone…"

"Lilly—" He was interrupted by her as she groaned in pain, "Lilly, sweetie, what's wrong?"

The girl's lips quivered, "My belly…it hurts."

Concerned shifting over, he took the scanner and scanned her with it. There wasn't anything terribly wrong but he knew that should they stay in this situation any longer that Lilly would go into shock and possibly lose the baby. Feli glanced between the two Beilschmids and then to his knives lying haphazardly on the ground.

At that moment, something snapped inside him. Feli's hands no longer trembled. His heart was slowing down to a calm pace and the tension in his belly had disappeared. Removing his coat, he put it over Lilly's delicate shoulders before removing Ludwig's belt to make a makeshift tourniquet for his leg. Outside he could still hear gunshots and angry curses as two gangs tried to get to them and or locate the drugs that were never there to begin with.

"If we can't get the drugs," screamed Shane, "then let's just get him. Imagine how much dough we can get for Feliciano Vargas' head! Word on the street there is a certain scorned lady who would pay anything to see him in pain."

Lilly watched fearfully as Feli picked up the briefcase and sat it before him, sliding on his harness with gleaming knives waiting eagerly to drip rubies as promised. She pressed the gauze against her brother's wound and asked, "Dr. Feli? Dr. Feli what are you going to do?"

"Whatever happens, whatever you hear, do not open this door for anybody but me or my people. Don't worry, honey. You and your brother are going to be just fine." Feli sent out a mass S.O.S to his hounds before giving his cellphone to Lilly. He smiled and kissed her forehead, "You're going to make a wonderful mother."

"What are you going to do," asked Lilly again, her voice breaking at the end of the question. "You can't go out there! They'll kill you!"

Feliciano smiled and pushed the door open, using the table as a shield against the gun fire. He closed the door behind him and waited patiently for his former subordinates to empty their barrels. It took them a few minutes but as soon as fire ceased, he let out a dark chuckle, "You stupid bastards." Gripping his both guns tightly in his hands, he danced around the table and let his own wrath fall upon them in a dance that had been instilled into his body by Mr. Sunwell in his youth and reanimated by his brother’s tutoring. The kitchen was pitch black, the light bulbs having been shot out, with the only source of light being that from his guns and the rushed return fire from his targets.

Behind the loud sounds, he could hear bodies falling and when his own clip was empty he turned to his knives. Ozzie had been right. The cold metal and their weight felt ridiculously grand in his hands as he continued to reach for more to let them fly to their mark. Feli was no longer there. He didn't feel himself there. Something, that something that he had tried so hard to keep locked away,
was loose and using his skin as its vessel. Was that how it worked?

Or was this really him?

Had he always been a bloodthirsty creature?

No…no.

They made him do this.

If they hadn't pushed him, if they hadn't threatened his family, he would never had stooped as low as to get his hands dirty like this. He would never have known what it felt like to plunge a knife into someone's gut to extinguish a life. He wouldn't have known what a man's eyes looked like as his last breath escaped him. And he sure as hell wouldn't have known what a bullet to the jaw would've felt like.

No.

This was him. He chose to do this. Seeing Ludwig broken and wounded, Lilly on the verge of a panic attack, had awoken an almost primal need to protect them. He was risking too much of himself but the way he saw it, if it meant keeping them safe, it was worth whatever consequence he'd face later. They were worth it. Ludwig was everything and for him, he'd risk it all.

A loud ringing noise pulsed through his ears as he jolted backwards. Hot liquid seeped out of his jaw and down his neck while his nose ached. It was getting really hard to breath. Too hard. His sight hadn't been the best but somehow it was worse. A stabbing sensation overwhelmed his head but he fought on. He had to survive whatever it was he was feeling. He had too…

Somewhere in the background he heard sirens and the sound of muffled screams and yells and more gunshots. He heard the sound of pain. Falling to his knees, his entire front side was aching. Whatever strength that had possessed him was vanishing quickly and icy cold tension wrapped itself around his belly and lower back. His hands shook violently and his head felt like something had split in two.

More voices. Who was that?

Feli saw red and white blinking lights of an ambulance. Masked figures in black came in and started working around the grabbing hands that were trying to lift him up.

"He's going into shock," shouted Mathias as he carefully lifted him onto a cot.

Feli couldn't see out of his left eye but he assumed that it was because he had it swollen shut from a graze of a bullet. He heard Lilly crying and Mathias shout orders to his partners about Ludwig. He was alive but still unconscious. Apparently, he was also losing too much blood.

"Feli!"

Said man tried to open his eyes at the sound of his name but felt too tired to do so. Someone grabbed his hand and didn't let go and he felt kisses on his cold skin, "Amore, what did you do? Dio mio, what have we done?"

"Cerberus, you need to let him go," growled Seraph as he tried to pry him away, "We have work to do here before the cops arrive."

"Fuck the cops! We pull rank over them anyway. If they were more diligent in their work then we
wouldn't have to do their shit for them. I'm going with Feliciano and the others."

"Cerberus," warned his brother.

"I fucking dare you to try and keep me away from him. This is our fault and if he dies, if Ludwig
dies, I won't be responsible for my actions. I hope grandpa and that stupid German of his are proud
of what they've done. I hope their stupid plan was worth this."

What?

Feli needed to wake up but he couldn't and after hearing what Oswaldo just said, and knowing that
Ludwig thought the worst of him, he wasn't sure if he wanted to.
How You Remind Me of What I Really Am

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the attack at Ludwig's bakery tests his relationship with Feliciano leaving both to wonder if this is what breaks them.

The door to Godfrey's bedroom was slammed shut as Akumi, Richard Godfrey's wife, threw their possessions against the wall in a temper tantrum. They'd just gotten back from a charity auction for Victrola's Society for the Performing Arts in which the final bidding item had been the privilege to host the pre-opening ball. After they learned that their son's fiancé had lost the role of Christine to Felicia Vargas, they had hoped to at least get bragging rights to the party. It had been wishful thinking when Romulus placed the final winning bid, it had been all he could do to keep his wife from attacking the man then and there.

And now that they were home. Godfrey knew better than to go in the bedroom where his wife was finally venting her frustration. He opted to go into his library instead and indulge in some whiskey. He made himself comfortable in his desk, a glass of whiskey in hand, and reached for his remote only to be interrupted by his cellphone. Grunting, he picked it up, "What is it?" His back became stiff when he realized who was on the other end, "Forgive me sir, didn—…Right, sorry…mhm…Yes, pick up for the product has been arranged…mhm…now? I don't know if they'll…ok….I understand…what about what my partner and I were promised?….I see. I'll see what I can do about that then….yes…goodbye."

Snapping his cellphone shut, Godfrey tapped his fingers along his desk in thought before calling his friend. The phone rang three times before Collins answered groggily. Godfrey smirked, "Call in a tip to the news. Make sure they send a team to Beilschmidt's hospital and one to the bakery. Something wonderful has happened."

Lovino stared at his cell phone, torn between wanting to answer it and wanting to smash it into tiny pieces. He clicked the ignore button and figured that if it had something to do with the job he was overseeing, then they would just call his grandfather. Or better yet, they would just tell Cerberus or, hell, Paolo. Either way, there was no way he was going to let himself be distracted from the task at hand. It was bad enough that he had to convince himself to do an otherwise simple retrieval. He could do without the added baggage of headaches the phone call would no doubt bring. The young man turned to the bartender and pushed his empty wine glass towards him, "Another, por favore."

"This is your fifth." The bartender poured some more, "First time flying?"

"Hardly."
"Nervous flyer then."

"Not really," said Lovi as he brought the glass to his lips. His cellphone continued to ring in rapid succession and Lovi finally answered it with a growl, "I'm fucking busy! Call me later."

Lovi hung up and drowned the entirety of his drink, hoping that it would numb the doubt that was starting to bloom in his belly but it didn't. If anything, it would seem that time spent drinking his family's wine on a daily basis had made him immune to its potency.

Sighing, Lovino motioned for the bartender to give him another. He glanced up at the large television screen where a breaking news segment just interrupted some cooking show. Lovi was about to dismiss it when live footage from Ludwig's bakery started to play. He waved to the bartender, "Hey, put up the volume."

The bartender quickly did as he was told and the on sight reporter's voice quickly filled the near empty restaurant, "I am standing in front Ich Liebe, a bakery owned by Wolfgang Beilschmidt's son, our city's very own golden boy, Ludwig Beilschmidt..."

"Holy shit."

"Do you know that bakery?" The bartender swung his dish towel onto his shoulder and leaned against the counter to watch alongside his patron. A few more moments passed when a picture of Ludwig was flashed on the screen. He exclaimed, "I know him! His brother performed surgery on my mom."

"Shh!"

Lovi listened intently as the reporter said, "An official statement has not been released from either the police, the Beilschmidt's, nor the Vargas—"

Frowning, Lovi muttered, "The Vargas? Why would—" He was answered by the sudden change of scenery, the cameras now in front of Asclepius Hospital, and a new reporter.

"That's right, Ashely. We have received word that the ambulances carrying the victims of tonight's shootings are headed this way. We hope to get more on this as..."

Lovi's cell phone rang once more and this time he answered, "Pronto?...Ozzie? What the hell's wrong with—Hey! Slow down, you idiot. I can't understand...What about my brother's face?"

Lovi's heart stopped by what his cousin said, "Che cosa?...no. No, no, no! Get me a—Listen to me, bastard!" He threw a few bills down and picked up his things before sprinting towards the exit, "Send for your uncle. I want him to operate on Feliciano. Get my mom and aunt protection. Where's Alex?...ok, good. I'm on my way. And for fucks sake, get the media away from this."

The hospital had been tossed into a state of chaos. News that two of their own had been shot and were on their way into the ER had the residents and staff in an uproar. The patients quieted down and practically pressed themselves against the walls in effort to stay away from the doctors rushing to receive Ludwig and Feliciano. Outside, the press wasn't as courteous.
Hounds that had followed behind the ambulance quickly ripped off their masks and tucked away their weapons before making a blockade. One of the men from Seraph's pack, Corgi, practically growled at a reporter for getting too close to Feli. He ripped a recorder from his hands before smashing it on the ground. In a thick English accent, he pointed to the block across the hospital, "If ya want to report, do so from over there. This is a private affair and I don't want to have to smash all of your equipment, but believe me when I say that if I catch you trying to invade on the privacy of friends and family of the two patients, I will break more than your damn equipment."

Back inside the hospital, Ludwig and Feliciano were being wheeled into separate operating rooms while Lilly was ushered into an examination room. Ludwig's siblings nearly tripped over themselves to get to the waiting room where they found Oswaldo sitting rigidly. The Italian had his face buried in his palms, murmuring prayers in Italian. He jolted back when Tino brushed his shoulder, revealing eyes turned red from tears.

Tino gave his shoulder a firm squeeze, "They'll be ok. No one gets into Asclepius unless they're good. Feli and Ludwig are in good hands."

"Ludwig will live," agreed Oswaldo and said with trembling breath, "but my angel has already died twice coming here. H-his face…even if he lives, he's going to be—"

"Where are they," cried Nicola as she ran towards the small group, Marzia trailing after her. She pulled Oswaldo up by his arm and shook him, "What happened?!"

"Zia—"

"Calm down, sorella," said Paolo as he tried to pry his older sister from his son. "You can't blame him for something we knew could happen."

Nicola released Oswaldo and turned to her brother instead, "Could. Could is not the same as would nor the same as did."

Paolo lowered his eyes to his son before turning back to his sister's, "My sons are always exposed, Nicola. Marcelo, he's always in danger of being discovered. Don't you think that Marzia and I are also afraid of what could happen to them? What has happened to them? Or have you already forgotten that they were poisoned?"

His eyes softened and he ran his hand through her red hair before wiping her tears, "I'm so sorry."

"I can't lose him, Paolo."

"We won't lose him," murmured Marzia. She squeezed in between her siblings and hugged Nicola, "Feliciano is stronger than we give him credit for. He'll live. You'll see."

The door to the waiting room opened and Wolfgang walked in with Romulus. Andrew ran by, while pulling on scrubs as Alfred read to him the details on Feli's chart. Bernardo watched them before he too entered the waiting room. He interrupted whatever angry remark Nicola was going to make, "Sorry for interrupting, Zia, but I need help." He turned to his grandfather, "The men from the bakery were injured—"

"Good," snapped Nicola.

"They need medical attention quickly or else this night would've been for nothing."

Romulus nodded, "Where are they?"
"We've taken them into custody at headquarters but I'm not sure how long they'll last."

Tino shared a glance with Matthew, "We'll go. There isn't much we can do here anyway. We can't touch Ludwig."

Wolfgang shook his head, "No, you two stay. Feliciano will need someone to watch over him after surgery. My sons will go. Gilbert, Berwald, Roderich."

"Ludwig will be fine, Gilbert," whispered Matthew to his husband before kissing his head. "I'm sure he'll be awake by the time you all come back. Lilly, too."

"Don't think about what those bastards did to our family, my love," said Elizabeta as Roderich pulled on his coat. "As tempting as letting them die may seem, they have to live so that they can help bring their masters to justi—."

"Where is she?!" Everyone turned to see Vash, hair in disarray and wearing a coat over his pajamas, a pygmy goat in both of his pockets while he held a third in his arms, "Where's Lilly?"

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Lilly held her arms around her belly protectively while Kiku checked her vitals. He wrote down his findings into his chart before smiling at her gently, "You and the baby are fine, Miss Beilschmidt."

"Lilly, is fine, Dr. Kiku," murmured the young girl sleepily. "Doctor? Could you please not tell my family about the baby?"

"I—"

"Please? I want to be the one to tell them."

"As you wish," said Kiku with a slight bow. He motioned for the nurses to transfer Lilly out of the ER and to her own private room.

"Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"My brother? How is he?"

"I believe he is in surgery at the moment with Dr. Sadik."

"And Feli?"

"I'm afraid I do not know who his doctor is. He is a peculiar one from the states, I believe. One with green hair."

Lilly sighed and nodded sleepily, "That's Doctor Andrew Blaze. They say his hands are guided by god himself."

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4 Hours later

Time was washing over him so slowly. It hadn't taken long after Paolo left with the three Beilschmidts and Bernardo, and Wolfgang ushered Vash to check on Lilly, before rage once again took over Nicola and she was yelling her frustrations at her father. Especially since a doctor had
come to inform them of Feliciano's injuries and the probability of his survival. This had sent another wave of displeasure through her, and Oswaldo exiled himself to the far corner to nurse his heart.

Unable to bare his daughter's anger, nor his own guilt, Romulus went to the chapel. And that's where Wolfgang found him, staring blankly at the cross above the dozens of lit candles. The German released a deep sigh making Romulus tense. Wolfgang watched him, "You know that I don't blame you."

"Wolfgang," said Romulus after a long pause, "your son is on a table, being sewn back after getting a bullet pulled from him. Your daughter…she was caught in the middle of this whole mess."

"It could've been worse. She's fine. Ludwig is, as you said, being sewn back. He's alive." Wolfgang placed a warm hand on his friend's leg but it was shoved away. He blinked in shock, "Romu, what's —"

"Why are you being so calm about this?!"

"What?"

"Why aren't you yelling at me like my daughter is? You have every right to be angry at me so why aren't you?" Romulus gripped his hair and fell to his knees in tears, "I—I've put the greatest treasure Maria could give you in danger. And my sweet Feli. My adorable baby grandson. He's— he could die. And it's all my fault."

Wolfgang joined Romulus on the ground but only to pull him up. He held his hands away from his hair and pressed his forehead against his, "Stop it. If you're going to blame yourself, then let me share the burden. This is on us both. We both agreed to pair Feliciano with Ludwig. Lilly shouldn't have been there, that was a miscalculation on my part, but she was.

"Romu, look at me." When Wolfgang was able to hold his friend's gaze, he leaned in and kissed his cheeks, "I'm not angry with you because I know that our family is angry enough as it is, and it's probably going to get worse when our boys wake up. I won't have a repeat of what happened last time."

"It's what I deserve."

"Nein. You should never be cast into that darkness again."

"They will never forgive me for this."

"You only had Feli's best interest in heart just as I had that of Genovia's. Be strong, Romu. You are still king. You have to be strong."

"I am strong, Wolfgang. I just…I will never forgive myself if Feliciano dies."

"He won't," promised the German with a shy kiss to Romulus' hands.

"You heard what the doctor said. How do you know he won't?"

"Because he's Nicola's and Cesare's son; your grandson. He's strong, too." Wolfgang led them back to the benches and sat with his friend in silence, allowing Romulus to gather himself. Smiling softly, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a tube of pills, "Have you taken your dosage tonight?"
"...no."

"I didn't think so. Here, I'll bring you some water."

Romulus reached out and gripped his friend's arm, "This isn't over yet, you know. Feli killed five of them and seriously wounded the rest. My pups took the survivors but they weren't able to pick up any other possible witnesses because they ran off."

"Then we'll just have to put off telling the boys. We'll wait for the ones you did manage to get to heal and pray that they'll be the ones to end this. Don't worry; everything will be ok."

---

Feli could hear the bullet cases fall to his feet as he shot at Shane and his people. He could hear the deafening sounds of thunder and the equally deafening sounds of bodies hitting the floor. He could feel the heavy weapon trying to ricochet in his hand and muscles tightening to keep it from doing so. Though, deep down he knew it was only a memory of a movie or what he assumed it would sound like. Truthfully, he couldn't hear any of it because of the ringing in his ear.

But now he could.

He was watching himself allow the monster take over him in black and white.

"Welcome to your life," purred a dark voice in his ear. Feli shivered involuntarily before turning to glare at the door next to him, gun fight forgotten for the moment, but it only made the voice chuckle, "Turning away from what you did isn't going to make it go away. Neither is locking me up again going to change the fact that I exist."

"I wish I could kill you," said Feli darkly.

"Thanks, but no thanks. We have died enough times for tonight. Perhaps a rain check?"

Feli stepped away from the door and echoed, "Thanks, but no thanks. I have had my fill of you enough to last a lifetime." As he tried to find his way out of wherever it was he was, he heard the voice speak again.

"What are you going to do when you wake up?"

"Beg Ludwig for forgiveness."

The voice was silent. Feli thanked god for it but just as he thought he'd gotten rid of it, it spoke once more, "Do you think he'll forgive you for putting his sister in danger?"

"I didn't do anything! But I'll find out who did this when I wake up."

"What about me?"

Feli sighed in agitation, "What about you?"

"Do you really think you'll get rid of me so easily this time?"
A shadow ran past Feli making him tense. He shivered again and turned back around to try and walk out of the bakery but the sweet shop was nowhere to be seen. He was in the corridor of his old home again. Feli rubbed his hands together, "I will."

The voice laughed softly, almost childlike, "I don't think so. You can't turn your back on me this time. I won't let you." As an afterthought, it added, "Though, I invite you to try."


"Ok," came Dr. Andrew's muffled exhausted voice, "We've done all we can do. It's all up to him now."

Feli heard Alfred ask in an equally muffled and tired voice, "Should I tell the others when we're done or…"

"No, I should."

"…at least he's alive, right?"

"…yeah…"

~.~

After almost nineteen agonizing hours, Drew finally entered the waiting room where Nicola was seated in between her sister and Oswaldo. Marcelo had arrived with Alice, Monika, Eric, and Felix when the others left to see to Ludwig. They all stood up but Drew motioned for them to sit back down as he let himself collapse on the leather chair across from them.

He pulled his surgeon's mask to reveal matted dark green hair. He ran his hand through it, "I have done all I can and given the severity of his wounds, I have to warn you that he isn't out of the woods just yet. I have him in the ICU to monitor his—"

"Uncle, please just give it to us straight," begged Ozzie. His lips trembled as he asked, "Is he going to make it?"

"That it is up to him. He did suffer a bullet wound close to the aorta but was lucky that it got one of the smaller blood vessels."

Nicola stared at Drew before narrowing her eyes, "Then why do you say it's up to him?"

"It isn't the injury that concerns me."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm afraid of what will happen when he wakes up. He also suffered a more serious injury to the face." He pointed to his cheek, just above the jawbone, "A small bullet pierced him here and exited here," he pointed to his left cheek bone. "I was able to reconstruct the majority of his face but only after the swelling goes down will I be able to determine if more surgery will be required. I mean he was incredibly lucky that it was such a tiny bullet and that it was shot from the distance and going the speed it was. The trajectory of—"

"Uncle," said Oswaldo lowly as he gripped his shirt in tightly balled fists, "If you fixed it, and he will live, then why are you afraid of what will happen when he wakes up? What happened to him?"

Drew looked at his nephew then at the rest of the people present before sighing, "The important
thing is that he will live…"

"Uncle!"

"Fine. There is no easy way to tell you so I'll just say it. Feli…"

~2 Days Later~

The smell of breakfast wurst and pancakes embraced Ludwig, pulling him out of his nightmare. Blinking his baby blue eyes, he was greeted by Feliciano's smiling face and a tray of food. He glanced between the food and his fiancé before sighing in relief, "Leibe, you won't believe the horrible dream I had."

Feli placed the tray on the nightstand and crawled into Ludwig's arms, "What happened, bello? Did I leave the wurst out before you got a chance to cook it?"

"Nein. It was worse."

"Ve?"

Shaking his head Ludwig buried his face in Feli's neck and breathed in his scent, "Don't worry about it. I know it would never happen."

"What won't?"

Pulling the sheets over them, Ludwig ignored the question and rolled on top of his fiancé with a teasing smile, "I said don't worry about it, liebe." He pressed his lips to Feli's before trailing them down his neck, "You would never bring harm to me. I know you wouldn't."

"Harm?"

"Hn. You love me." Ludwig pushed Feli's shirt up to kiss his stomach, "You love me." He felt his throat clog up with an unknown emotion as he continued to kiss his way up Feli's torso, "Y-you love me, right?" He suddenly tasted something salty on his love's skin and he realized that it was his own tears. He looked up at Feli to see him crying as well, "Right?"

"I love you more than anything, Luddy. I'll always love you."

Ludwig shifted in his hospital bed, the bitter sweetness of his dream making his chest feel heavy. As he blinked his eyes open, he realized the reason his chest felt heavy was because of the bandages wrapped around it. Lilly and Emil smiled at him, the former carefully hugging his arm, "I'm so happy you're awake, big bruder."

"How long have I been asleep," asked Ludwig, feeling as though he had cotton balls in his mouth. Emil immediately handed him a cup of water, "Danke."

"Just a couple of days." Lilly looked as if she wanted to say something else.

"What is it?"

"Aren't you curious about Feli?"

Ludwig's chest clenched painfully, "Why should I be? He's probably in the cafeteria getting some coffee or something. Could you go get him? I'd like to see him." His heart clenched again at the
look his sister and Emil shared, "What?"

"Lilly, dear, why don't you and Emil go home," said Wolfgang before she could tell Ludwig about Feliciano.

"Ja, Vati." Lilly kissed Ludwig's cheek before walking out with Emil.

"Vati," said Ludwig, "Where is Feliciano?"

"How are you feeling?"

"Like shit. Where is he?"

Wolfgang ignored the curse and looked over his son's chart, "For obvious reasons, I'm giving you a sick leave so you don't have to worry about rushing back to work anytime soon. You're to stay here until we deem you well enough to return home and even then, I'd like for you to take it easy."

"Vater, where is Feli?"

Sighing, the older Beilschmidt placed the chart back, "He's in the ICU. I'm afraid he has yet to wake up. That is, of course, not to say that he won't."

It took a moment for Ludwig to register that he was in a hospital bed with bandages and suddenly everything that had happened that night came rushing back, including how Feliciano's phone had rung after Shane called the number that had texted him to come to his bakery for drugs. Ludwig shook his head in hopes to clear it, "I want to see him."

"Ludwig, stop. You're not—"

"Please, Vati, I need to see him." Ludwig struggled to pull himself out of the bed and when he finally managed to force his legs off the edge, he winced. His right leg started to bleed through the bandages.

Wolfgang clicked his tongue and pulled out fresh packages of bandages to rewrap his son's leg, "Why don't you ever listen to me."

"What are you talking about," snapped Ludwig, irritated that he now had to wait for his dad to finish wrapping his leg before he could go see his fiancé. "I always listen to you."

"Hn." As soon as he was finished cleaning and bandaging the sutures, Ludwig made to hop off the bed but Wolfgang forced him to sit still.

"Vati!"

"Feliciano is asleep, Ludwig," said Wolfgang with patience only he could have. He patted Ludwig's knee and went to get a wheelchair, "He's not going anywhere anytime soon. Take it slow."

"But I need to see him. I need to know he's ok."

"I know, son."

Helping Ludwig into the chair, Wolfgang gently wheeled him towards the ICU. Along the way, nurses and other doctors would smile at the young Beilschmidt and politely ask him how he was feeling. They didn't take it to heart when all they received was a curt nod. When they finally arrived, Ludwig unconsciously gripped the fabric of his gown and tensed; his heart racing as he
counted the steps his father took until they reached Feli's room.

It was so dark inside. And cold.

Ludwig wanted nothing more than to just leap out and cuddle him close to keep the chill at bay but a firm hand held him in place. He glanced up at his father, "Vati?"

"Wait a minute," said Wolfgang as he glared ahead. Ludwig followed his gaze, his own eyes hardening at the detective walking out from behind the small curtain hiding Feli from view. He watched as the officer gave a startled gasp.

"Oh, Mr. Beilschmidts," she said as she pulled out a notebook, "I'm—"

"Doctor," corrected Ludwig and Wolfgang simultaneously.

"Sorry, Dr. Beilschmidts. I'm Detective Cassandra O'Righley of homicide." She handed them her business card with a grim smile, "How are you feeling?"

Ludwig studied the woman for a moment before scowling, "I want to see my fiancé."

"Fiancé? Oh! Mr. Vargas? Sorry," she corrected herself when Ludwig's scowl deepened, "Dr. Vargas. He's...well, I'm sure he has a great personality."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?! What's your prob—"

"Detective," interrupted Wolfgang, "What were you doing in Dr. Vargas' room? Who gave you clearance to see him?"

Cassandra showed them her badge, "Since when do I need clearance to visit patients?"

"Since this is a private room and he's a Vargas."

Cassandra's dark eyes studied Wolfgang momentarily then traveled to Ludwig. She nodded towards Feli's bed, "What were you two doing at the bakery that night?"

"Are you seriously going to interrogate my son right this minute?" Wolfgang pulled the wheelchair closer to him, "This is outrageous! He just woke up."

"Had he not been in such critical condition, I would've asked him the night of. And since he is out and about, surely he has time to answer a few questions while the night is still fresh in his mind."

Cassandra clicked her pen, "Well, Ludwig? What were you two doing at the bakery? Did Dr. Vargas know the men there?"

"Do not answer anything, Ludwig," said Wolfgang in German.

Cassandra shook her head and said in German as well, "Not doing so will only impair the investigation. Dr. Wolfgang, please refrain from answering for your son."

"Can't this wait till after Feli wakes up," asked Ludwig.

"No. I'll be asking him these questions later but for now I'm asking you."

"I—"

"The hell are you doing here?" Lovino walked out of the elevator with a cup a coffee and all but stomped over to them when he saw Cassandra. "I already told you that we'll let you know as soon
as he wakes up. Buzz off."

"Mr. Vargas, I've made your brother's situation more than clear with you and your family. Anything that could help clear up what happened is important."

"Right, and the fact that my brother is a high-profile man has nothing to do with your eagerness to arrest him.

"Five men were found dead in that Bakery. Granted they were thugs but that doesn't excuse the massacre…"

Ludwig watched as Cassandra and Lovino argued with each other. Five men were found dead? In his bakery? He felt his breathing increase. Did Feli kill them?

"Massacre? That wasn't a massacre; it was in self fucking defense, lady," snarled Lovino, his grip on his cup tightening, "What did you expect him to do? Sit there and take it up the ass?"

"Phrasing. And no, but that doesn't explain the drugs we found on the premises," shot back Cassandra. "Those men were either tricked into going there so that your brother could dispose of them, or your brother called them there and they happened to be there when Dr. Beilschmidt arrived, and to cover the fact that he and his family are still up to their dirty ways, killed them!"

"Drugs," whispered Ludwig, his head starting to hurt. The world suddenly started to spin as he fought to breathe properly. He gasped in between words, "Drugs? The—he—phone…Drugs?!"

Wolfgang wheeled his son over to an empty room to sedate him while nurses rushed over to help. Cassandra made a move to follow but was stopped by Lovino. His eyes were dark with a calm anger. Through a clenched jaw, Lovino pointed at Cassandra and said, "Listen, I don't much care for you people on the best of days. I don't know what you think you know about us, but if it's a fraction of what you're making it sound like, then you should also know that you are way out of your league."

Lovino scoffed and added, "Actually, you're way out of your league regardless. I don't want you bothering my brother or my brother in law to be. You aren't to ask them questions and you sure as hell not going to show up here again unless it's to arrest them. And even then, they won't talk unless our lawyer is present."

She made a move to step around him but Lovi blocked her path, "And another thing, don't you or your colleagues even dare talk to the media about this. They don't need to know a damn thing about what's going on. Go against my family's wishes and I will have your badge so fast, you won't even realize you're a fucking rent-a-cop driving around in a damn Segway at my family's mall."

"Mr. Vargas, I doubt that I need to remind you that threatening an officer is considered a felony."

"And yet here I am. Trust me, detective, you don't want to get involved in this one. It's going to be fucking messy."

Cassandra frowned, "How so?"

Lovino shook his head, "Never mind. Just don't come back here again unless you have a judge's order."

Unfortunately for him, it wasn't long until the detective came back with just that. Apparently, they found one of Feli's knives hidden in between some dishes and it had matched one of the wounds on a victim.
Yes, victim.

The sheer audacity that the thugs who attempted against his brother's, Ludwig's, and Lilly's lives were now being called victims, not only by the police but by the damn media, had Lovino seeing red. Tino and Matthew had to restrain him when they handcuffed Feli to the bed—where the fuck is a man in a coma going to go, he had snarled.

The rest of the Vargas were faring no better. The media had started to dig up things that they were sure had been buried deep in their past and as hard as Alfred's parents tried to control the flames, where one was put out, the wind had already carried enough sparks to start a new one. Rumors surrounding their current status, as far as mob ties were concerned, quickly became the talk of the city.

And Ludwig was watching it all with a heavy heart in the room next to Feli's. As much as his family told him to ignore what was happening and just focus on getting better, he couldn't help it. Not when memories of that night kept haunting his sleep. Not when he kept hearing Feli's cell phone jingle every time he closed his eyes.

~2 weeks later~

_Feli continued to wander through his house in search of an exit but every time he went through a door that would take him to the foyer, he would end up back in the corridor much to the voice's amusement. It had offered its services but Feli quickly shot him down. He'd even stumbled across his father a few times, who repeated the same thing he always told him, but he ignored him in favor of finding his way out._

_When he finally found a door that didn't return him to the corridor, Feli had nearly wept tears of joy. Even more so when the door led him outside. He cried out, "Thank goodness, I'm out!"_

_"Congratulations," said the voice with genuine joy for him, "Now which path shall you take?"

_Feli ran out of the patio, not exactly surprised that the voice was still echoing in his mind despite the distance he'd placed between the door and himself. He frowned as he came to a fork in the road. One path was sunny and another dark as if both day and night were coexisting at the same time. His smile slowly disappeared, "Isn't it obvious? I don't want to go down the scary—"_

_He shivered again, this time a sharp pain in his head accompanying it. Rubbing his face, Feli glanced at the two roads only to find that there were now a few more paths that led into mist and shadow. He glanced at the sky but both sides had been shaded with clouds. Feli whimpered to himself, "Why are there so many?"

_"Why don't you pick one?"

_"Which one?"

_"Does it matter? Either way, I'm positive it'll get you to where you need to be."

_"I don't want to go through the mist."_
"Why not?"

Feli strained his eyes to see through but couldn't. He shook his head, "Maybe I should just go back into the house until it clears up."

"You can't."

"The hell I can't." Feli gasped when he turned around to find his home as it looked now, nothing but rubble and ash with the exception of the wooden door with a barred window. Two golden eyes stared back at him.

"Go into the mist," the voice encouraged.

"I don't—"

"Go. Moving forward is all you can do now."

"But I don't know what's out there."

"I already said that it won't matter which you pick. They all take you to where you need to be. Go, I'll be right behind you."

"That doesn't exactly give me comfort."

"It will when everyone leaves you."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just move before you fade along with the rest of this world."

Feli took a breath, praying that he would wake from this nightmare soon and took a step into the shadow. His heart ached as soon as he did, his body trembling. He turned around again and found that the view was fuzzy as if it were fading. The sun was losing its rays to the fog until it too faded from view.


The heart monitor's steady rhythm welcomed Feli back from unconsciousness. His vision, though blurry at first, was slowly clearing and he was able to recognize his room. It was one of the private ones that he'd often visit patients in. This one was dark blue with silver accents and was filled with flowers and stuffed animals from his coworkers and friends. A few moments passed, his confusion slowly clearing up before he remembered what happened. The men at the bakery holding Lilly hostage. The men at the bakery telling Ludwig all those horrible things about him. Ludwig believing them. Them shooting at Ludwig. Him shooting at them.

Oh, god. Did he kill them? Feli started to panic at the thought. Did Ludwig hate him? Fuck, were they even still alive?! What about Lilly? The baby?

Feli's anxious whimpers and elevating heart rate alerted his caretakers to him. Tino and Matthew jumped into action, one getting a sedative while the other called off the nurses. Matthew smiled down at Feli once he settled down, "Welcome back, bud."

At their friend's gagged reply, Tino carefully took out his breathing tube, "My goodness, aren't you a sight for sore eyes—uh, I mean!" At Matthew's incredulous look, he quickly tried to correct himself, "I mean, glad to have you amongst the living. I'm sure you're happy to finally be awake
after two weeks of slumber, huh, sleeping beauty. Wanted to catch up on your beauty sleep, huh? Not that you need it cause you look beautiful despite the…” Tino motioned to his own face awkwardly.

Matthew face palmed, "I really hope you don't greet all your patients coming out of a coma like this."

"Heh, no, I don't. I'm just happy to see him awake is all."

"Right…." Matthew turned to Feli with a smile, "So, how are you feeling?" He and Tino watched warily as Feli glanced around the room, biting his lip sadly as he watched the realization hit their friend.

"Tino?"

"…Y-yes?" Tino sat at the foot of Feli's bed and patted his leg in comfort.

"What happened to Ludwig and Lilly?"

"They're all fine. Don't worry about them. How are you feeling? Does…d-does your head hurt at all?"

"Not really."

"How about your chest," asked Matthew, now holding Feli's chart to make note of what he was saying.

"No."

"Wonderful. How about your cheeks?"

"They're sore but I'm ok." Feli tried to lift his hands to his face but found himself unable to do so. He did it again; the sound of metal clinking against the bed rail's making him tense, "Ve?"

Both doctors scowled at the handcuffs and Tino said, "I'm so sorry for those, Feli. Wolfgang and your family were furious and fought against putting them on you but the cops didn't want to take any chances."

"Am I under arrest?" Feliciano's mood did a complete turn-around and he suddenly felt himself grow angry, "Did they fucking arrest me while I was in a god damn coma?!"

Tino widened his eyes in shock of his friend's profanity but figured that he would probably react the same way if he woke up handcuffed to his bed absent a sexy reason and Berwald. Blushing, Tino shook the idea from his head and tried to calm Feli down, "It was just so that the public didn't think you were getting special treatment."

The voice that followed him about in his dream started to cackle at this. Through his laughter, it whispered, 'Guess you might actually be worthy of your title after all, huh, prince?'

Feli pulled at his cuffs angrily, "Enough!" He managed to catch both of his friends draw their breath in sharply and it quickly defused him. Feli withdrew into himself as much as he could given his circumstance and fought back tears, "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—"

But Matthew was quick to comfort him, "It's ok, Feli. Tino knows that you're feeling a little out of it right now. It's ok."
"Y-yeah! Don't worry. Besides, I think I would be pretty cranky myself if I woke up like you did."

Letting their words soothe him for the moment, Feli asked, "How does the public even know that I'm involved in the shooting?"

"I'm not sure, but somehow the media was alerted the night of. They've been following the story intently."

"What do they know?"

Tino visibly relaxed. Well, as much as he could relax with what he was about to tell the Italian. He rubbed Feli's leg through the blanket and said, "Your cousins were rushed on the crime scene because the police arrived quicker than anticipated and they found one of your knives and matched it to one of the bodies. Good thing Bernardo was smart to spoil the blood splatter of the ones that did survive, so the ones they found are the only ones that they think were involved for now. Your grandpa and the agency could make this go away but the public is already watching you and your family very closely."

"Make what go away? Tino, I didn't do it as an act of crime. Those guys were trying to kill us for something that wasn't even there!" At his friend's renewed silence, Feli's stomach churned. He curled his hands around his restraints, "There wasn't anything there…right?"

"Well, that's the thing—"

"Dio mio, there was?!"

"Sh-sh," cooed Matthew gently, "we know that you weren't involved in that. But, the damn reporter vultures are spinning it like you were or something stupid like that."

"And there is only so much pull his family can do without drawing suspicion to themselves," added Tino with a nod towards Matthew. "This is a big story. It's going to be tough but you're going to have to pull out of this by the books, or as close to the book as possible. At least, it has to seem that way. I don't know much about what your grandpa is doing but I heard from Elizabeta that he and Magyar already spoke with her cousin. Daniel is coming down from the capital to represent you."

Feli gave up tugging his arms away to rub his face and laid back, "What about…what about the men who were at the bakery?"

"Well, the Hounds were able to retrieve a few but they have to heal before they can be questioned."

"I see." Feli tried to rub his face with his shoulder but gasped in pain as soon as he did.

"Careful," admonished Tino, "your facial bones are still mending."

"Is that why I have a bandage around my eye?" When Tino didn't say anything, Feli sighed again, "How's my Luddy taking all of this?" All of his muscles tensed uncomfortably as he waited for him to answer.

"Wolfgang had him under supervision because he had a head injury but recently he's been getting physical therapy for his leg. As far as taking all this, well, I'm not sure exactly. We've had to sedate him a few times to keep him from freaking out."

Feli let the information soak in for a moment before he quietly asked, "Has he said anything about what happened?"
"Wolfgang told him not to," said Matthew. "Gilbert's been in there with him when he can. Mostly it's just been Vash, Lilly, and their cousins. Yours would've come to visit you along with your other family but you're not allowed visitors at the moment."

"Oh. But don't worry, Feli. I'll tell your family in a jiffy and when they post bail, Alex will be able to come soon. And let me tell ya, he's been dying for his papa to wake up."

"Can I see Ludwig?"

Matthew and Tino exchanged glances again before Tino smiled, "Sure but it's going to have to wait until after your bail thingy. You can see him later though. It should only take a couple of days."

"I don't want to wait a couple of days. I want to see him now." As Feli tried to sit up, he remembered that he was still cuffed to his bed. He tugged on his restraints in annoyance but Matthew was quick to stop him.

"At least let us check you over again. We need to go over your injuries and wait until the cops switch out. That should only be in a couple of hours. Please?"

"Alright," said Feli with a resigned sigh, "But, I know that you guys know how to pick locks. I refuse to be handcuffed a moment longer."

He allowed his friends to fuss over him, Matthew working around Tino as the shorter man worked at Feli's handcuffs while he made sure that everything was healing nicely. Throughout it all, they kept asking if he needed to speak with the hospital councilor. Although, saying that they were 'asking' was putting it lightly. It was more like they were kindly telling him that he had to talk to someone.

After the handcuffs released their hold on Feli, his hands moved to rub the pink welts around his wrists. Feli smiled, "Ve, grazie~"

"You're welcome." Tino glanced at the door to make sure the cop standing guard hadn't noticed that Feli was no longer bound. With a sigh of relief, he turned to watch Matthew finish pulling Feli's facial bandages off before inspecting the scar tissue. He toyed with a small mirror, "It's not easy to kill someone, Feli. Believe me, I know. I remember after my first job, my mom had to get me to talk to Dr. Drew's wife. She's really good you know. If you don't want to talk the hospital’s psychiatrist then maybe your uncle can see if she can come. Or if you want, you can always talk to me about it. Or someone."

Feli looked at him, put off that he couldn't see from his left eye. He gingerly touched around it to figure out why, "I'm fine but…what's with this?"

"Please don't freak out," said Tino and he handed the Italian the mirror, "And try not to touch it too much."

Feli didn't react when he saw his reflection aside from a quiet 'huh'. He turned his face in all angles, pleased to see that the majority of the swelling had gone down. Taking some gauze from Matthew, he made a square to place it over the more serious wound, "I don't feel any different."

"Not yet maybe," said Matthew softly as he handed him some surgical tape. "But the guilt is going to come. It always does eventually. How are you feeling about your," he trailed off and motioned to his face.

"I'm not sure how I feel about that yet, but if Alex could deal with losing something that was a part of him, I'm sure I can too."
"Not everyone reacts the same way, Feli," reminded Tino gently, "And don't forget that Alex was a little depressed about it for a while."

"Listen, I know you guys only want to help but my tummy is already all bubbly with nerves. I don't want to talk about anything until after I talk with Ludwig."

"Feli…we really must insist waiting a couple of days. What if you get caught?"

"I don't care. I have to see him."

Tino bit his lip before asking, "Are you going to tell him? About you and your family?"

"Yes."

Matthew and Tino had to force their eyes not to meet over Feli's head. Ludwig hadn't been doing all that well from what they heard from their respective husbands but they didn't have the heart to tell Feli that.

---

Alex waited for his uncle Oswaldo to pick him up from school. He played with the straps of his prosthetic arm as he listened to Daniel assure him that the other kids were just jealous because their dads weren't heroes like theirs. Danny smiled, "What did your uncle Ozzie say?"

"He said that my papa woke up and that my grandpa arranged for me to be able to see him for a few minutes," said Alex with a small grin. He refastened his arm before it slipped off and pulled it onto his lap, "I can't wait to see him!"

Daniel noticed Alex's smile falter. He lightly head butted his shoulder, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Come on. You ain't upset about what our classmates said are ya?"

"You'd be upset if they told you the things they're telling me."

Danny smirked, "Well, why not roll with it? Tell them uncle Lovino said he'll make them sleep with the fishes if they keep messing with you."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know but I heard it in a movie my dads were watching once."

Alex sniffed, "Something tells me your dads weren't watching the little mermaid." His eyes brightened when he saw Oswaldo drive up in his black spider. "I'll call you later, Danny."

"Ok. Tell your papa I said hi when you see him."

"Ok." Alex leaned down and kissed Danny on his cheeks before scurrying over to his uncle. Oswaldo opened the door for him and smiled, "Hey there, kiddo."
"Hello, uncle Ozzie."

"Have a good day at school?" Alex hesitated a moment before nodding. Ozzie frowned, "What's wrong?" When the boy didn't answer, he called again, "Alex?"

Alexander glanced up at his uncle, taking note of how sad he himself looked. He had dark circles beneath his usually cheerful eyes and it seemed as if he'd forgotten to shave that morning. Alex reached out for the large hand on the shift drive and held it, "Are you ok, uncle?"

Oswaldo blinked, taking his gaze off the road momentarily to look at his nephew before shifting it back. He chuckled, "I'm ok."

"The kids at school told me that my family is evil. That," Alex twisted his face as if he tasted something bitter, "that the Vargas are spoiled and that my papa is a murderer." He felt Oswaldo's hand tense under his and added, "But I know he's not. And I also know that you and all my other uncles and auntie Felicia didn't become famous because you are Vargas. You guys did it all by yourself."

"Damn right we did," muttered Ozzie. He sighed and forced his anger down, "The kids in your school don't know any better and are only repeating their parent's ignorant accusations."

Alex nodded, "That's what Mr. Arthur told me! But… that doesn't keep me from feeling angry."

"Don't get angry, little man. Feli wouldn't want you getting upset over this. I know Ludwig wouldn't either."

"Hn."

Oswaldo pulled into the apartment's parking lot and shut his car off. Alex needed to change out of his uniform and pick up his stuffed bumble bee. As the two made their way to Feli's penthouse, Oswaldo went over his little lecture silently in his head. He'd been working on it for a while now, trying to find the simplest way to say what he had to say to Alex without frightening him.

He let them into the penthouse and parted ways with his nephew to let him change while he went to shave and freshen up. His cell chirped with a new message from his dad telling him that permission had been granted to him to tell the boy. Ozzie ran a hand through his hair and sighed as he clicked his phone off.

"Well," he said, "here goes nothing." Rubbing his eyes nervously, he went back out to the living room and took a seat. When Alex came back out with his stuffed bee and a picture he drew for Feli, he tried his best to smile. He motioned for Alex to take a seat next to him, "Sweetheart, there is something you need to know."

Alex tilted his head to the side, "What is it Uncle Ozzie?"

"It's about our family, kiddo. I know this is something your dad should tell you but I know that he's going to have a bit of a hard time trying to tell your vati as it is, so I'm going to go ahead and tell you."

"Ok."

Oswaldo took a deep breath and showed him the Vargas family crest tattooed on his forearm, "Do you know why our family's crest is the sun?"

"Grandpa says it's because of your bright personalities."
"Well, yeah, but that's the silly cute reason. Do you remember what Feli taught you about the stars?" When Alex nodded, Ozzie smiled, "Well our family is like the gravity in a star. We…"

The plan had been simple: Stay calm, don't yell, hear him out.

At least that's what Ludwig kept repeating to himself every time he reached the same conclusion after obsessing over what little he knew about Feli's part in what had happened. For the past few weeks, Ludwig had been churning the events that put him and Feli in the hospital. No one detail was spared from dissection, no word was left unanalyzed. But no matter how much he tried to reach other conclusions, he couldn't.

Stay calm, don't yell, hear him out.

There was certain desperation for Feli to wake up so he could ask him all his questions; and that had been another thing that had troubled his heart. His beloved, if now somewhat dangerous, fiancé was asleep and he hadn't been allowed to see him. The steady beeping of his heart could be heard from his room though so at least there had been that.

His family had been of little help. Neither his brothers nor sister were able to supply any information other than what was said on the news; their excuse had been the less he knew, the better. Piles of newspapers and magazines lied in a small pile at the side of his bed; the corners of the papers were wrinkled from him anxiously bending and folding them as he read.

When those didn't satisfy his need to know what was going on, he turned to television. That hadn't been any better. News anchors and so called specialists kept painting Feli in a horrible light. Unfortunately, what they had to say about him and the Vargas only kept reinforcing what Natalya had told him months ago, and the same conclusion he was coming up with: The Vargas were notorious gangsters and he was in love with a lying, manipulative bastard that was Feliciano, heir to—not just a criminal empire but The Criminal Empire. And really, what else was there to think?

Stay calm, don't yell, hear him out.

Feliciano's strange behavior suddenly started to make sense. The attack on him? The fires? That time those people had them at gunpoint? It had all been because Feliciano and his family were distributing drugs. Hell, maybe they were even involved in a turf war if that night was anything to go by.

Ludwig felt his walls come up as he stared out his window; Feli had lied to him. No, worse. He'd used him.

"That can't possibly be right," he whispered to himself. The dull throb of another headache was starting to pulse around his temple as he thought about that night again. He repeated his plan: stay calm, don't yell, hear him out.

Despite his doubt, the seed that Shane had planted that night had sprouted roots and they were gripping his sense of logic tightly. Ludwig fell back against his pillow, eyes closing and mind racing as he shifted in his hospital bed to lay on his side with his back to the door. Anger rose the more he thought about it and he clenched the sheets in his hand, "How could he have done this to
Christ, he should've seen this coming. All the signs were there. All the sneaking around at night, him coming home bloody and bruised. The shady way his brother and cousins would sometimes act. Hah, sometimes? God, the power they had.

He tensed when he heard his door open and close softly. There was movement to his left. He turned around in his bed to sit up but only saw a retreating back. His eyes darted to his bedside table and found that the stranger had taken his engagement ring. Before he could yell at the intruder, his stomach churned when he realized who it was.

There standing by the window, dressed in dark blue pajama bottoms and a pajama top left open as to not agitate his bandages, was Feli.

A part of him was relieved, happy even, to see him awake and well. It would've been so easy to go along with his plan and walk over to him to make sure for himself that his little fox was ok, to hug him and tell him that he'd been worried sick and to never do whatever it was he did to land him in a coma before pulling him under the covers with him and hear out his side of things. A smaller part of him suppressed those feelings wanting nothing more than to get him out of his room. So instead of beckoning him to his bed, Ludwig pulled his sheets closer to his body, "...Feliciano."

~.~

The plan was simple: Stay calm, don't cry, let him talk.

With that in mind, Feli read over his own chart in hopes of seeing all the familiar medical procedures done on him and the long names of medications he was on, or not on—Feli was going to have make sure he got back on schedule for his depression medication—in hopes to keep his mind off of what he was going to do later that evening. It hardly helped that his stomach was killing him, he was so nervous. Not to mention that he kept trying not to think about the dead bodies and his hand in it, but visions of what he did kept flashing in his mind's eye.

'It was rather nice though, wasn't it,' asked the voice in his head. Hearing it made Feli shiver, he really needed to get back on his medication.

When the sun started to set, Matthew rushed into his room and helped him out of his bed, "Quickly now. You only have a few minutes before the new guard takes the next shift. Tino's going to try and give you more time, though."

Feli took the crutch from Matthew and limped towards the door, "How?"

"He got maintenance to screw with the elevator."

"Grazie, amico," murmured Feliciano as he scurried next door while Matthew distracted the nurses.

Stay calm, don't cry, let him talk.

Feli repeated this over and over in his head as he made his way inside Ludwig's room. His fiancé was lying on his side facing away from the door. He caught sight of the engagement ring he made him resting safely on the nightstand next to Ludwig's bed. As silently as he could manage, Feli shuffled over and plucked it from the bowl before moving over to the window.

"...Feliciano?"

Stay calm, don't cry, let him talk.
The tone Ludwig said his name only made his stomach more upset but he promised himself that he would give Ludwig a chance to vent all his pent-up frustration before soothing his ruffled feathers. It was, after all, the least he could do. So, with his plan in mind, he cast aside what remaining armor he had around his soul so to not have it weigh down his heart or resolve to reveal what he was. If Ludwig was going to believe him, he couldn't afford to have it on.

Movement outside caught Feli's eye and he pulled the blinds up to glance down at the crowd of news reporters and—were those protestors? Sighing, Feli kept facing forward, "Hey, Luddy."

~.~

Stay calm, don't yell, hear him out.

Yes, the plan was simple. Executing it was not.

Despite his best efforts, Ludwig snapped, "Don't call me that," startling himself as the words escaped him instinctually. He felt a pang of regret when he saw Feli's body tense at them.

"Ok, Ludwig," whispered the Feli.

"You have some nerve showing up in here after what happened." Ludwig's throat tightened as he spoke. No, no! No! This isn't how this is supposed to go screamed his mind but he was lost. The softness of Feli's voice did little to calm him and before Ludwig could help himself, every bottled frustrated thought, every assumption he'd made was flying from his mouth.

Balling his fists in blankets, Ludwig leaned forward with furrowed eyebrows, "You—This whole time you've been lying to me, haven't you? You've been feeding me nothing but bullshit and me, being the stupid dumbass that I am, ate it without question! I've harbored guilt for what happened with Natalya and I've spent every moment since trying to make that up to you. To show you that you mean everything to me and this is how you repay me? I've allowed Oswaldo to live with us despite knowing that he loves you in a romantic way. I've allowed you to take your time with whatever it was that was bothering you because I never wanted you to feel like you weren't safe with me. But that was all a rouse, wasn't it? Are you even really sick or were you just playing me this whole time?"

Feli flinched at that one, a hole in his chest slowly started to open and he vaguely questioned his decision to be armor less. The voice growled quietly, 'Jesus, he really went there, huh? Hey what are you doing with that ring?' Ignoring it, Feli rolled Ludwig's ring in his palm, feeling for the small indention where the wire had been melded with the band with his thumb. He stared blankly out the window and continued to listen to Ludwig, his thumb finally catching at the little groove he had left unwelded. Feli started to rub at it.

"You know what the worst part is? Natalya warned me about you!" Ludwig laughed humorlessly and ran a hand through his hair, "She actually told me what you were but I defended you. I told her that you would never hurt me—"

'I wouldn't', Feli wanted to say but kept quiet.

"—Christ, maybe if it had only been me in there but Lilly was there, too. I think she might even be with child. With child, Feliciano! What were you thinking hiding drugs in my bakery?!"

'I didn't', sobbed Feli mentally.

"You know how much I hate being a doctor and what that place means to me. That bakery is my equivalent to your damn painting studio. Hell, to this fucking place! That's my sanctuary when I
want to escape from what I'm supposed to do. That was my sanctuary and you soiled it with—

Ludwig knew that he wasn't being fair but he couldn't stop himself anymore. He shifted in his bed, moving his legs off the edge as he continued, "You said you loved me."

'I do!' Feli started to rub at the ring harder to keep from crying. Had he been this cruel to Ludwig when he yelled at him? God, he hoped not. The voice chuckled, 'And here I thought he loved you.'

"But I'm starting think that maybe you don't." Ludwig ran his hand through his hair angrily, getting most of the fringe out of his eye before saying, "Out of all the damn places in this damn city to hide some fucking drugs, you chose to do it in my sanctuary, my bakery! Why? Did you think that maybe that because of who I am and who my family is, that it'd be the last place they'd look? Well, I've got news for you. They already found it. That along with what was left of the bastards you called or texted or whatever the fuck you did. Do you realize that the authorities have seized it?! Our name is all over the damn news. They're saying that you were using my bakery as a god damn drug depot!"

Feli wanted to interrupt his rant, to beg him to stop saying all these horrible things about him because they simply weren't true. But he didn't dare. The voice was starting to get agitated with the whole situation. It purred in his mind, 'Talk about reminding you of what we really are, huh?' Feli blinked out of his funk when he heard something particularly hurtful.

"What did you say," he croaked, his throat tight as he hoped that he heard wrong.

"I said," repeated Ludwig, pleased that he had gotten a reaction from the unusually quiet Feli, "that none of this would've ever happened if I had just listened to Natalya. If I had just gone with my instincts and just kept my head down and did what was expected of me—"

"You mean gone through with the engagement," interrupted Feli, his nail finally managing dig under the welded wired. It shot bolts of pain up his arm but it didn't hurt as much as what he was hearing. He glared out the window, "You mean marry her. You didn't even like her let alone love her."

"I could've learned!" God did that taste horrible in his mouth. If there was one thing Ludwig knew for certain, it was that he could and would never learn to love Natalya but his rationality had been overruled by his rabid emotions.

Feli dug his finger nail deeper under the wire and forced his face to keep looking forward. He licked his lips but that did little to moisten them. The hole was getting bigger in his chest and it threatened to swallow his heart. He shook his head, "You can't learn to love someone."

Ludwig knew he was going to say that and despite everything in his being crying out to him, screaming and begging him not to retort back with his comeback—NO LUDWIG, DON'T SAY IT! DON'T SAY IT!—he did. And what he said next shocked them both but it was out of his mouth before he had the sense to keep it shut, "I learned to love you, didn't I?"

The pained gasp from Feli, and the way he doubled over as if he'd been punched, was enough to wake him up from his ridiculous and irrational blind rage. He regretted the words as soon as he said them and he quickly tried to retract, "No, wait! I didn't—I didn't mean it like that."

He scrambled to get out of the bed, reaching for his crutch as he did, "Feli, liebe, I didn't—" Ludwig stopped trying to walk towards his fiancé when Feli took a side step away from him.

Feli released his own crutch and leaned it against the window sill so that he could use his hand to
pull at his hair before letting it gingerly cover his face. Taking a deep breath, he slowly rocked himself, body shrinking in on itself out of instinct to keep him safe.

Ludwig said that.

Ludwig actually said that.

He knew it. He kne—

Deep down, he fucking knew what they had was too good to be true. The voice told him so and it was true and oh god, he said that!

Ludwig gave Feli a few moments to try and collect himself. Truth be told, he was afraid of moving or saying anything else. The last thing he wanted was for Feli to run away but he desperately wanted to do what he should've done when saw him in his room. Pull him in his arms and not let go like Feli had done when he found out about his secret and patiently listened to what he had to say. Oh god, why hadn't he done that instead?! He had a plan!

After a few minutes of listening to Feli's labored breathing, Ludwig tentatively reached out to touch his shoulder but Feli flinched away without looking at him.

Feli didn't move from his spot, his gaze staring out into nothing, "Is that so, Ludwig?" He didn't wait for a response nor did he turn around, "You learned to love me?" His body tensed horribly but he tried to shake it off, "I love you. I didn't learn; it just happened. You think I wanted to fall in love with you?"

"I didn't mean—"

"Quiet, Ludwig. It's my turn to talk now." Ludwig held his tongue as he watched Feli slowly uncover his face, still refusing to look at him. Now that he was a little closer, he could see the mix colors of a bruise peeking from the bandage on Feli's visible cheek. Wait, what did Feli say? He hadn't wanted to fall in love? With him?

"No," murmured Feli as if answering Ludwig's silent question, "I didn't. My life is dangerous and I never wanted to get a civilian involved. That's why...That's why I thought being with Oswaldo wasn't such a bad idea but that didn't exactly work out. Our agoges took us down different paths. He and his brothers tried their luck on the streets, doing things that would hopefully catch the organization's eye. And I...I went in the opposite direction."

The sun was setting in the horizon, its rays casting an orange glow over the skyline and reflecting off his family's towers. Feli was able to see his reflection in the window and, despite his gaze being on the people below, it seemed as if his mirror image was glaring at Ludwig.

'Let me out,' demanded the voice but Feli silenced it.

He continued to dig his finger nail under the wire, "I tried it at first, you know? I tried to be like them but I wasn't very good at being bad. I mean, I knew I was going to have to be at one point in my life, or at least pretend to be, so I wanted to be good for as long as I could." Feli chuckled dryly, "Hell, I couldn't even steal an apple from the university's cafeteria when I was starving before I was able to secure a job. And even then, I was living off handouts from Ivan or Felix because I refused to steal."

"Feli—," started Ludwig, reaching forward to hug his fiancé but Feli's uncharacteristic growl froze him in his tracks.
"I'm not done yet." Ludwig retreated back his hand in shock. There was a great big part of him that was starting to feel annoyed that Feli wasn't looking at him but he kept quiet for now. Feli huffed, "And then I met you and everything changed. Now I'm not sure why it happened but I couldn't stay away from you. You had this gravitational pull and just drew me in and I— I'm not sure what the others were thinking but I thought...I thought 'well if they could make it work, maybe I can, too.' Do you remember how hard I tried to get you to notice me?"

Ludwig smiled in despite of himself, "Ja."

Feli gave his own small smile, "And even then, I still questioned whether it was right to ask you to be mine. It was around that time that my grandpa started talking to me more and more about my responsibility to the family." He replaced his smile with a frown, "I didn't understand what he was trying to tell me because my head was so far up my ass. I have values, Ludwig, and up until that night, I have never jeopardized any of them. That's a big reason why I got into an argument with my family. I wasn't willing to jeopardize who I am for what we do. I was selfish."

Gripping the ring in a tight fist, Feli furrowed his brow, trying his best not to cry. His face ached as he wrinkled it with distaste, "That being said, I thought...I thought you knew that much about me, Ludwig. I thought you knew me well enough to know that I would never do anything to hurt you intentionally."

At that Ludwig's annoyance blossomed into anger again, "How the hell am I supposed to do that when you're always lying to me, huh? Even now you're trying to manipulate—and for god's sake, look at me!" Ludwig, having had enough, reached out and forcibly turned Feli's head to face him.

Feli yelped in pain and smacked Ludwig's hand away, the action making him pull away the bandages on his cheeks and the bandage over his eye fall off. He couldn't help the feeling of dark satisfaction in seeing Ludwig pale at what he saw. He brought his hand over his empty eye socket and touched it softly, "Do I look every bit like the monster you think I am?"

Eye widening, Feli suddenly found himself in a tight embrace. Ludwig's body shook as he tightened his arms around him. Feli raised his arms and hugged him back, "I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry too, liebe. I'm sorry."

"No, Ludwig, you don't have to apologize to me. I know things look really bad."

Feli looked up at Ludwig who pulled away to stare at his face with a pained expression. Ludwig gingerly reached out to touch where the bullet had pierced through his right cheek and exited out his left cheek bone before lifting his red fringe to get a better look at his eye socket, "How?"

"That's what I want to know," whispered Feli with a tremor in his voice. "How could you believe that I would ever do anything to hurt you and your family? How could you believe that I would purposely tarnish something that is precious to you? How could you believe that I would love me and tell me that you'll be there for me and then turn and have your heart run to her the moment you think I may be involved in something that you should know better that I would not be?!

Feli pulled away from the embrace and pointed to their injuries, "Look at us! Mobster or not, do you seriously think I would do this to us?"

Feeling foolish, Ludwig glanced down to his socked feet. There were a million things he wanted to know and say but the lamest one left his tongue. He said quietly, "But your cell phone rang."
Feli choked on a sob and slowly shook his head downward, mouthing, "Oh my god."

The foolishness Ludwig felt multiplied exponentially and he knew he had been wrong about something...but what part? As he thought about where he had screwed up, aside the obvious, what Feliciano said next caught him off guard. Ludwig raised his eyebrows at the empty tone his beloved had used and asked him to repeat himself.

"I get it," said Feli a little louder. "but I don’t understand. What part of my behavior gave you the impression that that was my character? That what they say, I am?"

"You were acting strange!" Ludwig struggled to stand up straighter but his wound was still a little tender. "What did you want me to think when you were ordering people to go after who knows who? Too messy? Send the French bulldog? What or who the hell is the French bulldog?!"

"I couldn't tell you yet."

"Why not? And if you could, would you have been honest with me? Or would you have just lied and change the subject like you usually do?"

"I've never lied to you."

"You're lying now!"

"No, I'm not! I couldn't tell you because those things are on a need to know basis and you truly didn't need to know yet."

Ludwig balled his fists angrily, "So you don't trust me."

"That's not it," Feli all but screamed, "If it were up to me, I would've told you on our first date but I couldn't. There is too much at stake and I had to be sure."

"Be sure of what?"

Feli sniffed miserably, "Be sure you meant everything you told me. That night when we were in the park, I was going to tell you everything but then that happened and now here we are." He hugged himself with a sad sigh and glanced at the clock over Ludwig’s bed. This had not gone at all like he'd planned and he was out of time. He uncurled his fist and fiddled with the rest of the wire of Ludwig's ring.

"What are you doing?" Ludwig's anger quickly evaporated, leaving behind a thick condensation of anxiety in his chest. "Feli, what are you doing with my ring?"

Feliciano smiled sadly, hurt evident in his eyes, "I never should've given this to you without telling you the truth about me. I never should've believed you when you said you didn't care if I was a mobster."

Keeping his eyes on his engagement ring, heart breaking at the sight of Feli's bloodied finger tearing at the wire, Ludwig asked, "Are you?"

"...Yes. No. You said it didn't matter."

"As long as harm didn't come to us or our family," corrected Ludwig. This wasn't how his plan was supposed to be executed.

"That's right," murmured Feli almost inaudibly, "You're right." He wrapped the wire around his
finger plucking the diamonds with his other hand.

"What are you doing," cried Ludwig as he lunged forward to keep Feli from destroying it completely. That ring was everything to him. It symbolized their—oh god. Tears were burning in his eyes, his breath coming out in desperate gasps, "Wh-what…why?"

Feliciano sniffed miserably, "I'm so sorry, Dr. Beilschmidt—"

"Nein! C-call me Luddy. Call me amore. Bello. Tesoro. Call me anything! Anything but that." God, what was happening?!

"I'm so sorry, Dr. Beilschmidt," repeated the Feli again.

"Liebe, please don't—"

"But you were right." Feli's lips trembled but he plowed through what he wanted to say, "I said I was going to do right by you but I couldn't. You said that there was nothing that would ever keep you from loving me."

"There's not! I love you, liebling. I do!" Ludwig tried to hug Feliciano to himself but he squirmed out of his arms.

"You said that you trusted me to tell you my secrets when I was ready…"

"I do! I swear I am but you have to see things from my point of view. It doesn't look right. What happened? That doesn't make you look innocent. They're saying all these things about you and…and no one is willing to tell me anything to say the otherwise."

"Ludwig," said Feli in a low voice, "Ludwig, you lied to me the day you decided to keep your engagement a secret from me and yet I believed every word you said to me after I found out the truth because I love and trusted you."

Ludwig's lips parted in a silent gasp. As if the guilt hadn't been bad enough as it was. He felt something being pressed into his hand, the familiar cool metal too familiar but he refused to look at it. Maybe if he didn't, it would be as if this wasn't happening.

"You told me a lot of pretty things since then, Dr. Beilschmidt," continued Feli, his eye void of light as if he had retreated to the safety of himself, "I wasn't faking anything and I never lied to you about anything. Kept things from you, yes, but never lied. I never ever lied to you."

Feli picked up his crutch and shuffled towards the door, stopping only because Ludwig embraced him from behind. He patted his arms before gently forcing them away, "I'm not a mobster, Ludwig. My family isn't either. We only pretend to be."

"Why," breathed Ludwig almost inaudibly.

"If I told you, would you believe me?" When Ludwig didn't answer Feli sighed again, "Why don't you ask your dad? Or Gilbert? Or Roderich, hell, ask Berwald or even Monika? Or if you like, you can even ask Willem. I have nothing more to say to you."

Ludwig watched with a heavy heart as Feli walked out of his room, dropping the diamonds from the engagement ring into the wastebasket. He hesitated for a moment before dropping the metal band as well.
Ludwig spent most of the night crying. There was no reason to pretend that he hadn't and that he was fine because he wasn't. Feli had spent the night crying too. He was, after all, in the room next door and the beds were basically pressed against the same wall dividing them. A few hours after Feli had left his room, Ludwig had tried to see him but the cop on duty had stopped him before he even got a chance to knock. He'd tried to talk through the door but all he was met with was silence.

Now as he laid in his bed, he reflected on everything he'd thought he knew and realized that it didn't really fucking matter anymore. He could always rebuild a new bakery; lord knew he had the money. He could give two shits about what his public image was. If Ludwig were in a better mood, he would've laughed at himself. After all, his public image had been hanging by a thread, so to speak, after the whole dating Feli whilst engaged. What more was a scandal concerning his bakery? If anything—and again if he were more emotionally sound—he'd chuckle at the fact that his produce suppliers would all fight among themselves to give him first pick. Hell, he'd probably even get them on time for once out of fear that his scary fiancé would put out a hit on them.

Bringing an arm over his eyes, Ludwig mumbled, "Not that he would. Feliciano—Feli isn't that kind of man."

Ludwig jerked his arm away, his eyes darted to the door when he heard the door knob twist. Heart swelling with hope that Feliciano was well enough to come visit him again, he waited for his little fox to shuffle into his room so that he could smother him with affection. He already had all kinds of apologies ready to use, however when he saw that it was his father, he let out a disappointed sigh and let his head fall back onto his pillow, "Hallo, vati... 'bout time you came to visit me."

The older German offered a tired smile before bringing up a chair next to his son, "Forgive me, Ludwig but there were a few things I had to take care of. I had to give permission to the authorities to retrieve the surveillance feed from the bakery. I'm sure you and Feli will be pleased to hear that it's enough evidence to show that he only acted out of self-defense. And thanks to your mentioning of a phone, Lovino was able to track the messages from it and got time stamps. That combined with time stamps on the surveillance feed from the research facility you and he were at is sufficient to prove that it wasn't him who sent it."

"What?" Ludwig quickly sat up, ignoring the sudden headache; he reached out for his dad just as the older man was going to take a bite from his bagel, "Vati, how does that work?"

"Well, at the time the message was sent, you and Feliciano were declaring your love for each other." Wolfgang grinned, "He was like a little puppy yipping at your heels, not to mention shortly afterwards you two and Marzia were discussing something before a man came up with Feli's cell phone. He'd dropped it somewhere hadn't he?" Taking a bite from his breakfast, Wolfgang offered some to his son, "Don't tell Arthur I'm offering you some of this. He'll have my head for giving you some of this 'bloody cholesterol filled sorry excuse of a meal'. Personally I don't see anything wrong with it. I think McDonalds every now and again is—."

"Nein! I mean about the phone. That's true! I pulled Feli into my lap in some guy's office and told him that I would never leave him because he was freaking out about something. We heard a thump but we didn't know it was his phone. It was his phone, vati!"

"Vati," cried Ludwig suddenly, "It's true!"

"Well, ja, I can see why he thinks there is a lot of cholesterol. I mean the hash brown alone leaked so much oil into its packaging it—"
"Uh…ok? Ja, we figured something like that happened."

"We?"

"Elizabeta's cousin, a handful of the Vargas and I. Daniel came down from the capitol to represent Feliciano. Pity really." Wolfgang took another bite from his bagel sandwich, "If the damn media hadn't gotten involved, or the police hadn't arrived as quickly as they did, we wouldn't have to worry about any of this. I can't even begin to describe how badly Bernardo feels about all of this. He said to tell you that he's going to make it up to both you and Feli after this is all over. He even asked Romulus to not be sent on any assignments until he does. And we all know how much Bernardo lives for his work so be ready for whatever it is he planned for you two."

Wolfgang chuckled heartily to himself but stopped when Ludwig only gave him a strange look. He frowned, "What?"

"Why are you talking to me like I'm supposed to know what any of that means?" His father's playful mood vanished as he studied him.

"Feliciano didn't tell you, did he," he said after a brief moment of silence. It wasn't a question so Ludwig didn't answer. Wolfgang sighed and finished off his breakfast, "What did you two talk about while Tino distracted the guards?"

"I really screwed up, Vati." Ludwig folded his legs in and buried his face in his hands, "I screwed up so bad." He didn't even bother putting on a strong front as he told his father everything that had happened last night. His voice started to break as he finished and mutely showed him the remains of his engagement ring.

Wolfgang took the pieces and examined them, "Is this the one he made you? You pulled out the diamonds and metal from the trash can?"

"I was hoping maybe Roderich or Berwald could put it back together."

Tilting the remains towards the light, Wolfgang squinted. He could see tiny grooves in the black metal that was the band. One of the small blue diamonds had a strange cloudy appearance in the center and instantly he knew what they were and where they were supposed to go. The German chuckled to himself with a shake of his head, "Why did he throw it into the trash bin?"

"Vater, this isn't funny," growled Ludwig as he tried to snatch back his treasures.

"Why did he throw it into the trash bin?"

"Because he doesn't want me anymore."

"Did he say that?"

Ludwig opened his mouth before shutting it and frowned, "Well, n-not directly, no. But why else would he destroy it and leave without telling me anything other than what he did? He said that he was done here and to just ask you or someone in our family to explain things to me."

"Feliciano is a good boy, Ludwig, but he really is just like his grandfather. Too passionate, too hot headed whether you can believe that or not, but I suppose it's our family's curse to fall in love with those idiotic Vargas."

"What are you talking about?"
"I'm going to assume that you didn't notice how an officer arrived moments after Feli went back to the room."

"I did, actually. He kept me from seeing him. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Son, you just explained to me that the instant he walked into your room, you lost it and then put your foot in your mouth which in turn sparked anger in him. Then you wanted him to tell you the truth about himself but let me tell you, if he had, then it would've taken a whole lot more time than he had to spare. He is under arrest you know and if that cop had found him outside of his room then I can guarantee you that he would've gotten in a whole lot more trouble than he already is."

Wolfgang smiled at his son and placed the objects in his palm before gently closing Ludwig's palm around them, "It's not that he doesn't want to see you, son. It's just that he doesn't want you to go to him without knowing who he is. I don't think he could bare it anymore."

"How do you know that?"

"Because his idiot grandfather was just the same," said Wolfgang fondly, "He stammered and cried before he could come clean, but back then he really had been the prince of crime. That was before…"

"Before what?"

Wolfgang looked at his son's fist in thought before shaking his head, "I won't break tradition, Ludwig. He has to tell you."

"He won't talk to me! Why the hell can't you just tell me?"

"Because it's the duty of your lover to do so. Now, where is your laptop? I know your sister mentioned she dropped it off for you."

Ludwig watched his father switch it on before taking out a small black box from his bag, "What are you doing?"

"Lovino gave me this earlier this week and said something about giving it to you when the time was right. I was honestly confused as to why but I see now that despite what happens or how different they may seem, that man will always know his brother better than anyone."

Wolfgang put on his eye glasses and handed his son the box.

Curious, Ludwig opened it. Inside was a thick golden band with the Vargas sun embossed into the metal, however the V was missing. Instead there was a smaller version of the Beilschmidt imperial eagle with its wings rising towards the sun rays and four small holes on either side and above and below its body with another where the eagle's heart would be. He carefully pulled it out to get a better look. On the inside of the band, imprinted in neat script, was the word keystone.

Wolfgang sensed Ludwig's confusion and gently took the ring from his son, "Your Feliciano is far cleverer than anyone gives him credit for."

"He's my little fox," said Ludwig with a smile. He shook his head and looked at the cord his dad connected to the laptop, "What's all this for?"

"This ring is a modern design of a ring that can be dated back to the Renaissance. They were ordinary to the unsuspecting eye but when someone knew how to open it, they would find secrets written inside. This one requires keys to unlock its secrets."
"The diamonds!"

"That's right but they have to go in their specific slots else the information inside could be destroyed. Lucky for you I know how this works. This diamond has a slight cloudiness to it, therefore signifies wind so it goes into this slot here. This one has been nicked on this facet here and patched with gold so it goes here into the earth. This one is clear like water so it goes here and —"

"Wait." Ludwig stopped his father, "This one goes on top of the eagle's head and this one with a redish tone goes into the eagle's heart."

Wolfgang shook his head slowly, "I don't think so. That's not how the elemental circle works."

"I know Feli, vati. I'm sure I'm right." Ludwig didn't wait for his father and placed the diamonds into place. The result was immediate and the ring hummed with life, the top flopping open to reveal a slit for the other end of the usb cord. Stunned, Wolfgang made the connection and the laptop screen went white with the Vargas' sun image at the center. It counted down from three before that was replaced with Feli's face.

The Italian smiled warmly into the camera, his eyes practically radiating love. He was wearing a black robe and looked as if he had just stepped out of the shower. Ludwig had to refrain himself from reaching out and touching his beloved's face. Feli grinned, "Ve~ I'm so happy you got it right, Luddy! It was what my papa always said, keep your mind cool like water but the flames of the sun in your heart. I think that makes for a good leader. I hope I can be a good leader."

Feli looked into his lap sheepishly, "I guess that may come as a shock to you. Me talking about being a leader. Actually, what I'm about to say may come as a shock to you as well." He glanced up with a sad smile, "If you've come by this ring then it probably means one of two things. Either I've died before I got a chance to tell you about me, or I've been compromised and can't say it to you personally.

Either way, I'm so sorry for doing this through video. I wish I was brave enough to do it in person but this is probably the next best thing." Feli winced and ran his hands through his hair while breathing deeply through his nose. He sighed, "Luddy…I'm not—I'm not who you think I am. I wanted to be…I wanted so badly to be a normal guy—or, heh, as normal as I can get.

"Sorry, this isn't funny, um…here let me try that again." Feli reached out to the camera and there was a quick time skip to five minutes later. "Ludwig, something is changing. I'm not sure what it is yet but I'm afraid. Things are getting messy out there and in here," he tapped his temple. "I know you can't really see it but that's because I've been trying to shield as much as I could. Right now, it's not so bad but one day it's going to get to a point where shielding you is going to force me to lie to you and I don't want that. Which is why I'm here telling you.

"Getting beat up by Natalya's thugs has opened my eyes. Now I'm not sure why she's so against us being together but then again, her brother's deal was pretty big. There was a lot more than money riding on your marriage to her but I'm sure you already know that."

Taking a deep breath, Feli let it out slowly, "But that doesn't matter because I have no doubt in my mind that someone will try to beat me up or worse, attack you or Alex. Odds are that they won't because they're afraid of me and my family. Jeez, I'm so sorry, Luddy. Here I've talked for three minutes and haven't really said anything." Feli sniffed and held his own hand to steady the tremors going through it, "I'm sorry. It's just that this is kind of hard because, even though I know it's just a camera I'm talking to, I know that someday it's going to be you behind the screen."
"Ok, I'm just going to just say it. As you know, I come from a mob family. Great-great-grandpa really got the ball moving with the train rail and my grandpa's dad expanded our dealings during the prohibition era in America. Now, as bad as those times were, they were nothing in comparison to what my great uncle did."

"My grandpa had a twin brother named Remus—"

Ludwig glanced over the laptop screen at his father who had clenched his jaw at the mention of Remus before looking at Feli in the screen.

"I know that my family doesn't think that I remember him because of what happened to us and how I was a little sick afterwards but I do. I don't like thinking about him, Luddy. As a matter of a fact, I hate thinking about him…" Feli stared off into the distance for a moment, his eyes hardening, "I've never wanted to kill a man more than I wanted to kill him."

Ludwig's jaw fell as such harsh words left Feli's mouth with such conviction. Feli glanced at the camera as if sensing his discomfort and shook his head, "I'm sorry, but what that man did to us—what he did to our family name?—he all but nearly destroyed us. He—" The Italian shook his head, "When my family's empire was growing, our economic empire, my great grandpa Leonardo named grandpa Romulus heir to it all. And as it is customary, it was his job to oversee the both sides of the family.

"You see the Vargas, at the time, was divided into two, the main branch which includes direct descendants of all the heirs, including all of my grandpa's kids and grandchildren and the side branch. I'd go into detail but there's no point in that really because what you see of the Vargas now is all that's left. Well, us and a handful of others scattered around."

Ludwig couldn't help but snort at the thought of more Vargas wrecking playful havoc around the world.

"And the reason there's so little of us is because a feud broke out between the two factions of our family. It was the main branch versus the side branch, which loved Remus and wanted him to lead the family. We were only kids at the time and didn't really understand what was going on until later.

"For some reason, my grandpa lost control of the family and when Remus took over, he led our family into darkness. He took our family business of smuggling goods and—" Feliciano choked up momentarily and wiped at the tears that had started to collect in his eyes. Clearing his throat, he continued, "H-he…he ruined lives, Ludwig. He forced our family to—t-t-to start smuggling and selling—dio mio, please don't hate me, tesoro—Remus got the family involved in human trafficking."

Feli exhaled slowly as if to calm himself down before speaking again, "Human trafficking…that is one of the most vile things anyone can get involved in and I wish that the Vargas had nothing to do with it but we share the name so that stain in my bloodline will remain forever. Luckily my grandpa found out what was happening and he took back the reins. This caused the feud to get even more violent.

"My grandpa gathered all of his supporters, main branch and some of the side branch, in our vacation home in Italy. Remus took advantage that all his opposers were gathered in one location and he…he sent a hit squad to eliminate us. Only my brothers, a handful of my cousins and I survived. My dad didn't…and neither did Marcello's and Felicia's dad."

This time, Feli did break down. He covered his face with both hands and sobbed violently for a
good moment because there was a sudden break in the film before he stared vacantly at the camera with red rimmed eyes. Ludwig vaguely felt his father wiping at his cheeks with a handkerchief and tilted his head away. He didn't want to be taken care of, not when his poor little fox had no one to wipe his tears away.

"A little while after that," continued Feli in a low voice, "while everyone in the criminal world saw the Vargas rising and rising in power, Grandpa saw the family as it really was, a dying star just waiting to implode on itself. He did something bad afterwards. Well, bad in the eyes of the underworld."

"He went to your dad and uncle Magyar in hopes that they could help him save what little good was left in the Vargas. At the time, your dad and uncle Magyar were big in the government…well, Magyar still is and that's partly in thanks to the deal he arranged with my grandpa…"

Ludwig's eyes widened. He'd read enough mystery novels to know what he beloved was going to say next but it still shocked him.

Feli smiled bitterly, "I know, right? The king of a criminal empire is a snitch. He handed over the names of all the cartels and associates his brother was in business with, and even family members who were more dangerous than they were salvageable. Right now, that may not seem like a lot but if you look at all the paperwork, you'll see that it was actually was. Especially since the main thing he gave them was Remus himself.

"All that was given, in exchange for pardons for the rest of the family's past crimes." Ludwig noticed how Feli visibly tensed as he said, "But the deal went a whole lot deeper than that. Grandpa changed the rules of the game for us…so to speak.

"As I said, the Vargas had climbed to heights unimaginable and had so many crime syndicates under its influence that my grandpa and his friends thought it would be a waste to throw it all away. Not to mention, when you're the keystone to something that big, if you take it away, the keystone won't survive the fall. Also, if said syndicates ever found out what my grandpa had done, we would all have been killed and a civil war would have broken out, involving not just other criminals but civilians as well.

"There was no way that the other syndicates wouldn't figure out that someone in the family had snitched and given who the last man standing was, it wouldn't had been hard to put two and two together. So, my grandpa killed two birds with one stone. Remus was going to die one way or another as punishment for his crimes but it was decided that his death shouldn't be wasted." Feli stopped to lick his lips to moisten them. Ludwig stared at him with wide eyes, already knowing where he was going with this but, like before, knew that as soon as he heard it, it was still going to come as a shock.

Feli looked at the camera directly, "Yes, Luddy, my grandpa shot and killed his brother, but not in cold blood, not to reclaim his birthright, and certainly not for snitching. He did it to save us. He just let everyone else believe that those were his reasons because in our world, power like that isn't given. It has to be taken in order for it be seen as yours."

"I've never lied to you about us, Ludwig. My family are not mobsters…not really. Yes, in the eyes of the underworld and our empire, the Vargas are royalty. They all fear us; after all, a man who wasn't above murdering his own flesh and blood won't blink twice to kill anyone else who defy us. If grandpa says not to traffic humans, they don't traffic humans. If grandpa says not to sell drugs in certain areas, you better believe that they'll risk losing millions instead of losing their loved ones. Not that we ever would hurt innocents but they don’t know that and they won’t risk it either."
"My brother Lovino and Marcello are often doing rounds around the city to make sure the gangs aren't getting too comfortable. And if they are, then Grandpa has them all swept away to prison—discreetly, of course. Seraph, Bernardo, and Oswaldo, they're enforcers. They go around the world to scope out how much trouble the syndicates who are under our rule are making. And it's not just us, remember how I said there were crime syndicates? Well, some of them are friends. Tino, Alfred, and Antonio are loyal to our family and they help us but I'm not going to get into that."

Feliciano shifted in his seat and pulled away his robe enough to expose his tattoo, "I'm next in line to take over my grandpa's position as patriarch of the family, Ludwig. That means one day it's going to be up to me to make the decisions he makes in regards to handling the criminal scum that taint our society. When you think about it, it's kind of cool. Our family crest is a sun. A sun is a star and stars are literally balls of gas reacting with one another, wanting nothing more than to expand and burn everything in its wake. That's the criminal part of our world. The thing holding all that dangerous stuff back is gravity."

He pointed to the V in the center, "And this is our name. We're in the center of it all, we're the gravity but we're disguised as the gas. Does that make sense? No…probably not. I shouldn't have made that comparison because even though our family crest is the sun, we still have other parts to it. My tattoo hasn't been completed and won't be until it's my turn to lead but when I do get it completed, I'm going to have a choice from three brands. One is the sword, the crown, and wolf paw prints." Feli giggled in spite of himself, "Funny…the paw prints hadn't been used since the Genovian Revolution when Vincenzo had Hounds at his command. I guess that's why my grandpa chose to name our group that. Have you ever heard of the Hounds of the Republic?"

Ludwig shook his head as if Feli could see.

"Oh, Luddy…You probably have heard whispers of dog breeds when you're around us or maybe heard it around the hospital. You've definitely heard of Cerberus! That's my three-headed hellhound, heh, my cousins and Ozzie. You know? Ser, Ber, Os? When they're out gathering intel, they report back to grandpa. And if the intel says that a crime group is making too much trouble then a pack of Hounds is dispatched to take care of the issue. It really helps that they are really talented. You have no idea how often idiot young drug lords just invite them into their homes."

"Remember how you asked my brother what he did for a living and you thought he said he worked for the government? That's not really true, Luddy. He doesn't work for them, he works with them. Everyone in my family does, well not my mom, or zia Marzia or Felicia, or Eric, or Fabrezio but everyone in our organization does. You haven't been there yet, amore, but one day I'm going to take you to see V Enterprises. The basements of all three buildings are connected by underground tunnels. They contain so much information, Luddy. So, so much! It's literally the heart of the operations."

Feli's smiled withered to a stern expression, "I hope you understand how important and sensitive all this information is, Ludwig. We have to be very careful; if anyone were to find out that we're the Hounds that has been screwing with their illicit activities, then it won't just be my blood family that will pay the consequences. It'll be every operative out in the field. We aren't mobsters, Ludwig but we pretend to be to keep everyone safe."

"I'm just repeating myself now but I can't stress it enough. I've probably been freaking out lately but it's because, as you can imagine, that's a lot of pressure on me not to screw it up. What this means for us, for you and me, is that there are going to be times where I have to make important decisions and there are going to be times where I'm not just Feli, your dorky fiancé who loves kitties and you and our Alex with everything I've got, but I'm also Feliciano. When I'm Feliciano, I can't be soft. I can't be sweet or—I have to be Don Vargas, the King of the criminal empire. And
know that I would never drag you into this…but now that you know who and what I am, know that there are going to be times where you won't just be my sweet Luddy. You won't be the man who loves dogs and bakes, you're going to be my husband, my queen. People are going to suck up to you in hopes to gain your favor in order to gain mine."

Blushing, Feli looked at Ludwig through his eyelashes, "You do after all, hold more than their future king's ear. And you do, my love. You won't ever have the burden of making decisions but if you have an opinion, I will always hold it above anyone else's. But don't worry, as scary as all that sounds, I promise you, Ludwig." Feliciano reached out towards the camera as if he were trying to touch Ludwig's face through the screen and stared at him so intensely, that Ludwig couldn't help but feel safe and loved and trusting in whatever his beloved was going to say next.

"Ludwig, I will never let anyone harm you or Alex. Never. I'll sooner pick up a gun and put a bullet through their head, pick up my knives and gut them, or rip their throats out with my teeth than let anyone touch you two. You're my family and if that's what it takes to make sure you're safe, I'll do it without question. Ve...that's kind of scary, but for family, I think I'm willing to do that and more."

Ludwig felt a blush on his cheek. His belly ached with all the new-found knowledge…

"Ve, well, I think that about covers it...If you decide that you don't want to marry me after all, assuming I'm not dead—jeez, I really hope I'm not dead—then tell me. I promise I won't hold you back, Ludwig. I just want you to be happy. I love you."

"I love you, too," whispered Ludwig as he reached out to touch Feli's cheek with his finger.

"When I see you next, I'm going to give you lots and lots of hugs and kisses~ I really miss cuddling with you at night but I'm training to get stronger. I'll see you when I get home! Ciao~"

The video stopped and the screen went white, leaving Ludwig staring at the Vargas sun. He glanced up at his father who offered a slight smile. Wolfgang closed the laptop and said, "Now you know."

"Vati…why didn't he say something sooner? Didn't he trust me?"

"He already said, son. What they're doing is one of the most intricate undercover operations in history. It's bigger than the Trojan horse, hell it is a Trojan horse but instead of a small army inside a wooden animal to take down a kingdom, it's a royalty trying to take down its own kingdom without arousing suspicion from its subjects."

"That's...that's pretty dangerous."

"No kidding."

Ludwig shifted in his bed, "Vati, could you leave me alone, please. I need to think about all this."

Wolfgang nodded silently and moved to take the laptop but Ludwig reached out, "Leave it. Please, I need to hear it again." He waited until his father left before replaying the video.

He watched it over and over, he lost track of how many times but each time he heard it, it made him feel a vast of emotions. Underlying the, was the desire to see Feli again, to hold him to talk to him. They needed to discuss so much, clear the air, make up. Arthur would occasionally come in with a tray of food and to check on his wounds but they didn't exchange words.

Berwald came in a little while later and sat in the chair quietly. He watched his brother pace the room and waited for him to ask him anything. When he didn't, Berwald cleared his throat, "Vater,
told m’ that ya know now.”

"Ja," murmured Ludwig as he finally took a seat on the window sill. He pulled his legs towards his chest and nodded, "I know."

"Hn." Berwald crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, "They aren't bad people, Lud."

"Aren't they, though? Don't they kill people who they think are dangerous? Don't they do bad things in the name of safety? How are they any better than the people they are seeking to protect us from?"

Berwald waited a moment before answering, "They're not. Don't misunderstand, they’re not heroes. They're not saints and they're not normal government officials. As a matt'r of a fact, as far as society knows, th' Hounds of th' Republic don't exist. Not to th' ones that matter at least. Th' ones who should be scared of them know and they cower behind th' Vargas thinkin' that they’re protecting them." Berwald smirked in a way Ludwig had never seen before, as if he'd figured something out that he himself was still trying to.

Ludwig closed his eyes and thought hard. He wasn't stupid…maybe naïve. Maybe…maybe the way he was still clinging onto something that wasn't letting him. His skin tingled where Berwald was suddenly touching his knee and he glanced up to see that his brother had taken a seat across from him.

"I know what yer thinkin', Luddy. I had those same thoughts too when Tino told me what he did."

"What did he do?"

"His bloodline has incredible eyesight. Always have. Like hawks. Their family were merc’naries."

"Hitmen?"

"…Hn."

"They became friends with th' Vargas when a young Genovia was at war for its independence. They were loyal even after what Romulus did what he did ta protect his family. I didn't understand that loyalty, not at first. It was th' cause of so many arguments between Tino 'n me."

Ludwig glanced at the scars on Berwald's neck then blushed when his brother started to unbutton his dark blue shirt, "What are you doing?"

Berwald ignored him and stood up straighter to unbuckle his pants just enough to expose his hips. Ludwig stared. His brother's chest was mired with scars of various sizes. The one from his neck went all the way down to his left pectoral and there were even a few surrounding the imperial eagle tattooed onto his ribs. At his hips though, was a tattoo that Ludwig hadn't known his brother had. It was a crescent moon in a filigree design with a small silhouette of a bird flying towards it. Or rather, what was left of it.

The older Beilschmidt snorted softly, "Th' guy Tino was sent to kill was an Italian mob lord who was selling weapons to a terrorist group that the Americans were fighting. I went along with him because I know that Tino...sometimes felt funny after killing especially after his pack dismantled. It's not easy t' take a life even if ya are trained ta do so."

"I thought you guys said that your base was bombed."

Berwald shook his head, "I was captured and tortured. Not fer information but…because of who
Tino was and who he was associated with. They did it because I was in love with him and he was in love with me. I don't remember much but I know that Romulus sent his grandsons to rescue us.

"Lovino?"

"Nh, he sent Cerberus. Tino was discharged from th' military and debriefed from th' organization."

"What's your point, bruder? You never talk too much without reason."

"My point is that being with Feliciano won't be easy. People will want to hurt you ta hurt him; I wouldn't blame ya fer ending things."

"I could get mugged in the street, Berwald. That's not really the part that is bothering me at this point."

"It's th' morality of things, isn't it?"

"It's just—how can you look the other way? Is that what I'm supposed to do, to? Look the other way? Smile and pretend that I don't know what my husband and his family does at night while we're at parties or when we're watching movies with our son?"

"Ya have to look at the bigger picture. There is no such thing as black and white when it comes to justice."

Ludwig scoffed, "Justice? That's what you people are calling it? Berwald, justice isn't dealt by vigilantes or former mobsters in the dark. It's what the legal system is for, what cops and authorities of the law are for."

"You don't get it, Luddy," said Gilbert from the doorway. He entered and closed it quickly while the new officer taking watch over Feli switched with the former. Gilbert dragged the chair over to his two younger brothers and sat in it backwards, "Do you know how hard it is to get things that stick in order to bring down tyrant mobsters? Do you know how many cops and politicians they own? If we tried to go about this the moral way, it would've taken more than one lifetime to accomplish what they have in just twenty years. And for god sakes, Ber, cover up. The last thing we need is a riot of residents trying their hand at a piece of your hot bod."

Berwald blushed furiously and quickly buttoned back up. Ludwig rolled his eyes, "How is that right though? If the way they go about getting things...they're not innocent."

"No, they're not. As a matter of a fact, they can be the most ruthless monsters in existence with the way they handle things," said Gilbert seriously. He looked into Ludwig's eyes, "But they're our monsters, our Hounds. Everything they do, they do for us and this nation and everyone else. No, I won't romanticize the fact that they're technically villains or that they sometimes use methods that would be frowned upon in civilized society. But I will say that sometimes it takes people like them to fight the fights average guys like you and me can't take care of."

"We can't tell ya what t' think," said Berwald as he finished fixing his clothes, "that's something ya got t' figure out yerself."

"Ber is right, west. We can't force our ideology on you. Ultimately, you're going to have to make a decision. This isn't fair to Feli either; if you're going to cut him off, you have to do it now so that you can both start healing. But if you do choose to stay with him..."

Ludwig nodded, "I know. I know that he needs me to pull him out of the darkness."
"What? No, it's not your job to do anything you don't want to and it most certainly isn't your job to take care of him. It isn't your responsibility to pull him away from the darkness."

"But I love him," whispered Ludwig and suddenly something clicked into place. All the stuff he'd been fussing over…it didn't matter anymore because ultimately, it boiled down to a singular thing. He was in love with him.

He was in love with Feliciano Vargas.

Ludwig thought to the night of the shooting and realized how Feli had thrown caution to the wind and allowed a slice of the monster he was so afraid of to come through to protect him and Lilly. He'd risked his mental well being to assure that his loved ones were safe and, now that they were, he was certain that Feli was starting to allow the gravity of what he'd done simmer in his mind. Unlike himself, Feli had become a doctor out of his own free will. He took a vow never to kill and now that he had, it must be killing him.

He remembered memories of Feli's smiling face and of all the times he'd made him laugh and the time when he soothed him after finding out about Natalya. Every other moment filled his mind as well. The small smile he'd get when he saw their patient getting better. The mist that would cloud his beautiful eyes when they lost one. The way he genuinely cared for each and every single patient that crossed their path, always remembering their name and every little detail they cared to share.

He remembered the pain he felt when Feli started to regress into his depression at the thought of losing everything he'd work for and the man he'd become despite the horrors his family had gone through and despite knowing what his future had in store for him. Ludwig tried to imagine how terrible it must feel to know that the man you desperately wanted to be, and the man you have to be, are two sides of a coin which he then had to try to keep balanced so that no one side will ever topple over the other, but knew that there is always the chance that one day it could. Would.

Oh god, and Feli, bless his Feli. Feli, who despite feeling that way, always smiled at him. He always looked at him and Alex and their friends and family with a glow in his eyes because he probably thought that even if he were to change, that Ludwig would still love him. Just like Ludwig always said he would.

Just like he promised he would.

Ludwig gasped, his eyes now filling with tears again. He barely felt Gilbert and Berwald reach out to him as he doubled over with grief. What had he done? How could he have said those terrible things to his angel? Oh, god.

No, it wasn't his responsibility to make sure Feli didn't change. He didn't have to stick around but he wanted to. He wanted to be there and stand beside Feliciano. He wanted to make sure that his beloved never felt like he didn't have somebody who cared, not out of responsibility or because they were related, but because they chose to.
Everybody's Fool

Chapter Summary

Everything has led to this moment. Just when they thought the worst has come to past, Ludwig and Feliciano encounter the worst.

Chapter Notes

Even though they are the same person, there is a difference between Feli and Feliciano.

April 8, 2014; 7 Weeks After the Shooting

“The world looks so funny when you’re seeing it from the very top a fifty story building,” slurred Feliciano to the man perched on the ledge next to him as he took a generous gulp from his wine bottle. Some of it dripped down his chin but he wiped it away on his sleeve. He glanced at the solemn man who was robotically toying with his own bottle. The man stared at the wine drops staining his jacket with an eye housing dying embers of the light that was once lit with joy. Feliciano rolled his eye and nodded to the unsuspecting people below, “Everyone moves with purpose.”

He chuckled dryly before his gaze twisted with cold anger and shouted, “Completely ignorant of all the shit done to keep them safe. Such stupid and ungrateful peasants! My heart holds no love for them anymore.”

“Mine does,” whispered the man next to him. He shifted in his seat on the ledge only to pull his legs into his chest, “Despite what has happened...how angry I may be, I still love them. All of them.”

“And that is precisely what makes you weak; why you now see yourself in the position you are in.” Feliciano mirrored his pose and took another gulp before pointing at every random car, “Do you think they love you? They? Or they?”

Tumbling on the edge, he caught sight of V Enterprises. His grip tightened around the bottle as he nodded pointedly to his family name on top of the building, “How about them, huh? After what they’ve done to us, do you think they share the same feelings?”

“Stop,” whispered the man next to him as he fought back tears.

“Why? I’m only speaking the truth. They don’t love you. No one loves you.” Feliciano kneeled on the ledge and crawled closer to the man, his eyes softening as he reached out to brush his cheek, stopping by the wall only they could see. Still, he calmed his voice to soothe, “No, I lie. There are still a couple who love you. One was ripped from your arms, stolen from us by cruel events that were not of your hand but by theirs.”
Feliciano watched as the man gasped in agony and lost control of his tears from his words. He smiled gently and leaned forward, “But where he cannot be here to provide comfort in these dark times, I am. I love you as I always have and always will. I would never turn from you even when others do.”

The man turned his face from Feliciano’s gaze, only for it to slowly return as if someone was forcing him to meet his eye. Feliciano stared back, “Even if you cast me aside, I will never leave. You’ve tried that once. Remember? Aren’t you glad I stayed?”

“What do I do?” Feliciano said nothing as he thought; his answer only a glance at the ground below the building.

“You,” the man licked his dry lips, “You want me to jump?”

“We to jump. Obviously, I would jump with you.”

“Why?”

“Why not? What purpose does life hold now when everything we have strived for has been stripped away?”

Sniffing, the man finished off his drink and tossed it behind him, wiping his mouth and face on his knee, wincing when he applied too much pressure onto his still healing face. Everything that had happened in the past few weeks clouded his mind making it murky and the feeling dripped down into his chest.

As much as the man hated Feliciano for his poisonous words tainting his withering resolve, his putrid hatred towards himself was beginning to fester in his heart for allowing it to begin with. He had a point. He was nothing anymore. He didn’t mean a damn thing to anyone but, as it would seem, to the voice purring such thoughts in his impressionable ear.

“There is nothing keeping us here, my love,” whispered Feliciano as he moved, tried in vain to get closer, “but heartache and the agony that comes with knowing that those who’ve claimed to love you don’t and that the one who you trusted to keep your heart safe doesn’t want you either.”

The man’s lips trembled and before he knew it, his whole body was shaking as he shook his head saying weakly, “You’re wrong.”

“Am I? Tell me, then, where is he?” He stood slowly. The man looked at the streets below with teary eyes before turning to the Vargas tower, then to the hospital as he too stood, his arms extending outward in a reflection of what his companion was doing.

Fat teardrops rolled down his cheek as he trembled with the thought of what he was about to do, “But he does love me. He told me he does.”

“Where is he then?”

“He said he’ll be right back,” whimpered the man.

“He said that hours ago and he’s still not back.” Feliciano sighed, “He lied to us. He’s no better than the rest of the fucking bastards that don’t deserve your tears. You deserve more. Jump.”

The man sobbed silently as he turned his face towards the night sky for an answer to his troubles different from the one being offered by the monster beside him, only to find it in the same state as his mind and heart. Clouded and void of starlight.
6 weeks prior; February 28, 2014

After his talk with Ludwig, Feli had rushed past Matthew and straight into his room where he buried himself underneath his covers. Matthew had immediately started to fuss over him but when he was met with shuddering breaths, he figured that perhaps it was best to leave Feli alone.

Feliciano stayed under the covers despite how uncomfortably hot he was. On the other side of the wall he could hear Ludwig’s heartbroken sobs and he had to force himself to keep from running back to him.

‘It’s better this way,’ cooed the voice, now taking a horrible resemblance to his own, ‘That two timing bastard doesn’t deserve you.’

“But I love him so much,” whimpered Feliciano as he pulled the covers closer to himself.

‘Tch.’

“H-how…why did this have to happen?” Feli gingerly touched the wounds on his face, his cheeks pulsing under his finger pads while he ran his other hand over the bullet wound he had on his chest. They were starting to hurt more than he had the tolerance for, so he reached out and gave himself a few pumps of morphine. Maybe if he was lucky, it would help numb the pain in his heart as well.

It didn’t.

A sudden broken moan escaped him as he tried to go to sleep and the voice echoed in his mind once again. In an almost loving tone, it whispered, ‘Don’t cry, Feli. I’m here for you. I’m here for you; you don’t need him.’

“But I—”

‘Shh,’ drawled the voice, and Feli couldn’t help but blush. Maybe it was the morphine—no, it definitely was the damn morphine; what the hell had he been thinking taking it?—but Feli couldn’t help but be comforted by the voice. And, again it probably was the morphine taking affect, but he could’ve sworn he felt his hair being gently combed through with fingers.

Oh god, was he hallucinating the feel of someone touching him? He was already hearing things that weren’t there…

‘Shh,’ said the voice again, this time as if it were right in his ear. Feli allowed himself to be swept up in the chemically induced warmth spreading through his body as the voice sang to him softly, ‘…turn your face away from the garish light of day; turn your thoughts away from cold unfeeling light…’

No, wait this was wrong! He shouldn’t have used the damn morphine, not when he was obviously suffering some sort of remission. Feli shivered in discomfort and tried to get up, but his body felt as if something were sitting on him. Feli grimaced; that wasn’t what morphine was supposed to make you feel. He whimpered again, his eyes turning to the vitals machine.

Everything was fine.

‘Don’t fret, it’s ok. You were in pain, so you took some morphine. Matthew wouldn’t have hooked it up to you if you weren’t allowed to take some.’
Feli relaxed a little, “...I suppose you’re right.”

‘Of course I am. I am you after all.’

“No, you’re not,” slurred Feli quietly before finally succumbing to his sleep. A few hours must’ve gone by before he was roused awake again, though this time it was by Ludwig shouting through the door, begging him to let him in or at least talk to him. Feli had only pulled the covers closer to himself and stayed silent. He didn’t press the morphine button again.

The next morning, Tino came in to check up on him with a breakfast tray. He smiled brightly, “Good morning, sunshine~”

“...What’s so good about it,” croaked Feli before wincing. He took a cup of water from Tino and drowned it down in a single gulp.

“Well, today is the day Alex gets to come see you. It’s only going to be for a few minutes but it’s better than nothing, right?” Tino pulled out fresh bandages to change the other’s out while Feli pulled off the cover on his breakfast tray. He glanced up and his smile slowly disappeared when he took in his friend’s appearance.

Feli’s eye was red and puffy as if he’d spent the better part of his night crying and his cheeks looked like they had swelled up again. Tino reached out and covered Feli’s hand with his own, “What happened? I didn’t see Matthew but...did things go alright with Ludwig?”

At the mention of last night, Feli felt himself tear up again. Tino immediately pushed the tray away and pulled him in for a hug, “What happened?”

“He blames me,” whispered Feli miserably.

“What?”

“He blames me and I don’t blame him for doing so. This is my fault.”

Tino frowned, “No, it—”

“I know it’s not my fault but it’s my fault! It’s because of who I am that this happened. I don’t know why it did but it did and now I’ve lost him, Tino. I lost my Luddy!”

“Did you tell him?”

Feli shook his head, “I didn’t get a chance. He yelled at me and said horrible things and then I got upset and yelled back.”

“Oh, Feli…”

“What am I going to do?”

‘Forget him,’ offered the voice, and Feli groaned as he pulled away from Tino to grip his head tightly. The voice sniggered, ‘That won’t get me out you know.’

“Tino, please call Oswaldo and tell him that I need my medication. I’m—”

“Are you hearing things,” asked Tino, his face now a mask of genuine concern. He gasped, “Is that why you apologized to me yesterday? Were you talking to it?” When Feli nodded, Tino was quick to make note of it in his chart, “Ok. I’m going to go over and ask Elizabeta what she thinks the best combination of medicine I should put you on. I need you to keep taking these antibiotics to keep
your chest wound and eye from getting infected. And your bones are mending so I recommend this here for the pain.”

“I rather not hear voices or relapse further in my depression, Tino…”

“You need to see a psychiatrist, Feli. I don’t know much about those kinds of drugs but don’t worry. I’ll call it in and we’ll see what we can do for you.”

“Just give me what I was taking before. Make the other stuff work around it.”

Tino hesitated, “Er, Feli, you know it doesn’t work like tha—”

“I know how it works,” growled Feliciano, this time not looking a bit sorry for snapping. He glared at his friend, “I’m still a doctor despite being in this damn bed. I don’t want to relapse. I can’t afford to.”

“The pain is being controlled right now, though. If you come off, I can’t guarantee you that you’ll like what you’re feeling. Plus I’m not so sure what will happen if ya mix that stuff with the antibiotics you’re on…”

“My mental health is more important right now.”

“All your health is important,” countered Tino before sighing. “Fine, I’ll see what I can do. Other than that, how are you feeling?”

Feli sighed and stared up to the ceiling, “Terrible. Ludwig hates me. And from the sound of things, the city hates me too.” He didn’t mention that he was starting to hate himself as well.

Clicking his pen in and out a few times, Tino studied Feli carefully before sighing again and setting his things aside to pull out his contact lenses. He blinked his violet eyes a few times and laid at the foot of bed tiredly, “I hated myself too. I hated myself for a long time.”

“…Ve?”

With a small smile, Tino glanced up at Feli and said, “I hated myself for loving Berwald. Believe it or not so did Matthew. Well, for loving Gilbert but you get the idea.”

“Did they get hurt?”

“Oh boy, did they. Berwald went with me on my mission to assassinate Versocci a few years ago and they caught and tortured him.” Tino’s eyes hardened dangerously, “But not because they wanted information. No, they did it because they knew that would hurt me a lot more than any of their torture methods.”

“Why was he even there?”

“Your grandpa sent him. Ah! Before ya get mad, you should know that he only sent him because, after my pack had fallen apart, I didn’t have a spotter anymore and he knew I had really violent tendencies when allowed…well, sometimes I got caught in the blood lust.” Tino said that last bit quietly, “Knowing Teddy was with me was enough to make me control that and to just do my job and put a bullet through that asshole’s head instead of doing something stupid. Didn’t quite work out that way, though.”

“Is that...Berwald didn’t always talk that way, did he?”
“No. I mean he’s getting better, a lot better actually, but I still feel bad about it. The whole thing was rough on him and, well, the guilt was terrible for me. I mean, I never asked for us to fall in love with each other.”

Tino wiped at a tear at the corner of his eye, “But you know what happened after? He worked so hard to get better and he said that he was happy that we’d both made it out alive. Then we started working together and planning our wedding.”

“And he was fine with the whole marrying into a family of hitmen?”

“Ah…no, not exactly. He wasn’t very happy that I was loyal to you guys either but that was before my mission to take out that mob lord. My teddy bear was hesitant to believe that anything good could come out of being associated with ex mobsters and then I had to remind him that our friendship dates back to Frigga and Vincenzo even before they fought side by side under the Genovian flag. Plus, Christopher was friends with them both so, in a way, the Beilschmidts would’ve been associated with the Vargas regardless. Hehe, it’s kind of heartwarming if you think about it. It’s like we were all destined to be together.”

“How did you stop feeling bad about yourself?”

“Mm…well, mostly I had to focus on the other part of me and nurture it. It took a while but I learned to love myself and with that my love for Berwald actually grew stronger. The guilt I harbored and all the self-loathing slowly went away, but I suppose what really helped was knowing that Berwald was waiting for me on the other side.”

Feli glanced down at his hands, “Yeah, that must be nice.”

“Hey.”

“…hm?”

Tino sat up in order to look at his friend in the eye, “Ludwig loves you so much, Feli. I saw him go from a teen to a man and I know that he’s flawed, all those silly Beilschmidts are. As smart as they are, they can be stubborn as mules. Berwald thinks he’s a Viking just because somewhere down the line he had a Swedish grandmother. And don’t even get me started on Gilbert.”

Tino giggled to himself before sighing, “Give each other a chance, Feli. I know he hurt you but you hurt him too—” He raised a hand to silence Feliciano’s protests and gave him a stern look, “Even if you didn’t want to. I know how fights work. I’m married to a Viking remember? And as much as Berwald loves me and I him, sometimes, and this isn’t a pleasant thing to hear, but sometimes when we’re hurt, it’s in our nature to make the ones who hurt us, hurt too. Even if that someone is that someone we hold very close to our hearts.

“Now, I’m not saying that’s healthy, because it’s not, but it happens. And when it does, the best thing you can do is make it better and try your damn hardest not to let something like that happen ever again.”

Feli felt his friend give his knee a comforting squeeze, “You both made mistakes, but don’t hold on to your anger in the way so many people often do. It will only fester and sour to the point where it becomes poisonous to everyone involved. Just think about what I said, ok?” Tino gathered his things and moved the food tray back to Feliciano before taking his leave, leaving the Italian to reflect over his words.

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Later that afternoon, Oswaldo held Alex’s hand in his as they rode the elevator up, the little boy shaking with excitement to finally see his father. Ozzie smiled down at him and gently squeezed his hand. When the elevator stopped, the duo stepped out and he ushered Alex towards Feli’s room.

The cop standing guard stood up, “I’m sorry but he can’t—”

“We have permission to see him,” interrupted Oswaldo. He showed him the necessary paperwork and the cop stood down. Smiling down at Alex he nudged him inside, “Go on, kiddo. I’ll be there in a bit.” He watched Alex go inside before turning to the cop, “You playing the cop pretty well there, Beagle.”

Beagle smirked, “You and your brothers ain’t the only ones who are good at acting.”

“Did you find anything? Are they going to bring Ivan into the country?”

“Not yet. Unfortunately the fuckers don’t think his name on the box where the drugs were found is enough to bring him in.”

Oswaldo sighed, “Fuck.”

“I take it that the other boxes were picked up in the chaos?”

Nodding, Ozzie rubbed the back of his neck, “I don’t know how the hell it happened. The Hounds didn’t even see who moved the product.”

“Guess that means that you guys are going to have to interrogate the ones the prince wounded after all.”

“Yeah.”

“Are they well enough?”

“They’re getting there. We’ll have to do it after Feli’s trial.”

Beagle smiled, “Well, it shouldn’t be that bad. Kid did it in self-defense. He’ll be fine.”

“Yeah.” The two men watched as Ludwig emerged from his room with the help of his brothers and made his way over to Feli’s room. Oswaldo reached out to hug him, “Hey, I’m sorry I haven’t been by to check up on you. I’ve been pretty busy with—”

“I know, Oz,” said Ludwig with a small smile, “I know. Can I see him?”

“Er, he’s with Alex right now. I think you should give them a few minutes.”

“Why?”

“They need to discuss a few things, Luddy. You’ll get your turn soon enough.”

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Alexander stood at the doorway until Feli noticed that he was there, “Hey, papa.” He placed his bumble bee plush on the small table before crawling onto the hospital bed with his father, not missing how he immediately covered his eye as if to spare him the gruesome sight. The boy frowned, “You don’t need to hide it.”
“Ve~ I’ll have a new one soon enough.” Feli brought his hand down at his son’s insistent tugging. Something soft brushed near his eyebrow and it took him only a minute to figure out that Alex had placed an eye patch over his socket.

“There,” he chirped proudly before settling back down to lay his head on the Italian’s chest, “Now we can both be pirates.” He took off his prosthetic arm wiggled his stump, “You can be the Captain and I’ll be your trusty First Mate.”

Mentally frowning in confusion, it took yet another minute to realize what Alex was talking about. Tensing, Feli echoed softly, “Pirates.”

“That’s right.”

“But pirates are bad aren’t they?”

“We’ll be good pirates but the bad ones don’t have to know. That way we can go in and out without them knowing. We save lots and lots of lost boys and girls like that! Uncle Ozzie told me so.”

Feli watched how Alexander’s blue eyes glittered happily at the prospect of helping others. So Oswaldo told him...he was going to have to thank him later. He raised his arm up so that Alex could snuggle into his side, “You know.”

Picking at the button of Feli’s pajama top, Alex nodded “Uncle Ozzie explained things to me. He said that he didn’t want you to stress over telling both Vati and me.” He glanced up to meet his dad’s eye, “I’m not scared of you. I still love you and I want you to be my papa. I don’t care what the news lady says ‘cause I know you won’t let anything happen to us.”

Feli tightened his arm around his son, “I won’t let anything happen to you, Alex. I promise.”

The two started talking about school and Alex proudly told him how he got an A plus on his essay about stars and how the teacher even asked him to read it in front of the class. He’d been nervous because of the other students but when he was finished reading, Daniel had clapped very loudly for him and soon the others joined in. That of course had steered the conversation to how Danny and Sammy’s dads were thinking about pulling them out of school so that they could be homeschooled.

Alex sleepily nuzzled against Feli’s chest, “Why are they going to be homeschooled, papa?”

“Well, normally our family start training their children at a young age. I didn’t think that Alfred wanted for the boys to do that but I guess I was wrong.”

“So, instead of learning math and reading, he learns how to fight?”

Feli laughed softly and combed his fingers through Alex’s hair, “Nothing like that. It’s more like, you learn everything like at normal school, but you also learn how to defend yourself. You also learn more languages, and other things that will help you survive and blend in with your surroundings.”

“Oh. Papa?”

“Hm?”

“Were you homeschooled?”

“Yes, I was but I don’t really remember much of it. You’re uncles Cerberus, Lovino, Francis,
Marcello, and Antonio were all homeschooled too. Then when they graduated, they went out for their Agoge where the organization picked them up and then they were schooled again at the Ludus Canis. That’s what they call the school for what we do."

“And then you become puppies,” murmured Alex before finally dozing off next to Feli who smiled at his soon to be son’s simple view of the world. He glanced over to the door at the sound of its knob twisting and tensed when he saw that it was Ludwig on the other side.

‘Fuck, not this asshole again,’ hissed the voice, ‘tell him to fuck off. Don’t let him near you, he’s only going to hurt you. You know he will.’

“H-hello,” said Feli quietly as he tried his hardest to ignore the voice. Hell, where were they on getting him his medication?

Ludwig rubbed his hands nervously, “May I sit with you?”

Feli nodded silently and scooted over on his bed, taking Alex with him. Ludwig carefully climbed on. He tried to hold them both but there wasn’t enough room to do it comfortably so he settled for lying on his side. He glanced down at Feli but he stared straight ahead. Tentatively, he reached out for his hand, “Please don’t ignore me, liebling.”

“They gave you the ring, then,” said Feli softly, allowing Ludwig to hold his hand. He gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“Ja. I watched everything and then my brothers talked to me.”

“…what’s the verdict?”

“I love you.” Ludwig brought Feli’s hand to his lips, “Prince of crime or not, I love you. I’m sorry, I should’ve trusted you. I didn’t—”

Feli’s lips tilted downward as he shook his head, “No, I should’ve told you sooner. I shouldn’t have said the things I did. I was asking too much of you given the circumstances, and the last thing I want is to manipulate you into staying with me. Even if it is unintentional.”

“No. No, you weren’t. You were only asking me what I promised I’d give you. I’m the one who should be sorry, liebe. I never should’ve yelled at you.”

Smiling weakly, the conversation Feliciano had with Ludwig the night he found out about Natalya came flooding back into the Italian’s mind. He repeated the words Ludwig had said to him then, “It wasn’t anything I didn’t deserve. I put you in danger.”

“You didn’t put the drugs there.”

“No.”

Ludwig buried his face in Feli’s hair, “I’m sorry for ever doubting you.”

“I’m sorry, too, tesoro. I’m so sorry,” whimpered Feli. He shifted on the bed and curled into Ludwig’s chest, mindful of both of their wounds, “I’m sorry. I should’ve told you sooner.”

Ludwig carefully lifted Feli’s face by his chin and kissed his tears away, “I forgive you. I don’t understand completely, and I won’t lie when I say that I may not agree with how things are done but I do know that I love you. That’s all that matters.” He pulled away enough to look at him, “Feli, I want to be with you.”
“…But?”

Shaking his head, Ludwig gave him a small smile, “No buts. I want to be with you; if you’ll have me that is.” He shifted again to let Feli turn his head to look at him properly, his eyes meeting his and something in his chest felt cold at Feli’s sudden silence. Had he said something wrong? He’d gone over what he wanted to say again and again in his mind just a few minutes ago.

Ludwig looked into Feli’s eye, in an effort to decipher what he was thinking. The near golden iris stared back and—well, if Ludwig’s chest felt cold before, it was as if his heart had been cast to the arctic when he saw how Feli’s eye didn’t shine as it usually did. Had this been his doing?

Feli sighed heavily as he shook his head, “No, Ludwig. It doesn’t work that way.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“I mean that you don’t have to ask me if I’ll have you. Of course I’ll have you, but knowing what you know about me—”

“I don’t care,” interrupted Ludwig quickly in fear that Feliciano was really going to try to break things off this time.

“Knowing what you know about me,” repeated Feli, “ask yourself, and really think about it, amore mio, do you want to be involved in something like that? And don’t stay because you feel responsible for me. Stay because you like how I make you feel.” Glancing down at the sleeping boy in his arms, Feli corrected himself, “How we make you feel.”

Ludwig’s answer was in the form of a kiss. He kissed Feli’s hand and carefully kissed his bruised cheeks before kissing his nose and finally his lips.

Feli tilted his head to meet the kiss, “I’m sorr—”

“Shh, it’s…We’ll get through this.”

“It won’t be like before…”

“I know that, Feli, and I don’t want it to be. Before, there were secrets between us; now there isn’t. I don’t want us to keep anything from each other ever again.”

“Ok.”

Ludwig murmured against his skin, “Promise me, Feliciano.” He pulled away again from his little fox, “Promise me you won’t hide from me anymore. No matter how dark or scary or terrible it may be, don’t hide anything from me.”

“I promise.”

“Thank you. And no matter how hard the tide works against us, I won’t let you go, not again.”

Despite what the voice told him, Feli allowed himself to believe in Ludwig’s words. He shifted Alex in his arms so that he could press himself closer to Ludwig. They cuddled for a moment before Feli broke the silence again, “I’m not feeling well. I feel…bad.”

“Does something hurt?” Ludwig was quick to go over everything he ever learned when treating gunshot wounds and the ailments someone waking from a coma may have.

Feli saw this and chuckled softly, “No, not like that. I mean, I feel bad as in tired. I think that we
should go away after all this is over; maybe to Italy?"

Alex whimpered in his sleep and Ludwig reached down to smooth his hair, “What about Alex?”

“He’ll come with us, obviously. I need to see if we can expedite the adoption process.”

“Is that allowed?”

“Typically no, but…”

“Who can say no to a Vargas,” said Ludwig with a small smile, feeling rather happy when Feliciano returned it wholeheartedly. The small family enjoyed another few precious moments of peace. Feli finally allowed himself to give into the pain medicine Matthew had given him earlier and fell asleep listening to Ludwig’s heartbeat instead of the voice whispering in his ear.

Oswaldo came in an hour later to collect Alex and smiled at the sight of his family curled together in a blissful sleep. The back of his throat thickened as he thought of how badly things could’ve gone. He still didn’t forgive his grandpa, or dad for that matter, for what had happened in the bakery, but he’d count his blessings that everything had worked out in the end.

He glanced at the eyepatch over his angel’s eye before shaking his head. There was no reason for that to have happened but there wasn’t much he could do about it now. As quietly as he could, he leaned over to kiss Feli on the forehead and whispered an almost silent, *Ti amo*, before picking Alex up. Ludwig shifted and pulled Feliciano closer to him and Ozzie couldn’t help but smile at that. He hesitated a moment before kissing Ludwig’s forehead as well and whispered, “*Ti voglio bene, fratello.*”

It wasn’t long after he took his leave that Matthew came in to usher Ludwig back to his own room before the new officer taking watch over Feli arrived. And over the course of the following week, Ludwig had become a thorn in Cassandra and every other officer’s side. His brothers had never seen the man complain and snap as much as he had when he learned that Feliciano wasn’t allowed any more visitors until after he posted bail. Lovino had come in to visit him once with Bernardo and the spitfire of an Italian had actually smirked with pride at some of the colorful things Ludwig had said.

When both he and Feliciano had been deemed well enough to go home, it only got worse.

It hadn’t taken long for Cassandra to come back and handcuff Feliciano; hell, she did it as soon as the last button on his shirt had been buttoned. He’d been roughly pushed forward against the wall, his face only being spared being crushed against the glass because he managed to duck his forehead down. And once again, Matthew and Tino had been forced to hold Lovino back, though this time their respective spouses were ready to do the same to them. They were after all, still very loyal Hounds despite having been domesticated.

Ludwig had been processing some paperwork with Jessica downstairs when the elevators dinged to signal that its passengers were ready to exit. He gasped, “Feli? What’s the meaning of this, detective?!”

“That’s exactly what I want to know,” muttered Lovino from beside him. He had also been taking care of Feliciano’s paperwork when he saw that his brother was being dragged out. Taking his receipt and a bagful of things Feli would need for homecare, Lovino stepped onto Cassandra’s path, “What the hell are you doing? It was agreed that he was going to be taken through the back and delivered in either one of the family cars or an ambulance so that the vultures outside wouldn’t get him on camera.”
“Those are not my orders,” said Cassandra smoothly. She pulled Feliciano roughly forward and made her way towards the doors.

“Lovino, do something,” hissed Ludwig as he watched his beloved’s rough treatment. When he didn’t get an answer he secured his crutch and attempted to reach them but Lovino held him back, “What—”

“We can’t make a scene in front of the cameras. Don’t worry; we have Hounds stationed around the premises to make sure that some asshat doesn’t try anything funny.”

“But this can’t be good for him emotionally.”

“Yeah, but that’s what he has you for. Grandpa posted bail already; this is just procedure or whatever, just a little something so that the public sees that he’s not getting special treatment.” Lovino motioned for a wheelchair to be brought out and put on his sunglasses.

“I don’t need that.”

“I know. It was Daniel’s idea though. That guy may be as perverted as Elizabeta but I’ll give it to him that he knows how to work the crowd. Said that seeing Feli’s fiancé, the city’s golden boy, in a vulnerable state may change the public’s opinion on him.”

Ludwig immediately sat in it and allowed Lovino to roll him out, “What do you guys care about public opinion? Feliciano is more concerned about being painted as a murderer than what the city thinks of him.”

“Idiot,” muttered, Lovi as he pushed the wheelchair closer to the door, “that’s one in the same. This wouldn’t have been an issue but there is a child on the line.”

It dawned on Ludwig and as soon as it did he felt like, as Lovi said, an idiot, “Alex.”

“Si.”

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One week later; March 14, 2014

It hadn’t been an easy thing to do, being processed. As a matter of fact, Feliciano was sure, no positive, that the guys who had processed him might have had been on Collin’s payroll because the entire ordeal had been more humiliating and emotionally draining than it should’ve been. His mob blood had threatened to resurface but he tried his best to suppress it. Also, Daniel had told him not to say anything that would make him look worse. After the walk of shame Cassandra had forced on him, more things on the media had surfaced. Images of him handcuffed and being led through the crowd had been featured on nearly every magazine in Victrola, if not all of Genovia with headlines stating that he was some kind of drug lord.

Daniel had assured him that he could place in a suit for slandering his good name but Feli declined, ‘The people are entitled to their opinion of me even if it is a stupid opinion,’ he’d said. The Hungarian grinned and smacked his client on the back with a hearty laugh before launching into an explanation as to how they were going to go about his case. Feli smiled and nodded as Daniel assured him that he had nothing to worry about.

Of course, Ludwig didn’t believe that Feliciano was taking it all in stride. Despite what Feli said, he would find him awake at night in the living room watching the news with Gino or Johan in his
lap. He'd stare miserably at the large screen, listening to strangers debate his motives and how he was following his ancestor’s footsteps. But Ludwig suspected that the segments that really ate at Feli’s heart were the ones who would focus on the weeping families of the men he’d killed who swore that they were good boys and standup citizens of society.

Oh, and as if that hadn’t been enough, they were also dragging his cousins into their shit storm. And boy did that really enrage Feliciano. It was one thing to sully his name but now they were trying to do the same with Felicia and Eric. Rumors surrounding their success started to spread and things really got nasty when questions came up in regards to how Felicia had gotten the role of Christine.

“She got it by not sounding like a god damn toad,” snarled Marcello when he was caught by a reporter as he was trying to get into his Den of Iniquity before shutting the door in the reporter’s face. Thankfully, the company had stood by their two stars and simply told any and all who asked to go see the opening show so that they could see for themselves why Felicia had gotten the lead role.

It had been just as difficult for Alex at school. Ludwig had halfway expected to get a call from the principle but it had actually been Alfred who had gotten one. Apparently, Danny had punched a kid for bullying Alexander and saying mean things about the Vargas. Alfred had been so damn proud of his son that he took him and Sammy to the pound to pick up a dog. Arthur wasn’t as obvious with his approval but there had been a certain gleam of pride in his eyes when he stared down the bully’s father.

The two couples met up at the park afterwards so that the children could play with the newest addition to the Kirkland-Jones clan. Feli sat on the bench in between Arthur and Ludwig and stared ahead while his fiancé and Alfred talked about the upcoming trial.

Arthur reached out for Feli’s hand, “How are you holding up, mate?”

Feli wanted to say that he felt numb, sick, angry, sad, and anxious. That he felt like he was on a damn roller coaster that was doing the loops in reverse at a speed that was faster than what should legally be possible. That he was scared, so very scared but instead he smiled and said, “I’m fine. We’re thinking of pushing for Alex’s adoption to go by faster so that we can go to Italy.”

“That sounds like a splendid idea. I think Alex would love to see your home country.”

Feli smiled and turned back to look at his son to be throw a ball at Berlitz when a flash went off followed by a few more. A reporter suddenly appeared as if the flash had been a prelude to him and he shoved a recorder towards Alex. Feli’s body reacted before his mind could and he found himself running towards them while Ludwig, Arthur, and Alfred were shouting at him to stop.

‘That’s right, Feli,’ encouraged the insufferable voice, ‘get ’em! Teach them not to touch what’s yours.’

Fist raised, and anger pulsing through his veins, Feliciano was about to punch the reporter but he was tackled to the ground by Arthur while Ludwig punched the reporter for him and growled to him in German to back off. Berlitz, bless the Doberman pup, echoed his master and bared his teeth in warning. Arthur got off of Feli, quickly checking him over for injury before shaking him, “What the bloody hell was that?! Those wankers are just looking for an excuse to make you look like a monster. Don’t fall for their traps.”

“Hate to agree with him, but Artie has a point,” said Alfred as he reached out a hand to help them up. “Not to mention those dudes will totally sue you and you could lose your medical license,
man.”

Ludwig pulled his family close and nodded, “They’re right, liebe. I don’t much care if I lose mine but I know that yours means a lot to you. Hey,” he ducked down to catch Feli’s eye, “if they want a fight, they’ll get one but let me take care of it, ok?”

Feli nodded mutely and hugged himself. What on earth had he’d been thinking to fall for something so obvious? His watch beeped and he dutifully reached into his breast pocket for his small silver pill box to take his cocktail. Good god, he thought, he really wanted to go away.

The day of the trial finally arrived on March 18 and Elizabeta’s cousin had been adamant that the family all showed up. Feli couldn’t care less; it was as if the world was moving past him at an inhuman speed. The sun had risen without him noticing. He showered and dressed himself sometime between then and the time of his trial and had even gotten to the court house itself without him realizing it.

Glancing around the majestic room, Feli gasped, “Where am I?”

Daniel glanced up from his notes in confusion, “What do you mean? You’re in court, Feli.”

Feli stared at him for a moment before nodding slowly, “That’s right.”

“Are you ok?”

“I-I need to take my pills.”

Daniel waved his hand before turning back to his paperwork “Go for it.”

Feli reached into his pocket to search for his pill box and panicked when he didn’t feel it in his jacket. He felt a hand on his shoulder and he turned around to see Ludwig handing him his dosage along with a small bottle of water, “Here you go, liebe. I didn’t want you to have them on you when they checked you at the metal detector.”

“Grazie, bello,” said Feliciano as he took them gratefully. Wincing when he swallowed, he finished the bottle of water before handing it back.

Ludwig nodded and settled back behind him, only to glance up again as Oswaldo walked into the courtroom with Eric and Bernardo.

Taking a seat next to him while his two brothers took their seats next to Paolo and Nicola, Ozzie leaned over and whispered, “Seraph said he’s sorry that he couldn’t come out for this. Only two of us can be seen out in public and since he knew that I wanted to be here, he volunteered to stay behind.”

Before Ludwig could ask why, his family arrived with Romulus, his eyes widening at Lilly’s very form fitting dress, or rather, at the clear belly bump it was accentuating. He looked over to his brothers and father but they were all stone faced, well everyone but Vash whose face could rival that of Lovino’s when he was angry. He turned to Daniel who was grinning. So that had been the ace up his sleeve.

Ludwig felt a little wave of joy in his belly at the fact that the family was now going to have two babies. It was swiftly followed by a strange wave of over-protective big brother feelings and a
sudden need to kick Emil in the groin. Though, based on how far away the boy was sitting from Vash, Ludwig wouldn’t put it past his brother to have delivered one already.

Feliciano folded his hands on the wooden table and stared at the grained surface while the courtroom continued to fill with people. The two families suing him for the murder of their children and their supporters sent him dirty looks and a few snide remarks but the drugs had started to do their job and he was back to feeling nothing.

He stood dutifully when the judge finally arrived and sat back down, content to let Daniel do all the talking. Again, it was as if the world was moving without him. Ludwig had gone up to the stand and gave his testimony to the jury: He and Feli were walking through the park and had taken a break on the fountain—because we were on a date... Because, we’re engaged and that’s what engaged couples do!—when they heard a gunshot.

It was Feli’s turn and he had to force himself to focus…maybe he shouldn’t have taken the pills but it was too late for that. He bit his lip at all of the accusatory glares he received and took a deep breath as he placed his hand on the bible to swear in. As he exhaled, he forced his body to relax. He was going to tell the truth and nothing but the truth: He and Ludwig rushed to the bakery after they heard the gunshot and found a group of men, which yes included the men in the pictures, holding Lilly hostage. There had been a disagreement—they were looking for drugs, sir. No, I didn’t tell them there were going to be drugs on the establishment. I would never do that to my Luddy. Sorry, Ludwig—and Ludwig made an opening to get his sister back and they had all ran to the pantry.

Daniel then called Lilly to the stand who glanced nervously to the judge before stating her testimony: Dr. Feliciano had risked getting hurt, did get hurt, in his attempt to save them—no sir, I didn’t know there were guns in the pantry. No sir, I didn’t know there were knives either—that he had only acted aggressively and defensively after learning that she was pregnant.

Both lawyers argued back and forth about why the men had shown up at the bakery when Daniel showed the evidence in the form of timestamps and surveillance video Wolfgang had mentioned to Ludwig earlier. While the spectators watched the trial go on, Oswaldo watched Feliciano and his reactions, or rather lack of.

His beautiful angel was staring at the condensation on his glass of water, following the drops of water as they rolled down onto the table. Ozzie nudged Ludwig’s side and leaned in to whisper, “Is he ok? Why am I just noticing this?”

Ludwig’s lips turned downward. So, it hadn’t just been him…He leaned in to whisper back, “I’m not really sure. He’s been taking his medicine but that’s the result. He says he’s fine but all he’s done since he got back from the hospital is sleep, get angry and yell at nothing, and watch the news.”

“Yell at nothing,” asked Oswaldo with a frown. “What do you mean?”

“He doesn’t get mad or yell at Alex or me but he’ll talk to himself and say harsh things to his reflection in the mirror.”

“I see.”

The two continued to observe Feliciano as the trial continued. Feli remained unaware of his surroundings until the prosecutor showed graphic pictures of the victims both at the crime scene and on the autopsy table. The voice came back, ‘Look at it. Look at what you’ve done.’
“What I’ve done,” mouthed Feli as he looked at the bruised and bloodied bodies. He didn’t listen to what was being said but knew that it pissed Daniel off because he shouted something along the lines of objection or whatever jargon lawyers spouted. He then proceeded to bring out his own visual evidence and played the surveillance tape from the bakery.

The jury and prosecutors watched with wide eyes as the men bullied their way into the bakery and held Lilly at gunpoint before ransacking the place. Hushed whispers broke out on the prosecutor’s side as they watched the video reveal Shane shoving a pregnant teenage girl to the ground and press a gun to her head before shooting it off in the air moments before Ludwig and Feli rushed to the scene. A few minutes afterwards, they smirked at the tale Shane fed Ludwig about the Vargas and Romulus shooting his brother but the jury didn’t seem to react.

Ludwig turned to Oswaldo in question but the Italian brought a finger to his lips and winked at him. Figuring it was best to ask questions later, Ludwig couldn’t help but snort when the prosecutor’s small victory was crushed by what Shane said next—If we can’t get the drugs then let’s just get them! Imagine how much dough we can get for Feliciano Vargas’ head. Word on the street says there’s a certain scorned lady who would pay anything to see him dead.

The judge glared at the prosecutor who demanded that what was said to be disregarded. Ludwig watched with a heavy heart as the video setting was altered to be able to see despite the dark lighting. He heard Bernardo and Lovino whisper to each other where it was that Feli screwed up in his form and that next time he should train with weights because it was clear that, while he was fast and quite agile, that the guns had slowed him down and that’s why he’d been shot.

But Feli didn’t care about the whispers behind his back nor of the pained cries from the families. He cared about the sudden monsoon of guilt that had fallen on his heart. It was as if he’d been standing in front of a supernova and all of its terrible power was beating him over and over again. What had he done?

He’d seen this scene over and over again in his mind but seeing it now, actual footage of him submitting to the monster inside him, his heart started to beat faster. His blood pumped almost savagely and he felt his eye water. What had he done? What had he done?!

Ludwig noticed this and leaned over to whisper to Daniel that perhaps a recess was in order. But Feli shook his head and laced his fingers tightly as if he were trying to comfort himself by holding his own hand. He didn’t want to postpone the inevitable. He’d killed these assholes in cold blood, and gotten shot in the process, yes, but at least he was still alive.

And the cries from the families were only making it worse. Chaos erupted in the courtroom and Feli barely had time to duck when Shane’s older brother came over to punch him. Oswaldo was quick to react and pulled him back before the bailiff, and the judge restored order so that both lawyers could give their closing statements. The jurors were sent away to formulate a verdict while Ludwig and the rest of the family surrounded Feli and Daniel.

Ludwig shooed all but Oswaldo away and took Feli out for some fresh air. Ozzie smiled at his angel, “Don’t worry, sweetheart, anyone with eyes can see that you only acted to protect your family. That move with Lilly is sure to gain your favor and if all else fails, well…”

Feli pressed his face into Ludwig’s chest, voiced muffled as he asked, “What do you mean?”

“We’ll tell you when this is over.”

An hour later, everyone was called back into the courtroom where the judge waited until it was quiet before asking the head juror to read their decision. The juror, a Mr. Stephen Busa, cleared his
throat, “After much delegation, on the charge for conspiracy of murder, we the jury find the
defendant not guilty. On the charge for possession of drugs, we the jury find the defendant, guilty.
On the charge of capital murder, we the jury find Dr. Feliciano Vargas…” Everyone leaned
forward in their chair and held their breath until Stephen finally said, “not guilty.”

The judge nodded and banged on his anvil to get the court to settle down as they jumped in
outraged, “Order! I will have order. Order in the court!” With tight jaws, the court did as they were
told and openly glared at Feliciano who was trying his best not to cry. “I, Judge Nolan, accept this
verdict and hereby sentence you Dr. Vargas to pay a fine of two-hundred thousand euros to the city
of Victrola on the possession charge—” Judge Nolan spoke over the cries of outrage and concluded
the trial.

Feliciano pushed away from his family and walked up to the grieving family. He fiddled with his
hands before saying, “I’m…I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“No, you’re not,” snapped Shane’s brother. He took a step forward and pushed Feli into the desk,
“You fucking Vargas. You shit and everyone thinks its gold but we know the truth. You’re nothing
but murderous thieves and liars and one day you’ll get what you deserve.” He shoved him and
walked away.

When the courtroom was clear save for the Vargas and the Beilschmidts, including Daniel, the
judge pulled his glasses off and waved the bailiff away before hugging Romulus and clasping
Wolfgang’s hand. Feli watched the exchange with a curl of his lip and walked out. He didn’t need
to see this.

Ludwig quickly followed the others. Out in the hall, Feli exhaled and knelt down with his head in
between his legs. Ozzie knelt down next to him and tried to coax Feli into drinking some more
water while Daniel scooped up Elizabeta into a hug.

“Look at you, Lizzie,” he gushed, kissing her cheeks. With reverent hands, he touched her swollen
belly, “Look at you, darling! I’m sorry I didn’t get to see you properly.”

Elizabeta giggled and patted her cousin’s long hair, “Think nothing of it. I know you were here on
business.”

“Well, yeah but I should’ve still made time for my best girl.”

Roderich laughed, “Don’t let Antoinette hear you say that.”

Daniel laughed as well, “Yeah, I probably shouldn’t say that in front of her. My god, though, I
can’t believe you’re so big! When are you due?”

“I still have three months to go,” said Elizabeta cheerfully. She laughed when her cousin gave her a
horrified look and waved his worry away, “Don’t worry, belly bumps vary per woman. Everything
is perfectly normal.”

“Now, why is it that you always threaten to beat me with your frying pan when I say anything
about you being huge,” grumbled Gilbert next to them.

“Because it’s you.”

“What the hell? I’m just as awesome as Daniel! Tell ‘em, Birdie!”

Vash grunted irritably, “I want to know why no one’s discussing the freaking elephant in the room.
When are we killing the asshole who impregnated our sister?”
As his siblings bickered with one another in the background, Ludwig turned his attention to Feli who looked as if he were waking up from a dream. He knelt next to Oswaldo and reached out to cup Feli’s cheek, “Are you ok, little fox?”

Feli smiled weakly, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Baby, are you hearing things,” asked Oswaldo as gently as he could.

“I want to go home.” Feliciano ignored the question and started to tear up as he hugged himself, “I did something bad, didn’t I?”

Both Ludwig and Oswaldo cried out, “No,” before Ludwig pulled Feli to him, “No, no, no. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But I killed them,” whimpered Feli, “I killed them.”

Oswaldo quickly stood up and pulled out his cell, “I’m going to call my aunt and see if she has time for a Skype call. Don’t worry, Feli, we’re going to get you someone to talk to if she can’t.”

“Who are you calling,” asked Ludwig curiously.

“My Uncle Drew’s wife. She’s like the dog whisperer.”

Ludwig gave him an unimpressed look, “You mean she’s the shrink the mighty Hounds of the Republic talk to.”

“Pretty much.” Oswaldo took a step away when his aunt answered his call with Ludwig hovering close to make sure he told her everything that was happening with Feli.

‘Those fools think you’re crazy,’ said the voice angrily. ‘But you’re not, are you. You’ve been a good boy and have been taking all of your medicine religiously.’

Feli’s lips trembled as he watched Ludwig and Oswaldo talk on the phone. He glanced over to the doors where a sea of reporters were interviewing the prosecutor, and given the hostile yells of disapproval from the mob, were learning about the outcome of the trial.

‘Ungrateful blind bastards.’

Across the street, Feli spotted something that couldn’t possibly be real. A man almost identical to him, except he had brown hair and almost maroon colored eyes, was staring back at him. Before he knew it, Feli was walking towards the doors almost robotically, ‘That’s not real. It’s all in my head.’

The sun glared down on his vision the instant he stepped outside and suddenly a horde of reporters and protesters alike were on him. Camera flashes went off and microphones were being shoved at him while people with colorful posters were heckling him. It was a kaleidoscope of hatred and it was all aimed towards him.

He felt hands shove him towards a group of protestors. Feli looked around desperately for the man that had drawn him out but he was nowhere to be seen. Dismissing it as a hallucination, he tried to get back to his people but the mob trapped him inside their circle.

“Murderer,” they screamed.

“Wh-what,” breathed Feli as he looked for an out. Each of their accusations were like a thousand
needles into his heart. *These* were the people he was supposed to sacrifice himself to protect?

“You’re a disgrace to our city and great nation!”

“Look at the scars on his face,” shouted one, “he even looks like a villain!”

“He’s been nothing but trouble since the moment he came out of hiding,” growled another.

“You’re not a Genovian! You’re nothing!”

“The verdict was outrageous! You clearly bought it, just like you’ve bought everything else in your life.”

“All of you Vargas are shit!”

One person in particular hissed out darkly, “You’re *just* like your Uncle Remus.”

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Romulus and the others finally left the courtroom after discussing what was going to happen with the other suspects they apprehended. The Vargas patriarch looked around and frowned when he didn’t see his baby grandson. Lovino was about to ask Ludwig where Feli had gone when a sudden cry from outside caught everyone’s attention.

Oswaldo’s eyes widened and he quickly hung up before running outside, followed swiftly by Lovino, Ludwig, and everyone else. They pushed and shoved their way until they reached Feliciano who was being protected by a lone girl.

Her brown hair was pulled into a ponytail and she had a tomato in hand. Ludwig immediately recognized her as Isabella, the grumpy teenage girl that had been his and Feliciano’s very first patient as partners. She glared at the others and raised a tomato from her lunch bag threateningly, “Don’t you dare come closer to Dr. Feli! You should all be ashamed of yourselves. Don’t you know him? Don’t you know what a good man he is?! When no one else would pay for your people’s health, he and his family sent all the money raised at the charity ball to the free clinics around here so that you guys can enjoy the benefits of good health care. When you guys were sick, he would help you get better. When a girl was feeling down in the dumps for missing her big brother’s game, he literally sent her in a private car so that she could see him play.”

Isabella stomped her foot angrily, “YOU’RE THE ONES WHO SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELVES. YOU’RE THE ONES WHO ARE A DISGRACE TO THIS GREAT CITY AND COUNTRY!”

Feliciano stared at the girl defending him before realizing who she was. She was wearing a school uniform and had a visitor’s bracelet around her wrist suggesting she was on a field trip. Looking over his shoulder, he confirmed it. The sudden stunned silence was long enough for him to gather his bearings. Putting on a mask of calm, Feli patted Isabella’s shoulder, “Ve, grazie, but I don’t mind.”

“What?”

“The people are entitled to think what they want. If they want to believe that I am a murderer then so be it. The jury found me innocent and that’s good enough for me. I just hope that if they ever find themselves in a situation where two gangs are threatening their loved ones, that they show each other the same mercy they’ve shown me.” His family reacted almost simultaneously and Ludwig was quick to pull him towards his car before the crowd became aggressive again while the
others blocked them off so that they could go home without further incident.

Collins and Godfrey were far too amused with the evenings news. Their associate, not so much. He tapped his foot slowly in thought. “You know we all knew that Feliciano was going to get away with this…”

“Yes, but the people are not praising his existence like he’s God’s gift to mankind,” argued Collins from his desk. He toyed with his wedding band and said, “Wasn’t this what she wanted?”

“Our boss wants Feliciano to suffer so that he could suffer too.”

“It looks to me like he is still functional,” said Godfrey, taking a sip from his tea cup. “Perhaps we should rile the public up some more and see if they can appeal the verdict.”

“I don’t think so.”

“But the man killed so many!”

“True, but they’re not going to put this through a retrial. If anything, they might challenge the drug possession charge and for sure they’re going to pursue a trial for the drugs being on the premises but that’s hardly going to have long lasting effects.”

Godfrey narrowed his eyes in confusion, “I don’t understand. What exactly did the boss want to happen?”

Kevin leaned back in his chair, “You’ll see soon enough. Are you two still interested in stock in N.I.N.B? I hear that it’s going to go public very soon.”

“That’s news to us.”

“Mhm, but don’t worry about that just yet. I’m going to need you to further the campaign against Feliciano.”

“The city is already turning against him,” said Collins as he filled his cup.

“You released the spark, yes, but it’s only a matter of time before the public moves on to something else. We have to keep adding timber to keep the flames going.”

“And how do you propose we do that?”

“You have contacts on the Medical Board, don’t you?”

Godfrey shook his head, “They won’t take his license away, if that’s what you’re asking. The jury found him not guilty on the grounds that it was self-defense. As shady as that is, the board will forgive it. At the worst case, he’ll only get suspended for a short term as a slap on the wrist.”

“Not to mention that damn Beilschmidt is on it as well,” muttered Collins. He brought his whiskey to his lips but immediately pulled it away with a grin, “But then again, he doesn’t get to vote. And, if I remember correctly, we do have a file on each member we were saving for a time like this.”

“Yes, but do we want to waste it on something like this?”

Kevin nodded enthusiastically, “You should. After all this is over, you two won’t need anything
“Like that to get what you want.”

“That’s true. I’ll go make some calls.” Pulling out his cell phone, Godfrey stood up and walked towards the window to arrange a tribunal for Feliciano Vargas.

Collins watched Kevin as the young doctor rolled up his sleeves and said, “You know, I honestly thought we’d lost you to the Vargas. I’m glad you’re back.”

“Hn.” Kevin ran his fingers over the scars on his forearm, a reminder of what he’d done at Sacred Heart Orphanage. He smirked. And here Feliciano had kissed them through the bandages thinking that he self-harmed. What a moron. The smirk slowly vanished, it being replaced with a scowl. What a tease. To make him feel like he was worth more than what he was doing only to turn around and give everything he ever wanted to that Beilschmidt fool.

His growing hatred towards Feli made his stomach churn and the cogs in his mind to turn as he thought of what else they could do to break him. From the look of things, Feli was well on his way to self-destruction but Ludwig and Oswaldo were carefully watching him and taking care that he was safe. If only there was a way to shatter him beyond the point of repair.

The news ended and a talk show was up next. The host gave a brief summary of what the segment was going to be about and a picture of Alexander popped up along with her saying that in spite of the negative things surrounding the Vargas, that at least they’ll be getting a new addition to the family soon. This gave Kevin a wicked idea.

Collins regarded him curiously, “What is it?”

“I don’t suppose you have a file on Judge Maxwell, do you?”

“Maxwell? No, and even if I did, he’s an ally to the Vargas and Beilschmidts. I don’t think he’ll deny them the boy.”

“Everyone has a weakness. We just need to find his.”

A few days later

Oswaldo had scheduled a Skype call for Feliciano with his aunt and gave all the details to Ludwig to make sure that he’d keep the appointment. He gathered his things together in a small leather bag and kissed his family goodbye. Feli hadn’t reacted save for a small smile before retreating to his studio. The two men watched their beloved ascend up the metal staircase before exchanging glances. Ludwig rubbed his eyes tiredly, “I’m worried about him.”

“Me too, but you’re doing really well by him,” assured Oswaldo. He reached out and rubbed Ludwig’s shoulder, “I’m very happy that you two reconciled.”

“Really? And here I thought you were going to kill me for hurting him.”

Ozzie shook his head, “I’d be lying if I said that I’ve never hurt him. Do it again, though, and I won’t be as forgiving. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go to work.”

“What are you doing?”

“Those other guys that Feli shot are at near perfect health. I’m going to go extract information from
them to finish all this bullshit."

“You mean you’re going to find out who put the drugs in my bakery? What are you going to do?”

“Whatever me and my brothers have to. Hopefully, they’re not stupid and just tell me who sent them. No need to get Bernardo, or worse, Seraph, involved.”

Ludwig nodded slowly, “Ok. Just…try not to get blood on your clothes. I don’t want Alex seeing his uncle like that.”

“Please,” scoffed Oswaldo, “I’m a professional. See ya later, k?” Closing the door behind them, Ludwig parted ways with Oswaldo at the elevator to go pick up his and Feli’s mail from the mailroom.

Meanwhile upstairs, Feli was staring at the black canvas in front of him, his hands and paint brush stained with the dark paint. His watch beeped to let him know it was time for his medicine. Mindlessly, he reached down to turn it off and went downstairs to his bathroom to get it. He swallowed them dry before turning on the faucet to wet his face. The cool water felt rather nice against his face so he did it again and again, each time a little more water falling onto the counter but he didn’t care.

Shutting it off, Feli glanced up at his reflection. The bruise and swelling had all but vanished but the small scars on his cheeks had remained. And his eye…well, the eyepatch covered that grotesque feature up. He looked just how he had in his dreams. God, what was happening to him?

‘That’s us,’ said the voice, ‘I was only showing you your true self.’

“This isn’t me,” said Feli, “You aren’t me.”

‘I’m Feliciano. I’m the part you’re ashamed of but don’t worry. I still love you.’

“Leave me alone.”

‘Why? I said I’d stay with you so that you wouldn’t be lonely.’

“I don’t need you, though. I don’t want you. I have Luddy.”

‘For now.’ The voice shifted and it sounded like his own, ‘I can make you feel better if only you’d give us a chance. All you have to do is close your eyes and surrender to your darkest dreams. I can make you live like you’ve never lived before.’

Feliciano looked down at the bottle in his hands and wondered what would happen if he took a second dose of the depression medication. It was obvious that it wasn’t working as it was before. Or was it because the damn antibiotics were messing with their effects? Or was he finally losing it.

‘You know you want me,’ sang the voice, ‘you can be mine and I can be yours and we’d be us. Look at us.’

Against his better judgment, Feli glanced up at his reflection and it grinned at him making him jump back, dropping all of his pills. He turned to the door and bumped into Ludwig who took one look at his distressed face before pulling him into a tight hug, “Feli, what’s wrong?”

“I—,” Feli gagged and covered his mouth before pushing away to run to the toilet where he emptied the contents of his belly.
Ludwig put the letter he had on the counter and moistened a towel to clean Feli’s face. Getting him a cup of water so that Feli could rinse his mouth, Ludwig moved to flush the toilet and ran the shower.

“Luddy?”

“You’ve been summoned, liebe,” said Ludwig as he made sure the water was exactly how Feli liked it. He turned to his fiancé to helped him out of his clothes, taking his own off as well so that he could shower with him. “I’m afraid they need you to appear before the Medical Board this afternoon. I’m sorry, I should’ve gone to get the mail sooner but—”

“Don’t apologize, Luddy. It was Felik’s turn to get the mail.” As if he was just realizing, Feli glanced around for his best friend, “Where is he anyway?”

The question caught Ludwig by surprise and, to be honest, it broke his heart a little. He smiled at his beloved and gently tugged him into the shower with him, “Don’t you remember, liebe? He had to go with Monika to Milan to take care of a few things for Fashion Week. He didn’t want to go but you assured him that everything would be ok. He’s coming back at the end of the week.”

Feli furrowed his brow, “Oh, that’s right.” As he lathered shampoo into his hair, what Ludwig said finally caught up to him and he yelped as soap got into his eye. He quickly rinsed it out, “What do you mean I’ve been summoned before the medical board? Why?”

“It…it only said something about discussing the status of your license. I’m sure it’s just protocol.”

Allowing Ludwig’s words to calm him, Feli quickly finished his shower and shaved before getting out to brush his teeth. Stepping into his room, he opened his closet and pulled out a dark grey shirt and tie before slipping on a pair of boxers. He was ready by the time Ludwig had arrived with his own clothes but his fiancé couldn’t help but stare down at Feli’s legs.

Ludwig smiled, “Feli?”

“Ve?”

“Are you ready to go?”

“Of course. I want to get there early so that they don’t get mad.”

“Ok, but I think you should put on some pants first, little fox.” He chuckled as Feli blushed and did as he was told.

Together, they drove over to the medical center where they saw Wolfgang parking his own car. Ludwig and Feli waved at him as they crossed the street. When he reached his dad, Ludwig greeted him properly, “Vati, do you know what this is about?”

Wolfgang shook his head, “I honestly don’t. Let’s go in, shall we?”

Feli trembled nervously as he waited to be called into the room to be reviewed. When he finally was, Ludwig followed him in and took a seat behind him. The Italian went up to the podium and waited for them to speak, his nerves only getting worse when he saw the sour look on Wolfgang’s face. Licking his lips, he approached the microphone, “I-I was summoned?”

“Indeed,” said Beth Jeffery, the Executive Director. She glanced over her half-moon glasses at Feli and raised a thin brow, “I’m sure you know why.”
“Not really, ma’am.”

Beth produced a thick file and slammed it onto the table, “These are all clippings surrounding your…involvement with the murders of—”

“I didn’t murder anyone,” snarled Feliciano, feeling a sudden spike of anger. He took great pleasure in seeing the board members jolt back in their seats. He stood taller and pulled out the documents from his trial, “As you can see, I was found not guilty on the grounds that it was in self-defense. Or are you going to revoke my license and that of every Genovian doctor who has killed in order to protect themselves and their comrades?”

“I assume you’re referring the special cases of the doctors that come from a military background.” Beth composed herself and folded her hands neatly over the file, “Rest assured that they aren’t reprimanded for what happens in war but you, Dr. Vargas are neither a soldier nor were you at war. That being said, there is also the matter of you submitting false information.”

“When did he do that,” asked Wolfgang.

“Just before he was subjected to an evaluation before he was granted his license,” said Diane, the Director of Enforcement. She motioned for her colleagues to open the folders before them and in them was Feli’s claim that he’d never committed any serious crimes as well as his refusal to give his last name before it had been stamped by Magyar and Wolfgang stating that they knew who he was and that no last name would be required until after his debut to society.

Wolfgang was going to point that out but Diane cut him off, “As stated in our rules and regulations, in article 20, section 13, paragraph 7b: The physician is solely responsible for the submission of accurate information to the Board and may not delegate this responsibility to another. Submission of false or misleading information by the physician may constitute a violation of the rules.” Diane pulled her own glasses away and stared down Feliciano, “Now, Dr. Vargas, not only did someone else submit these files for you but you also neglected to inform us that you and your family are involved in less than legal activities.”

Feliciano couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He licked his lips nervously and shook his head, “I don’t—I’m not involved in anything of the sort, ma’am. Please, all I want to do is practice medicine.”

“Well, you should’ve thought about that before getting involved with the mob. Furthermore, back to the previous grievance, you did in fact kill five innocent—”

“They weren’t innocent,” interrupted Ludwig as he stood up.

He looked to his dad for help but Beth shook her head, “Do not think that because your father is on this board that he’s going to be able to save your fiancé, Dr. Beilschmidt.” The elderly woman turned her attention back to Feliciano, “A doctor takes an oath upon receiving the privilege to practice medicine and that oath states that you are not to bring harm onto others. That you are not to deny help to others and that you are not to discriminate…”

As he listened to the Board reprimand him, Feli once again felt the weight of his world on his shoulders and a certain sickness that he was foolish enough to think would never ail him started to spread through his heart. His fingers curled around the podium and he couldn’t help but also feel a strong sense of loathing towards the person who sent the men to Ludwig’s bakery and ruined everything. Feli looked down at his shoes. He already knew what the Board was going to do but still prayed that all he was going to get was suspension at worse.
Feli’s head darted up to face the executive director when she finally reached the end of her sermon on the responsibilities physicians had to fellow human beings. Diane took over the reins and pulled out a document and glanced around her fellow Board Members, “It will be put to a vote then. All those in favor of Feliciano Vargas keeping his medical license say aye.” No one said anything, though now that he looked closely at their body language, he could see that their eyes held a certain level of sadness and fear. Diane then asked who was in favor of revoking his license; everyone eligible to vote raised their hand.

Hot tears rushed to Feliciano’s eye and he felt Ludwig pull him towards him when they shredded his medical license before them, all the feeling of accomplishment and pride that he had felt when he first received it withering inside him like a dying flame until the only evidence it was ever there was a chard wick of worthlessness. It was as if he’d been physically stripped of his skin, everything was burning and he felt ill again. He heard his heart harden with ice in his chest, “I’m no longer a doctor, then? Just like that?”

Beth gave him a genuine look of sympathy but it only made him feel bitter. She smiled grimly, “I am truly sorry that it had to come down to this, Docto—Mister Vargas. Please understand that we are here to ensure that the people are given the best care by the absolute best doctors we can provide. It wouldn’t look good if they saw that we allowed—”

“Oh, is that so,” spat Feliciano, “Because I can name a dozen of my classmates who don’t give a rat’s ass about their patients and have done more harm than good. Classmates who you have allowed to continue to practice but hey, you’re doing your ethical duty and ensuring that people are given the absolute best care by the best doctors you can provide.” Breathing out a laugh, Feli stormed out of the review; doors slamming shut behind him.

Ludwig stared after him with wide eyes and running to catch up, leaving the Board to muse over what just occurred. Wolfgang shook his head, and turned to Beth, “Why, in God’s name, did you do this?”

The ride home was ridiculously quiet and very awkward. Ludwig felt rather frightened. He’d never seen Feli react like that to anything and even now he was twitching in his seat. his head bowed and tilted to the side as if he were listening to someone, or something, whisper in his ear. Their watches beeped to let them know that it was time for Feli’s medication.

“I’m almost done with the antibiotics,” said Feliciano as he took the pills from his pill box and swallowed them with juice.

Ludwig glanced over to his love before focusing on the road ahead of them, “That’s good to hear, liebling. Don’t forget that you have that Skype call with Dr. Amara tonight. You know; Dr. Andrew’s wife?”

Feli said nothing and glared at the cloudy sky. When they pulled into the garage, he jumped out of the car and went straight for his own. Scrambling out his seat, Ludwig called out, “Wait, where are you going? Feliciano, you aren’t supposed to drive after taking that stuff! Feli!”

But the red Alfa Romero was already roaring with life and peeling out of its parking spot. With the pedal becoming intimate with the dark floor, Feli sped out of the garage and into traffic, making his way aggressively towards V Enterprise. Cars honked and people jumped out of the way as he weaved in and out of lanes until he saw his family’s building. Slamming his car shut, he stormed inside without so much as greeting the security guard and made a beeline to the elevator.
A feminine voice called out to him, “Name?”

“Feliciano Vargas,” he muttered. A blue light scanned him for his tattoo before another ran over his eye to confirm his iris. He pressed his thumb against the button that would take him to the basement.

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Ludwig dialed Oswaldo’s number in hopes that he’d know where Feli would drive to. His first thought was that perhaps he’d go to the planetarium but he doubted that he’d want to go to a place where people would whisper behind his back. The farmer’s market was another option but again, he doubted that he’d want to be around people right now. Same with the art museum and science museum.

The call went straight to voicemail, as did the other’s he placed to Lovino, Bernardo, and Seraph. He finally got answered by Felicia but she barely had enough time to say that she’d call him after rehearsal before the director started yelling at the chorus in the background.

Grunting in frustration, Ludwig slammed his hand on his steering wheel and pressed his forehead to it. Why did they have to do something like that to his little fox? He could only imagine what he was feeling right now, though he suspected that it was something akin to what he’d felt when he saw how his bakery looked after he went back to check damages. Then again, the insurance company was fixing those damages. He and Emma would be back in business in a matter of weeks but Feli wouldn’t.

He wouldn’t be able to start working at the hospital again after a few weeks. He wouldn’t be able to touch another patient ever again. And all because what? Because he picked up a gun and defended Lilly and him? It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair at all!

Ludwig’s cell phone started to ring, the name of the screen alerting him that his dad was calling. Sighing, he reached over and answered, “Ja?...No, I’m at home. Feli drove off somewhere…Vati, what happened? Why did they do that?...Well, isn’t there a way you and Romulus can get it back for him?...Please try…I’m going to go online in a bit to see—…What, now?...What if he comes back? I need to be home to—”

Running his hands over his face, Ludwig nodded, “Fine, I’ll be over in a bit…Ja, bye-bye.” Ludwig pulled his seat belt back on and checked the time before pulling back out of his parking spot.

When he arrived at Berwald and Tino’s home, he was surprised to find that Gilbert’s and Roderich’s cars were parked next to their dad’s. He parked next to Gilbert and got off. The door to the house opened before he had a chance to knock and Tino waved him in, “That was quick, Luddy. Where’s Feli?”

“I’m not sure,” muttered Ludwig as he walked towards the living room. He frowned at how his brothers were sitting in a semicircle around a lone chair with their father leaning against the armrest of one of the couches, Gilbert and Berwald still in their scrubs while Roderich had his white coat draped over his lap as if they had just left work. Ludwig turned to Tino, “What is this?”

“It’s not an intervention, Ludwig,” answered Wolfgang solemnly, “Well, it sort of is but not like what you’re imagining.”

“I don’t understand.”
Gilbert rubbed his neck nervously, “Maybe you should sit down, west…”

Folding his arms stubbornly across his chest, Ludwig scowled, “I don’t have time for whatever it is you’re doing; I have to go pick up Alex from school in a few minutes. Just say what you have to say so I can go.”

“So, sit down,” said Wolfgang. He and Ludwig stared each other down until Ludwig finally gave in and sat in the seat facing his family. Wolfgang nodded and took a sip from his coffee mug before saying, “You know what the Vargas do.”

“You were there when I watched the video, so you know I do.”

“Right. Well, as you know they’re tasked with bringing down the underworld—”

“If you’re going to repeat stuff, I already know, I’m going to leave.”

Roderich narrowed his eyes, “Don’t talk to Vati like that. What’s the matter with you?”

“It’s fine.” Wolfgang waved his son’s worries away and continued, “As such, that means that certain traps have to be carefully put into place so that their targets can fall and can later be processed by the court of law.”

“What does that have to do with me?” Ludwig felt an uncomfortable drop in his belly when his family suddenly shifted nervously, even Berwald looked guilty of something. His eyes flickered over to his in-laws who looked at him guiltily. Not liking their reactions one bit, Ludwig turned back to his father and repeated himself.

“Son, you know that I love you and I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me after I tell you what I’ve—”

“We’ve,” corrected Berwald solemnly, “What we’ve done. We helped.”

“What we’ve done.”

“What the hell did you do,” asked Ludwig.

“Son, I want you to know that we only had all of Genovia’s best interest at heart…”


Roderich sighed and fiddled with his coat, “Vater, perhaps it’s best if you just come out and say it.”

“Yes, quite right,” said Wolfgang before looking at Ludwig, “It’s about your engagement to Natalya. Son, I want you to know that I was never going to let you go through with it even if you hadn’t fallen in love with Feliciano.”

“…what?”

Fellow Hounds dragged Cerberus’ latest work out of the interrogation room while Seraph tossed out his instruments and brought out fresh ones for the next person. Bernardo pulled off his own gloves and grabbed new ones so to not scare the next person with the blood while Oswaldo talked to someone through the intercom.
They’d gone through four already and none seemed to know a damn thing. Then again, those four had been from Shane’s crew. The new one would be Donovan. The three brothers prayed that this one would talk or else everything would have been a waste and they would have to rethink the whole damn plan.

Cerberus turned towards the door at the sound of distant yelling and things being shoved out of the way before the door to the interrogation room was slammed open. Bernardo was first to react, “Feli?”

“What are you doing here,” asked Seraph.

“I want to see this,” answered Feliciano before shrugging Beagle’s hand off of him.

Glancing towards the camera in the room, Oswaldo shook his head, “I don’t think that’s a good idea, angel. Where’s Ludwig?”

Bernardo nervously tugged on his gloves and nodded in agreement, “Yeah, you should be resting at home. Let us take care of this here, ok? We’ll let you know when—”

“No,” said Feli. He walked in and stubbornly leaned against the table with all of their tools, “I won’t wait around for answers anymore.”

Cerberus all looked towards the camera before Seraph nodded as well, “Ok, but let us do all the work, ok?”

“No promises.”

“I’m sorry, Feli but, you have to promi—”

“Just bring the next one in.”

Taken aback, Seraph motioned for Donovan to be brought in. The young Russian fought against Corgi and Dalmatian but was eventually strapped down to the chair. He froze at the sight of the horrible Hell Hound before him, only to smirk at Feli who was still leaning against the table. Well, this was a delightful surprise.

His face was aggressively forced forward by Oswaldo and the dark haired Italian said quietly, “Focus and listen to me very carefully. I’m about to ask you some questions and you are going to answer them. If you don’t feel like answering me, my big brother Bernardo is going to take over and he will beat them out of you. If you don’t feel like answering him, then our big brother Seraph is going to take over and he will bleed them out of you. Either way we will get our answers; it’s up to you on how you want to give them to us.”

Pulling a stool towards him, Oswaldo sat down and stared at Donovan, “So…want to tell us who you’re working for?” His answer was in the form of spit on his chin. Wiping it away, curled his lip in disgust and slapped him, “Listen, kid, I’m the nice one. I’m going to ask you again. **Who** are you working for?”

Feli watched as Ozzie worked on Donovan, each question met with an insult of one form or another. Growing bored with the lack of progress, he turned around to fiddle with the various instruments on the table. There were some scissors of various sizes, a few needles of varying thickness and length, some knives, a cigar clip, some large tweezers, something boiling on a hot plate and a small battery with clips. Feli picked up a good size needle and played with it as he watched what was happening behind him through the mirror in front.
Oswaldo had Donovan by his cheeks and was growling god knows what at him but that didn’t interest Feliciano. He looked at himself instead, making sure that the wounds were healing properly on his face. Scrunching up his nose, Feli wiggled his mouth to feel his face. Nothing hurt so that was good. His reflection didn’t look as great as it normally did though, which kind of sucked.

Ludwig assured him that he was still very beautiful to him and his mother always made a point to tell him that he was a handsome man, not that they had to tell him. Feli supposed that there was a certain charm to his appearance now...if you dismissed the patch over his eye and the scars...and the under eye circles and the slight stubble along his jaw. Damn, hadn’t he just shaved a few hours ago?

‘Bum-Bum, Bum-Bum-Bum, Bum-Bum’ hummed the voice, ‘Open up your hate, and let it flow into me.’

Feli shivered as the voice sang tunelessly in his head. As if it weren’t enough that he was feeling like shit, this thing was mocking him. But, it had a point. He was feeling so much hatred towards the man in the chair and he obviously knew who sent him to ruin his life. Would it be so bad if he dug the needle into him until he gave up names?

‘I can see inside you...don’t try to deny what you feel…’

No—wait, yes! Yes, it was bad. It was really bad! He couldn’t just torture someone; he made a vow, not only to the Board but to himself. He was a good person...he wasn’t bad.

‘Not according to the media. Why hold on to what you were? Look at where it’s gotten us. You’ve lost the people’s respect, you almost lost Ludwig, you’ve lost your license to practice medicine. You don’t owe anything to anyone. You deserve to go and get the answers yourself. What else do you have left to lose?’

The Italian’s reflection suddenly changed before him and Feli felt frightened again. He tilted his head and it tilted with him. Once again, the voice had a point. Why was it becoming harder and harder to fight it?

‘Because I can see what you really are and what you really want, and what you really want is to make those who have ruined you suffer as much as you are.’ Feli’s fingers tightened around the needle when Seraph came around to get his tray for his turn. His seraph of a cousin dragged the smaller table over to Donovan and pushed Oswaldo out of the way before shoving a needle into the Russian’s arm until he reached the nerve.

Feli watched through the mirror’s reflection, intrigued by how Donovan tried to curl his arm in but the restraints prohibited him from doing so. He stared at the hellhound in shock, and stuttered, “Wh-what are you—ah!” Seraph stabbed him again in another nerve. Donovan tried to move away but when he couldn’t he tried to get Feli to stop him, “You’re a doctor! You can’t let him hurt me like this!”

“I was a doctor,” said Feliciano quietly, “I’m not anymore thanks to you and the other assholes that decided to hold Lilly hostage.”

“I didn’t—” Donovan gasped when Seraph ripped his shirt open and checked over his wounds.

Tsking in annoyance that none of the bullets had gone through, Seraph walked around him and looked at the bullet wounds on his pale back. A shiver ran down Donovan’s spine when he felt the Italian’s cold fingers touch the still healing injury, “Wh-what are you doing?”
“My cousin hates violence, Donovan,” murmured Seraph as he continued to touch the wounds, “He hates pain and hates seeing others in pain.” He reached around for a scalpel and barely pressed it against the pale flesh before him, “And that’s where he and I differ. You see, unlike my cousin, I only hate seeing certain people in pain. People like you; I like to make an exception.”

“I didn’t enjoy hurting him,” snapped Donovan.

“That’s good to hear. I, however, will enjoy hurting you.” Feli watched as Seraph brought down the scalpel and opened up one of the bullet wounds before slipping on a latex glove and digging his finger into the hole, “Who sent you to hurt them?”

“Jesus Christ,” yelped Feli as he stared at how his cousin’s finger disappeared into the wound. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the mirror, ignoring the screams. The voice asked him what was wrong and he whispered, “This is wrong.”

‘Says the guy who was just thinking of jamming a needle into the poor bastard. Let your cousin have his fun, besides he may be able to get some answers out him.’

“But—”

‘It’s just the bullet wound from before. Remember? The one you gave him? Besides, it’s not as if you weren’t just thinking of shoving a needle into him. It would’ve been better if it were us digging into that flesh and making him scream. How long before he breaks, do you think?’

Oswaldo glanced behind him and paled at how uncomfortable Feli really was. He was about to suggest he leave when Donovan suddenly sobbed, “Ok, ok! I’ll talk! Just please stop!” Seraph pulled back and walked around to look at the Russian. With tears in his grey eyes, Donovan shook his head, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry but it was a job, ok? I needed the money!”

“Who sent you,” asked Bernardo as he kneeled down and rubbed his shoulder. “If you tell us, we’ll patch you right back up and protect you.”

Donovan looked to Seraph then at Bernardo, “Please…don’t let him do that again.”

“I won’t, but you have to tell me who sent you and why. Did they have anything to do with the drugs found at the bakery?” At his nod, Bernardo asked, “Did they also have something to do with the drugs that were smuggled in the crates via my family’s railroad?” Again, he was answered via a nod.

Reaching up, Oswaldo ran the pad of his thumb along Donovan’s jaw, and whispered, “Who sent you?”

“I-it was, my boss, Ivan Braginsky and his little sister Natalya. M-Mr. Braginsky wanted us to plant the dr-drugs at the bakery so that Mr. Ludwig would believe that it was Mr. Vargas who did it.”

“Why?”

“He was h-hoping that he would leave him after seeing that he was still a mobster. It was Miss Natalya who told me to shoot him, too, to make it believable. She really wants to marry Ludwig s-s-so that they can open a sister company here in Genovia.”

“Why does he want to be here so bad? Does it have something to do with the drugs in the other crates?”
“…Da. I-I don’t know much but I remember my boss saying something about needing money. With no one to partner with him, he had to take loans from people in bad places and this is how he was going to repay them.”

“By smuggling their drugs into our country?”

“The Vargas wouldn’t let them so he figured that he could bring them if they were in cargo that was supposed to be in here anyway.”

Feliciano couldn’t believe what he was hearing and he also couldn’t believe that Oswaldo was buying all the lies. Growling he pulled Donovan back by his hair, “How dare you, you lying bastardo!”

“I’m not lying! I swear I’m not!” Donovan looked to Oswaldo for help but Ozzie didn’t move. He glanced back at Feliciano and said, “I swear on mother Russia I’m telling you the truth. Why would I lie?”

“To save yourself. Clarify this then, you are saying that Ivan, my friend, burned down Sacred Orphanage, too? That he killed Mr. Sunwell, and burned down my childhood home to scare me away from Ludwig?”

“Da! It was because you were friends. He felt the betrayal all the worse.”

“So, you mean to tell us that he hired Acidanthera to terrorize us.”

Donovan looked confused for a moment before realizing what he was being asked. Nodding quickly, he said, “The flower! Mr. Ivan loves flowers so he had us paint the flowers on walls. He thought you’d know it was from him and back off! Please, please don’t!” He flinched when Feliciano reached into his mouth with forceps and held the scalpel dangerously close to his tongue, “I’m no lyin—” A sudden beep followed by a green light pulled the Italian’s attention away from what he was about to do.

Feli blinked once then looked down at his hands in confusion. He felt Ozzie’s warm hand gently wrap around his wrist to gently pull him away from Donovan. Why did he look so scared? Romulus’ voice sounded through the intercom in the room and it only made his cousin tense further. What the hell?

“That’s enough,” said the Vargas patriarch, “We have what we need. Clean him up and get him to say that again via video and make sure he signs the confession.”

What?

Feli’s breathing slowly started to increase.

Why did they need that for? Why—

His head suddenly felt like it was splitting in two and the voice he heard took the likeness of his father’s, ‘You know! You know! You know!’

He felt so sick but he had to know. No. He had to confirm that he was wrong. Pushing himself away from Ozzie, Feli ran out of the interrogation room and into his grandfather’s office where he found Lovino, his Uncle Paolo, and grandfather looking at a screen featuring the interrogation room.

Feli trembled and his lower back felt like it was suffering various small cramps but Feli ignored it.
He shook his head in confusion, “Why are you doing that? Why do you believe him?”

‘Don’t trust anyone. Nothing is like it seems!’

Oswaldo and his brothers rushed into the room, having left the other Hounds to do as Romulus ordered. Ozzie looked at everyone in the room then to his angel, “Feli, I think I should take you home now.”

“No!” Feliciano curled and uncurled his hands anxiously as he stared at his grandfather, “Tell me, nonno, why did you say that? What’s going on?”

Again, he was met with painful silence, until his memories started to simultaneously scream like banshees out of hell.

He remembered things that hadn’t sat well with him in the course of the last year. He remembered the fact that Ivan had been able to import whatever he wanted via the trains, and could despite what his family had said. He remembered how his family had been whispering about not telling him something on Christmas eve; how angry Oswaldo had been that they were keeping a secret from Feli.

‘The devil hides in the details because he knows they’re easily overlooked.’

He remembered how the man had also been confused when Ludwig showed up with him at the family cabin for Christmas—I thought it was only a job, he had said.

Only a job.

Feli’s eye widened at that as it echoed in his mind louder than the others. His job at the hospital… he never even applied to it. Feliks had sent out his resume, sure, but even his friend had admitted that he never sent one to Asclepius, only that he’d gotten a call stating that Feliciano was expected to show up to the interview…an interview that he didn’t even part take in but was still given a job to.

A job where he was able to flirt and court Ludwig whose brothers and in-laws had been adamant Ludwig give him a chance despite knowing that the man was engaged. Well, everyone but Alfred but Alfred was never once mean to Feli, the so-called home wrecker. If anything, the man was a very loyal friend to him, always checking up on him and making sure that he was ok.

Clutching his hair, memories continued to swarm around his head. He’d gotten a job to a place he never applied to…A job where he was free to court Ludwig…People practically pushed him and Ludwig together …His family had allowed Ivan to use the railroad to import…His family was keeping a secret from him…Ozzie had been confused because it was only a job… But why?

‘You know why, Feli. Come on, you’re smart. You’re not stupid. Your father kept telling you, didn’t he? Warning you…”

Only a job?

Tears clouded Feliciano’s vision and he felt like he was torn open from the inside out.

Only a job…

“Oh my god,” mouthed Feli in horror.

It was only a job.
“Oh, my fucking god!”

The Vargas all watched in silence as their prince slowly placed all the pieces of the puzzle together in his mind and exchanged looks of guilt when he finally understood. Romulus was the first to react after Feli’s exclamation, “Feli, I—”

“You lied! You told me there weren’t any major operations in play when I asked you. You told me!” Shaking violently, Feliciano rubbed his arms to stop them and glared at his brother, “And you. When I came to you with those recordings, you said you had no idea what they were talking about and you even said you’d help me figure things out. For months, you people have been giving me little information on the things that have been happening to us and for this last month, Lovino, for this past month you said you’d help me find out who was hurting us! You promised!”

The rubbing became scratching on his arms and Feli growled lowly, “But you all lied to me. You were just giving me shit to keep myself occupied and away from what you guys were really up to.”

Lovino rolled his eyes, “Well…you aren’t wrong.”

“You knew then? You knew who burned down our house? Who killed Mr. Sunwell?”

“We tried to tell you, stupid. You’re the one who insisted on turning a blind cheek to your friend.”

Feliciano shook his head angrily, “Don’t you dare turn this around on me. How could…why did you do this?”

“We couldn’t tell you, Feli,” said Paolo softly. He took a step towards his nephew and tried to get him to stop scratching but Feli backed away. Sighing, the older Italian looked towards his father in silent permission to explain the situation. When it was granted, he turned back to Feliciano and said, “Nipote, I’m not sure if you remember us telling you, but ten years ago, Ivan’s mother was head of their company. She partnered up with another company who was smuggling drugs into our nation but when our DEA stopped them, they refused to give up names, and Russia refused to cooperate with the Genovian government to get them.”

Romulus leaned against his desk and continued, “That’s when your Uncle Magyar turned to us and we agreed to conduct our own investigation. We started with the drugs that had entered our territories. They had a specific signature to them that your cousin Nya identified as the kind that the Spaniards tended to mark their drugs with. However, when the Hounds went to investigate in Spain, that particular brand had been eradicated and we were back to square one.

“That is until recently, about five years ago, when Francis and the others were able to pick up the scent again in France. They followed that particular trail back to Russia, specifically, to your friend’s company but we still don’t know who the supplier is. We believe that it must be the same person who was supplying his mother but the only way to confirm it is if we can get in there and see their records personally. Of course, there is a chance that they no longer have said records in which case, it would only be a matter of searching around the Russian crime syndicates.”

Feli glared at a spot on the ground and asked, “What did that have to do with Ludwig and me?”

“We needed to create a hole in the gate for us to get what we needed. The idea was simple: Entice the Russians to abuse the fact that our railroads were going to allow a pharmacy company to import their medicine. It was coincidental that it was Ivan’s company but it also worked very well that it was the source of the issue. Wolfgang offered to help with this operation because he is a very well-respected figure in the medical community here in Genovia as well as a respectable man in society. He—”
“He offered up his son as bait,” finished Feliciano angrily. His head was starting to throb with all of this new-found knowledge.

“…That’s right. We figured that if he extended an olive branch to Ivan and offered to be his partner that Ivan would be quick to accept, and he did. The business deal would allow Ivan to promote his company to other investors using Wolfgang’s name in the sale’s pitch. It would also look good for his company’s presence in Genovia if his sister were married to someone of Ludwig’s pedigree. But, if the deal were to be broken, Ivan would lose more than just a monetary fee.”

Shivering, Feli felt his stomach ache on top of it all. He bit his lip before asking, “So you were all counting on Ludwig breaking the deal…what if he hadn’t?”

“You were honestly our last chance,” said Paolo, “A resident position at Asclepius was quietly offered to anyone who could make Ludwig stray.” The older Italian visibly flinched at the glare his nephew sent him and he was quick to continue before Feli would snap, “It didn’t work, obviously. As much as your school mates tried, he wouldn’t budge. But a few of them did tell your brother that you were the only one close enough to get a reaction out of him.”

“And that led to grandpa arranging that I get a job at the hospital he worked,” concluded Feli.

“Si. When it was—we told the others, Tino, Matthew, Alfred, Elizabeta to…facilitate you’re coupling…”

As Paolo continued to explain, Feliciano felt his frozen heart crack painfully. The voice whispered in his head, ‘That’s fucked up, man. I would never do something like that to you. Fuckers. The whole lot of them.’

“And then Ludwig finally did sever the deal…’

‘This explains why Wolfgang didn’t bat an eyelash to end things…why he was so accepting of us...’

“We figured that something bad would happen but—”

“You figured that something bad would happen,” repeated Feliciano, voice thickening with bitterness. He glanced sharply at everyone in the room and stopped at his grandfather, “You knew that Ludwig would be shot? That I would—You knew and you still let it happen?!”

‘Isn’t it strange that they arrived within minutes of you texting them? That Mathias happened to be close enough to pick you guys up?’

Feliciano stood up but quickly fell back down, his legs feeling weak all of a sudden. Nausea overwhelmed him and he crawled over to his grandfather’s trash bin to vomit. When he was done, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and glared at his grandfather, “You used me! You used Ludwig and took advantage of our love for what? To provoke a desperate man into committing crimes so that big brother Francis and his Interpol friends could go pick up Ivan and his crazy sister and force Russia to surrender every bit of intel they have on that case?!”

Paolo frowned, “There’s more to it than—”

“I don’t care!” Feliciano stood on wobbly legs and pointed an accusing finger at them, “I don’t care what was at stake. How could you possibly have used me as a pawn? How could you have dragged a civilian like Ludwig into this?!” His breaths started to come out harsh as his head threatened to split into two but he pushed on, this time directing his wrath at his grandfather, “I thought we were family,” he sobbed as he backed away from them, “I thought you people loved me…”
Romulus rushed to him and held him by the shoulders, “We do love you. Feli, we—”

“No, sir! Families don’t keep stuff like this from each other. Families don’t use each other like this!”

“We couldn’t tell you, Feli. The plan was already set in motion and you wouldn’t have agreed to help if we had.”

“You’re god damn right, I wouldn’t have.” Feli looked around his grandfather and stared right into Ozzie’s eyes, “I would’ve never put the man I love in harm’s way.” He took an unreasonably amount of pleasure in the way his cousin’s breath hitched in his throat and eyes watered. Glaring back at his grandfather he pushed him off, “I love my family, grandpa. I may have put up a lot of resistance at first but in the end I would’ve done anything to protect us. How could you’ve done this to us? What were you thinking?!”

Reaching into his pocket, Feli walked around his grandfather and shoved the letter Antonio wrote into Lovino’s chest. Lovi looked at it in confusion, “The hell is this?”

“Your stupid ex-boyfriend left you this,” hissed Feliciano.

“What?” Lovi quickly opened the letter, face reddening as he read and re-read through it. He bunched it up and punched Feliciano in the gut, “The fuck is wrong with you? How could you have kept this from me, you little shit?! Do you have any idea what I almost did?!”

Feliciano chuckled darkly as he watched Seraph and Bernardo hold his brother back while Oswaldo pulled him towards his chest protectively, “What’s the matter Lovi? Doesn’t it feel good to have your loved ones hide things from you?” His chuckled died off and he started to cry again, “At least I kept it from you out of fear of him hurting you more than what he already did! I sent big brother Francis to go talk to him, make sure that what he meant what he wrote.”

Falling limp in their cousins’ hold Lovi looked at the crumpled letter in his fist, “I could’ve killed him. Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?”

“Because your little self-righteous ass would’ve ruined the whole damn operation! That would’ve been years of work down the drain because you can’t seem to get off your high horse and sacrifice a few things for the greater good.”

Feli stopped struggling and stared at his brother sadly, “I didn’t tell you because I was afraid it was a trap. I didn’t want you to die, Lovino. We may not be the perfect set of twins but I love you, and I know you love him. If it had been a trap, then you two would’ve fought and one or both of you would’ve died.

“But you lot were only thinking about the plan, right? Not once did it occur to you how this might affect me or Ludwig or—” He paused as realization hit him and his anger once again spiked, “Alexander. My little boy is missing a part of his arm because of you.” He wrestled away from Oswaldo and backed away from them all.

“Feli,” said Romulus, “Feli, please…don’t—”

“I’m leaving.”

“What?”
“I am leaving. Ludwig and I have spoken about it and we agreed that we need time away from this place. We’re taking Alex with us.” Feli pointed at Romulus, “And you are going to assure that that happens.”

“I’ll do anything, Feli, but please forgive us. I only had—”

“I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to hear a damn thing other than Alexander is a Vargas.” With that parting thought, Feli turned on his heal and ran out, leaving his family feeling guiltier than they thought they’d feel. Oswaldo shook his head and ran after him.

Romulus licked his lips before turning to the others, “Get back to work.”

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Feli abused the elevator button until the doors finally opened. He got inside and pressed the button before sliding down to the floor. A hand shoved in between the doors to open them again and Oswaldo slid in after him. Ozzie gripped Feli’s hand in his, “Please don’t be mad at me, angel. I wanted to tell you. I wanted to tell you so bad but the others told me not to.”

Gloring through his lashes, Feliciano spat out, “You. You said that what we had, that it would never die. That you would always—”

“Love you,” breathed Oswaldo as he kissed Feli’s knuckles, “You know, I do.”

“Then how could you have let them do this to me? To Ludwig? To Alex?”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

‘They were all laughing behind your back,’ said the voice, ‘They were just stringing you along like a fool.’

Feli hiccupped and looked at Oswaldo with such a pained expression that the older Italian could hear his own heart breaking in his chest. Feli asked, “Is that what you were doing?”

“What do you mean, angel?”

“Stop pretending, Oswaldo.” Narrowing his eye, Feli’s nose twitched in anger, “Were you and everyone else just stringing me along? Laughing at me? Was it a game to see who could make me feel and act like a prince only to laugh behind my back? Was I just everybody’s fool?!”

“No!” Oswaldo fell to his knees and tugged at Feli’s hand, “No, you weren’t.”

“No!” Oswaldo fell to his knees and tugged at Feli’s hand, “No, you weren’t.”

“Really? Cause I feel like I am. Do you have any idea what I’ve done for you people? I’m not like you or big brothers Lovi and Francis. I was never a part of the Ludus. I was never trained to deal with situations like you guys were, and yet I’ve deceived some of the closest people I hold dear. I’ve fought with myself, hating the fact that I’ve been selfish with my ideals and making the effort to be a better prince for the family. I—I’m missing an eye, Ozzie!”

Feliciano suddenly started to laugh, “I only have one eyeball left! My son has one arm and my fiancé has a hole in his chest! The people you come home to after work are all damaged! How does that make you feel, Oz? Huh? How do you think it makes me feel knowing that it was because they’re associated with me that they’re damaged? Was all of our suffering worth it? I hope so, Ozzie, because this whole damn operation has taken just about everything I have.”

“Angelo, please—”
“No, Oswaldo! Do you have any idea what this has done to me? What all I’ve lost?” Feli’s breath picked up again and he started to gasp out in between words, “I lost my fucking—my fucking medical license because of this bullshit! I l-lost my credibility to the public because of this! I almost lost Ludwig because of this!”

‘That’s it, my love,’ purred the voice, ‘let him have it. Break his heart!’

Worried about the wellbeing of his angel, Oswaldo tried to reach out to him but Feliciano ducked out of the way, “Don’t. Don’t touch me. Lovi spoke of the greater good but the greater good hates us! They hate me! Is that who we’re protecting? Those assholes who wouldn’t piss on us if we were on fire?”

Oswaldo stared at his angel in shock. This wasn’t him. Feli would never talk like this. His mind quickly worked out what could be wrong other than the obvious. He checked his watch, “You didn’t meet with my aunt, did you?”

“Don’t change the fucking subject, Cerberus,” hissed Feliciano. He glared out of his eye, the look near crazed. The voice started to whisper louder in his mind, growing louder and wearing him down with every beat his broken heart gave. Feli stared at his Ozzie, at how his beautiful face was still complete save for the tiny scar near the corner of his lip, at how his own unique eyes, a blissful merge of color from both sides of his family, were reddening with unshed tears, at how his curl was drooping as if it were mimicking his feelings, before laughing again.

His shoulders shook violently as he laughed and laughed at the absurdity of what his life was becoming, his chest feeling as if needles were being shoved in and sending cold bolts of electricity throughout his body. How could his family look him in the eye and lie as they had? How could his brother and friends done that? How could Oswaldo?

‘How could he do this to you,’ asked the voice. ‘How could he do this to you? How could he do this to you?’

“How could you do this to me,” repeated Feli, “How could you do this to me?”

‘You should’ve known…’

“I should’ve known.”

‘We hate you.’

“We hate you.”

Oswaldo froze, his own heart breaking further, “What?”

“What, no,” whimpered Feli as he curled into himself, “No, I don’t hate him”

‘Say it.’

“No! I won’t say that.”

‘Say it!’

Numbness enveloped Feli and his ears prickled with the sound of static in his mind. He was just… too fucking livid.

“You couldn’t tell me, right,” said Feliciano, “You couldn’t tell me because what? They didn’t let
you? Is that how it is, Cerberus? Is that what you are? Are you just a brainless mutt? Well then, dog, go fetch Ivan and—Oh!” Gasping in horror, Feli slapped a hand over his mouth and screamed into it. His head...he couldn’t bear it anymore. Falling over to the side he threw up again in the corner of the elevator. When he was done, he glanced up at the metal wall and narrowed his eyes at his reflection that was smiling innocently back, “I won’t let you get me. Not again.”

He took out his medication with trembling hands and managed to pop the lid open, a few pills falling to the floor as he poured out twice his dosage before swallowing them dry. Oh god...why did this have to happen? How could his family have used him like this?! And Ozzie...he—

The voice chuckled in his mind again, ‘Fine, I won’t speak through you but you have to admit that your family is shit. Especially that asshole sitting behind you. And to think that he’s the one you gave your—’

Feli slapped his hands over his ears and pulled at his hair in hopes that somehow he could rid himself of the voice by force. When it finally fell silent, he looked at Oswaldo who had paled significantly and now had his own tears running down his cheeks. Standing up, he pressed the button that would take him to ground level. They rode up in silence before Feli finally stepped out, he turned around and muttered, “Don’t bother coming back home,” before walking out.

Ludwig’s fists curled tightly in his lap as he stared his family down. It had been close to ten minutes that none of them had said anything after they finished telling him what part he’d played in the plot Wolfgang and Romulus had devised. His brothers and in-laws all returned the stare, albeit theirs was guilty in comparison.

Licking his lips, Ludwig finally concluded, “So all this time...you never really cared if I was happy with Feliciano or not, you just wanted me to sleep with him so that word could get to Natalya and she’d get Ivan to break the deal.”

“That’s not it at all,” gasped Elizabeta. She pulled on the sleeves of her sweater dress, “Sweetheart, we genuinely believe that you two are perfect for each other and we weren’t wrong, were we? You actually fell in love with him.”

“That’s beside the point,” snapped Ludwig, he glared at his three brothers, “Just the fact that you all conspired and used me like that—”

Gilbert shook his head, “West, aren’t you happy, though?”

“Of course, I’m happy with him, but do you have any idea the hell we’ve been through? The hell he’s going through?! You’re not the ones who have to go home and hope to god that he hasn’t gone off the deep end.” Ludwig stood up and started to pace as everything started to make sense. Like the fact that his brothers would always push him towards Feliciano and encourage that he accept to date him. Like the fact that his father was so quick to agree that he end his engagement with Natalya. Like how his father had purposefully worded the deal breakup as to anger Ivan.

Ludwig stopped pacing and stared at Wolfgang in horror before saying, “Did you know that my bakery was going to be used as the battleground for a gang war?”

“It...it had occurred to me that it could happen, yes,” said the Beilschmidt patriarch. He quickly added, “But it was never our intention that Lilly get in the middle of—Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving.”
Roderich stood up and reached out for his arm, “Now see here—”

“No, you see here,” growled Ludwig in German as he shoved his brother off of him. “In what world is it ok to use your family like this? I mean, did Feliciano know? Was he also in on this?”

“Of course not. He would’ve never had participated or—or…” Roderich trailed off and looked away from Ludwig’s eyes.

The younger Beilschmidt nodded, “That’s right, he wouldn’t. You know why? Because he doesn’t believe in putting his loved ones in danger.”

“That’s not fair,” said Wolfgang, “You say it like I wanted you two to get hurt.”

“Why not? Sadik said that the bullet he pulled from me was from a .22 caliber, and Vash said that that was a, and these are his words, a roiled up bb gun, or the gun that is used by someone who doesn’t want to cause any serious damage. If Natalya and Ivan wanted me to believe that Feliciano was part of a mob, and that what happened that night was in fact a gang war, then that’s the kind of gun they’d have their hired hand use. It would hurt me just enough for me to see that it’s real but not enough to kill me. And the fact that you foresaw that night as a possibility, leads me to believe that maybe you and Romulus were hoping that Feli and I got shot.”

Giving them a bitter smile, Ludwig grabbed his jacket and shrugged, “After all, how hard is it going to be convincing Interpol to go bring in Ivan and Natalya into Genovia after you get the gunman to confess that he was working for them? But hey, it’s all for the greater good right? Ever the damn humanitarian, screw anyone that gets hurt in the process. Here’s hoping Uncle Magyar wins the presidency after he brings down the Russian crime syndicate’s presence in our great nation, because lord knows that the Vargas won’t be credited for it.”

“Do you love Feliciano,” asked Tino when the other Beilschmidts didn’t respond to Ludwig’s rant.

“You know I do.”

“And you’re going to marry him.”

“What are you getting at?”

Tino smoothed his face into a neutral expression, “What do you think is going to happen when he takes over as patriarch of his family and becomes King? Do you think that he’s not going to be forced into the same position as your father and Romulus? Do you think that he’s not going to be forced into making tough decisions as they have?”

When Ludwig didn’t say anything, he continued, “And do you know what the worst part is, Ludwig? He is going to make them. He’s going to send his family members out and put them in the same position as you two are in; plots are going to be made and everyone has a role in them, maybe even you. And maybe, one day, even Alex and Daniel and Sammy.”

Matthew reached out and held his husband’s hand before saying, “You know that we never meant to hurt you guys. We care for you two so much, but especially Tino, Alfred, and me. I mean, we were once Hounds too, so you can only imagine how hard it was for us to know that there was a possibility that Feliciano in particular wasn’t going to come out of this unscathed.”

Ludwig thought to how angry Alfred had been with him after learning that he had agreed to be Feli’s boyfriend. That day he and Matthew had argued before the holidays hadn’t been about Ludwig not being loyal to Natalya, but rather they not being loyal friends to the prince and withholding the fact that Ludwig was not being truthful.
“Vati might’ve told us ta help you two get togeth’r,” said Berwald softly, “but no matter how much we encouraged ya, in th’ end it was yer decision t’ be with him.”

“Teddy’s right, west,” said Gilbert, “We didn’t force you to fall in love…we just gave you a little push.”

Sighing, Ludwig ran a hand through his hair and said, “And I’m grateful for that but I don’t think you’re aware of how much stress the aftermath has placed on our relationship.”

“It worked out in the end, didn’t it?”

“Again, that’s beside the point! You remember all the horrible things I accused him of. I’m lucky that we even made it past that.”

“But you did.”

“But what if we hadn’t?!” Ludwig was breathing harshly through his nose as angry tears threatened to roll down his cheeks, “What if we couldn’t have? What if he died? What if I had died? The fact that you guys risked that—”

“We’ve all almost died at some point in our lives,” countered Roderich. “This idiot next to me got caught up in Matthew’s assignment at Disney World and almost got his head cut off. Berwald already told you about that thing that happened during Tino’s assignment in the war. And me…well, I actually almost got Elizabeta killed.”

“And that makes it ok to have put our lives on the line?”

Wolfgang sighed sadly, “No, it doesn’t. I’m so sorry, son. I…I only had—”

“The people’s best interest at heart. Ja, you’ve said that.” Ludwig toyed with his car keys before saying, “You know some of the worst things imaginable have been done with the people’s best interest at heart.”

And even as he said that, Ludwig knew deep down, that that was why the Hounds of the Republic existed. Normal people couldn’t do the things the Hounds did. Now he knew why his beloved was so resistant against his role. It was a selfish thing to consider but the more Ludwig thought about it, the more he was certain that the people didn’t deserve an angel like Feli to taint his wings with ash just so that they could live in safety.

But Feli, his sweet Feli, was slowly proving himself not be an angel but rather a Hound who would bite back if provoked enough. The thought wouldn’t have bothered him as much if it weren’t for the fact that the transformation from a cherub to a canine was slowly driving his beloved to madness.

He wasn’t going to stand by something that was doing more harm than good, so Ludwig shook his head, “I’m sorry, but I can’t forgive this. Maybe someday, but not today. You don’t live with Feli, and you don’t see what I see.” With that, Ludwig walked out of the house and straight to Alex’s school to pick him up. What he didn’t know was that his family knew all too well what he was talking about, they themselves having to live through a dark period in their own relationships. Wolfgang knew this better than any of his children. He only hoped that his son would find it in his heart to forgive him so that he could learn the story of how he fell in love with a man who was destined to be king but dreamed of a life as a peasant.

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Feliciano stared at the ripples created by the water drops slowly dripping from the tub faucet. His eye was red and puffy from all the crying he’d done after he gotten home but just when he thought he no longer had tears to shed, a new wave overtook him. He’d seen the man again after he left V Enterprises and had gone straight home in hopes of forcing himself to calm down, but the events over the past few weeks kept haunting him and all he wanted to do now was scream until he couldn’t scream anymore.

This had to be some kind of nightmare. A twisted hell that his mind had conjured up after he maybe fell or something. Had he died in the confrontation with Donovan and Shane? He was starting to wish that he had. Closing his eye, he leaned back in the tub. He wasn’t sure when was the last time he’d taken a siesta, but right now it felt like he was due in for one.

He could still hear the voice but as soon as the pills had taken effect, it sounded muffled. Despite knowing how absurd it was, Feli couldn’t help but wonder if he’d ticked it off by doing so, for now it was almost screeching at him.

“So long as it’s muffled, I don’t mind,” he murmured to himself sleepily as he lowered himself a bit further into the tub so that the water covered his mouth. His earlier fit was still fresh in his mind. When he opened his eye, he froze. There sitting in front of him was himself, eyepatch over eye and everything.

Taking a sip from his wine glass, his doppelganger frowned, “Now is that anyway to treat me? After all I’ve done to stick around and help you during this trying time.”

“This isn’t real,” whispered Feli as he sat up, his tongue feeling like cotton in his mouth.

“It’s not?” The doppelganger looked at his own body and pinched his own cheek, “It looks real.”

Shaking his head, Feli rubbed at his temple and closed his eye shut before opening it again. Sure enough, his doppelganger disappeared with no evidence of it ever even being there. Feli pulled his legs to his chest and whimpered miserably. His mind was fucking with him, blurring the line between what was real and what was not, confusing the thoughts in his head, stirring them until they were chaos.

A giggle echoed within the bathroom and it took Feli one horrifying second to realize that it had come from him. He pulled his hands away from his face and looked at his palms, “What’s happening to me?”

“You know what it is,” whispered his reflection. It started at him sadly, “Why fight me still?”

“I can’t be crazy right now. Please…please just go away. I don’t want to be you.” The hollowness in Feli’s chest was becoming far too painful for him to bear but he forced himself to fight through it as he continued to whisper pleas for himself to be better.

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Ludwig let himself and Alex into Feli’s side of the penthouse and they were welcomed by an entourage of animals. Aster stayed back but the younger dogs, especially Berlitz, jumped on Alex happily. The boy giggled and patted each one before commanding them to calm down. When they obeyed, he ran to the kitchen to find them a treat.

Ludwig shook his head fondly as his dogs followed Alex eagerly. He glanced around for Feliciano and when he didn’t find him, he called out, “Feli, we’re home!”

There was no response.
“Feli?”

“Papa,” called Alex from the kitchen but that too was met with silence. He came out and looked to Ludwig in confusion, “Isn’t papa home? We saw his car in its parking spot.”

“He may be taking a shower,” said Ludwig, “Hold on, let me go check.”

Despite what his other father-to-be said, Alex silently followed after Ludwig but stopped when he heard quiet whispers from the other side of the bathroom. His heart broke a little upon realizing that it was Feli and that he was talking to himself again. Glancing up at Ludwig, he knew that the German was also feeling sad at not being able to help. But he quickly got an idea.

“Vati?”

Ludwig glanced down, “Ja?”

“Don’t be sad. I know what we can do to cheer papa up. Come on!” Alex tugged on Ludwig’s larger hand and pulled him towards the living room where a basket of mail was sitting on the coffee table. He let go of Ludwig’s hand and went to dump it all on the table before shifting through the correspondence. A large yellow envelope addressed to the Vargas-Beilschmidt family was at the very bottom and Alex pulled it up with a triumphant giggle. He handed it over to Ludwig and said, “I saw this in Uncle Ozzie’s car when he picked me up the other day. It’s a flyer to the Ph-phantom of The Opera.”

Ludwig opened the envelope and it was indeed a flyer to the newest production of the Phantom of The Opera starring Eric and Felicia Vargas. The two cousins were shown in their costume with a brief summary of their achievements as well as a synopsis of the musical. Frowning in confusion, Ludwig looked at Alex, “This is lovely, but it’s not yet ready for the public to see.”

“I know, but uncle took me to go see a rehearsal and Aunt Felicia was singing with a man who plays her loved one. In the song, auntie was sad and scared like papa but her boyfriend sung a song and helped her feel better. Maybe if you sing a song to papa, he’ll feel better too.”

“It doesn’t work like that, son. I don’t think—”

“Please! Vati,” pleaded Alex, his own blue eyes widening as he tugged on Ludwig’s hand again. “Papa doesn’t deserve to feel sad. You can call Mr. Arthur and ask if I can spend the night with him and Danny and Sammy and Mr. Alfred. Or you can even call Uncle Ozzie or Grandma Nicola, but please try. Please?”

Ludwig finally gave in with a sigh, “Ok. I’ll see what I can do…but I’ll have you know that I’m not the best singer unlike your uncles or even papa.”

“I like your singing,” said Alex innocently. “Your voice is deep and warm; makes me feel safe.” He released his hold on Ludwig and dashed to his room to prepare an overnight bag while Ludwig made the phone call to Arthur before researching the song Alex was talking about.

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25 minutes later

There had to be something to distract him, something that he could focus on instead of the damn voice insisting that it was him. Feli caught sight of Ludwig’s silver razor sitting in its box, its freshly sharpened blade practically winking at him.
Feli shook his head, “What am I thinking?! I can’t do that…it would break Ludwig’s heart.” He couldn’t do that to him.

“What would,” asked Ludwig as he entered the bathroom in nothing but boxers and his towel over his shoulder. He smiled shyly at his little Italian and motioned at the tub, “Room for one more?”

“Wh-where’s Alex?’

“Arthur took him and the boys to the movies. They’re going to stay the night in my side of the penthouse.” He shifted from one foot to another before asking again if he could get in with Feli.

Feli nodded and turned on the hot water to refresh the bath. He moved forward to allow Ludwig to slide in behind him and whimpered when the blond wrapped his arms around him. His breath increased as he thought about what he was going to tell him.

Rubbing his hands along Feli’s arms, Ludwig gently hushed him, “Shh, it’s ok, liebe.”

“But Luddy, I went to HQ and—”

“I know, my little fox. My father and brothers told me.” He rubbed Feli’s belly as he tried to fight his own sadness but Feli stopped his hand and turned around to face him.

“Luddy, you have to know, I didn’t know anything about that. I would never…I’d never do that to you.”

“I know. I didn’t know about it either but something should’ve told me that something was off when my father jumped at the opportunity to break the deal with Ivan.”

Feli’s stomach churned at the mention of his friend. That was another asshole to add to his ‘Not happy with’ list. He curled against Ludwig’s chest and glared at the faucet, “What do you think about him?”

“Ivan?”

“Yeah.”

“Well…honestly? He’s kind of intimidating but I’m not scared of him. I don’t know him all that well but I do know how much he was depending on the deal to raise his company. I guess if you make someone desperate enough, they’re willing to do anything to get what they want.” Ludwig said the next part carefully, “Even turning on your friends.”

Sighing, Feli pulled Ludwig’s arms around him tighter, “Ve, I’m so stupid. My family tried to warn me about him and I didn’t listen. I also should’ve seen the signs that they were up to something.”

Ludwig smiled at the verbal tick he’d grown so fond of and nuzzled his face in Feli’s hair, “How are you feeling, liebe?” He prayed that Feli would be honest with him.

There was a moment of silence, Feli trying to figure out how to put his current mental state into words that wouldn’t frighten his fiancé. When he couldn’t come up with anything, he all but tried to get even closer to Ludwig, “I’m not doing well, Tesoro.”

“How can I help?”

“I don’t know, but I’m scared, Luddy.”

“What are you scared of, liebe? Tell me and I’ll do my best to protect you.”
“I…I’m hearing things.” Feliciano winced as he heard the voice huff in disapproval before adding, “I hate it. It reminds me of when I was a bambino and all I heard was this little boy in my head telling me that it was my fault that my dad died. He told me that I was a coward and that I should let him take over me because he was better than me.”

Voice cracking, Feli started to shiver despite the warm skin behind him and the slight steam rising from their bath. Tears resurfaced to his eye and he added, “I thought I got rid of him when Ozzie was helping me, but he’s back. I don’t think my medicine is working anymore.”

“Feli, when did this start?”

“I think it—I think it was after the fire on New Year’s Eve and I started to have night terrors. It would whisper slowly to me but then Oswaldo got me medication and it went away. Then when I was in a coma, I dreamt that I kept trying to leave my house but every door I took kept taking me back to the same corridor. I heard it there again.”

Feli’s body shivers became stronger and Ludwig had to curl his legs around him to keep him from freaking out too much, “If it’s too much, liebe, you don’t have to keep going. I think I understand.”

“No, Ludwig. Y-you said that we had to be honest with e-each other,” stuttered Feli, “that’s what I’m going to do. You need to know. When I was in that coma, I felt it like when I was a boy. It’s even worse when I’m alone because I feel like he’s there with me—No! I know he’s there. Even though I’m awake, I know he’s still there in my mind. Every time I look in the mirror, he’s staring back at me, watching me. Wanting me. I can’t escape his face, Luddy.

“And he’s saying so many things to me. He’s trying to pull me down but I’m not letting him. I can’t let him get me again. He almost did in the elevator with Oswaldo but I controlled myself. Only…only I said really nasty things to him.”

“To Oswaldo?”

“…yes.”

“Feli, before you said that this thing was an it and now you’re referring to it as he and him. Why? Who is it saying it is?”

“M-me but not me.”

“What do you mean?”

“He says that his name is Feliciano, but that’s not right because I’m Feliciano not him,” murmured Feli with his lips downturned.

It was like something from a horror film. Ludwig couldn’t, well no, he could, believe that his little fox was suffering something so terrible. Hell, if he had voices whispering to him he’d probably freak too. But, Oswaldo hadn’t said anything about multiple personality disorder or schizophrenia within Feliciano. What else could it be? Making a mental note to research it, or rather, call Dr. Amara first thing in the morning, he reached over to unplug the water and stood up with Feli so that he could dry them off.

Feli stepped away as soon as he was dry and went straight to his bedroom window where he could see the sky. Very few stars littered the night sky but it was enough to calm him down a bit. Crouching down, he wrapped his arms around himself protectively and ducked his head down to push out the voice whispering, ‘You should’ve just lied to him, you idiot. Now Ludwig is going to think you’re a bigger freak than he originally thought. He’s going to leave you. He’s not going to
want to stay with someone as broken and crazy as you. Who in their right mind would? But that’s ok cause you have me.’

“You’re wrong,” said Feli miserably, “He loves me.” He gasped when he felt something warm and soft being draped around his shoulders and before he knew it he was back in Ludwig’s arms. Glancing at his arms, his eyes widened at the familiar blue shawl Ludwig had made for him for Christmas with all his favorite constellations sewed in with delicate white yarn that sparkled in the light.

“I love you,” murmured Ludwig in his ear, “I love you more than I ever dreamed I could love someone. You hear me, Not-Feliciano. I love him and there isn’t a damn thing you can make my little fox say or do to ever change that. There is only one and he’s standing right here in my arms.”

Feli looked at him with a wide eye, “But Luddy, I’m—”

“Sick right now, liebe, that’s all. Whatever this is, I won’t let you go through it alone.” Bringing the his fiancé’s hand up to his lips, Ludwig made sure to kiss every digit lovingly before kissing the knuckles, “You told me once that it doesn’t count if I only love you when you’re at the top of the world. Well, you’ve fallen but that hasn’t changed how I feel about you. Let me help you rise again, liebe.”

“But that’s not fair to you.” Feli turned around to be able to cup Ludwig’s cheek, “You’re hurting, too. I can see it in your eyes. It’s not fair that you only worry about me and not about you.”

“Are you worried about me?”

“Of course!”

“I’m worried about me, too,” confessed Ludwig before kissing Feli’s palm, “But I’ll be ok. Let’s take this one step at a time, ok? We’re not just Ludwig and Feliciano anymore. We’re Ludwig and Feliciano. We’re a team and we can work together to get better.”

Feli watched as Ludwig kept pressing kisses on his palms, his lips sending warm tingles up his arms before shaking his head, “But…but what if you get tired of trying to fix me?”

Now Ludwig saw why Alex had suggested that particular song. After the Kirkland-Jones clan had come to pick him up, Ludwig had done a quick search on Youtube for that particular scene and it was almost a mirror image of the situation he and Feli were in. Well, with the exception that the phantom wasn’t just a man in a mask but rather a dark part of Feli that had been awoken after all the mental stress he’d been under as of late.

Pulling away from Feli to turn on the ceiling so that they were under a blanket of stars—something he’d noticed that Feli responded very well too when he wasn’t feeling well, and based on how his little fox’s attention was now on the constellations above, he knew he was onto something—he took advantage that Feli was distracted so that he could turn on the speakers. The beginning notes to *All I Ask of You* started to play in the background as Ludwig felt a blush creep onto his face. Realizing that they were both still very naked, Ludwig decided that perhaps it was for the best. They were both vulnerable and he wanted Feli to see that he meant every word he was about to sing to him. He took note of a few teardrops still clinging to Feli’s eyelashes and the ones still left unshed in his eye and gently took his chin so that he could coax his attention back to him.

Heart beating wildly in his chest, Ludwig licked his lips and softly sang to Feli, “No more talk of
darkness, forget these wide-eyed fears. I’m here, nothing can harm you; my words will warm and
calm you.” He ran his hands through Feli’s damp red hair before carefully wiping Feli’s tears
away, “Let me be your freedom, let daylight dry your tears. I’m here, with you, beside you. To
guard you and to guide you.”

Ludwig’s cheeks deepened in color when he remembered that the song was a duet. Damn! He
hadn’t planned this as well as he thought...

To say that Feli was shocked was an understatement but he found Ludwig’s attempt to cheer him
up endearing. Glad that he’d gone to Eric’s debut as the phantom a few years ago, Feli reached into
the depths of his fragile mind and retrieved the verses for the duet before his Luddy regretted what
he started. Smiling genuinely for the first time in, well what felt like forever, he sang just as
timidly, “Say you’ll love me every waking moment. Turn my head with talk of summer time. Say
you’ll need me with you now and always.” Taking Ludwig’s hand away from his face and into his,
Feli sang almost pleadingly, “Promise me that all you say is true; that’s all I ask of you.”

Ludwig let out a breath he hadn’t been aware he’d been holding. He gently squeezed Feli’s hand,
“Let be your shelter, let me be your light. You’re safe, no one will find you. Your fears are far
behind you.”

Feli looked out the window towards their city, “All I want is freedom; a world with no more
night,” before turning back to Ludwig, “and you always beside me to hold me and to hide me.”

“Then say that you’ll share with me one love, one lifetime.” Ludwig let his hands travel down to
Feli’s hips and started to slowly sway him to the music, “Let me lead you from your solitude. Say
you’ll need me with you here beside you. Anywhere you go let me go, too. Feli, that’s all I ask of
you.”

Grinning, Feli wrapped his own arms around Ludwig’s neck, “Say you’ll share with me one love,
one lifetime. Say the word and I will follow you.”

Ludwig returned the grin and together their voices melded, “Share each day with me, each night
each morning.”

“Say you’ll love me,” cooed Feli as he stood on his tiptoes to kiss Ludwig’s cheek.

Rubbing his nose against Feli’s affectionately, he pecked it before responding, “You know I do.”

“Love me,” they murmured together, their lips inching closer, “that’s all I ask of you.” They met
each other halfway in a kiss and Ludwig picked Feli up and backed up towards the bed to take a
seat, making sure that Feli was settled in his lap. When they pulled away, both had a happy blush
gracing their cheeks, “Anywhere you go, let me go too.” Ludwig once again caressed Feli’s cheek
as they mumbled against each other’s skin, “Love me…that’s all I ask of you.”

They fell back onto the bed and crawled under the sheets, Feli making sure that his shawl was
safely folded on his nightstand before curling against Ludwig’s smooth chest. Pressing a kiss to his
pec, Feli couldn’t help but feel guilty at how his gloom suddenly returned. Ludwig noticed and
kissed his forehead, “I’m not going to fix you but I will definitely help you as much as I can. I
know a song isn’t going to cure you, liebe, nor will all the kisses in the world, but I hope you know
that I’m with you in this.”

“Grazie, amore mio,” murmured Feli. He shifted uncomfortably before blinking at Ludwig’s
extended palm, or rather what was sitting in the middle of said palm. He glanced up at Ludwig.
“Ve?”
“Since you missed your appointment with Dr. Amara, she emailed Oswaldo a prescription who then forwarded it to me. This is a sedative, liebe. It’ll help you get some rest. Don’t worry, it’s just until you get to talk to her.”

Feli took it obediently with a small glass of water before settling back next to Ludwig. The effect was almost instantaneous and before he knew it, his lids started to feel heavier. Ludwig kissed him again, “Good night, liebling. Ich liebe dich.”

He watched Feliciano until he was sure he was fast asleep before shifting them around so that he could make himself comfortable as well. Once he was settled, Ludwig thought about what Tino had said earlier that afternoon.

So that was what he was getting himself into…

Everything was falling into place in terms of what kind of world the Vargas and their associates were involved in, and Ludwig was starting to understand how different his life was going to be. Chances of him being a simple doctor moonlighting as a casual baker on the side were cast aside. If he stayed, he wouldn’t be able to live a normal life.

Looking to the sleeping man in his arms, Ludwig felt his heart flutter before lulling back into a peaceful calm.

There were so many reasons why he shouldn’t have promised Feli all those things. Millions in fact. There was no guarantee that he could make it out alive…not really. Despite all the protection and all the careful planning, it would only take a single bullet and their life would end in an instant. Deep down, Ludwig figured that Feli knew this and was probably scared of losing either him or Alex, or anyone else in his family for that matter; never mind that he was next in line to be king of a criminal empire.

How strange that he’d been sucked into a modern-day fairytale. A twisted fairytale, but one nevertheless. Would there be times when he’d slip away from him in the middle of the night like he used to when he’d go train with the others? What about the days when he’d have to go to sit downs with other less favorable dons? What if they tried something?

If the Vargas agreed to be used as players in a very dangerous game, then that meant that they had opponents that wanted them gone. And that was just simple politics! If they ever found out that they were being played for fools then it would only get even more dangerous.

Ludwig pulled Feli closer to him.

Feli. His beautiful, sweet, good, Feli. He was a prince…no—a slave, to that life. All of the Vargas were. And if that was true…what would that make him after they got married?

A queen, they had said.

A queen who would be the one waiting for his king to return to him in their cold bed, every second spent waiting, feeling like torture.

Yeah, there were a million reasons to let go, to just pack up and leave. Feli wouldn’t blame him, hell, no one would. It was the logical thing to do and maybe even the only thing to do. As a matter of a fact, now that Ludwig thought about it, he was pretty sure Feliciano was prepared to accept that to be his choice that night at the hospital before they made up.

But he couldn’t.
Or rather, Ludwig didn’t want to. For better or worse, his heart wanted this. He wanted this. He wanted to stay beside Feliciano and help him rule both sides of the business.

He wanted to help raise Alex and any other child they had.

It wasn’t as if that weren’t an option. As dangerous as things were, Nicola and Marzia, hell even Paolo raised their children just fine. Aside from the fact that they were lying bastards, something that he and Feli would probably forgive in the future after the dust settled and everything was back to normal.

Glancing back at Feli and the sun tattooed over his heart, Ludwig traced the sun rays with his finger. He said they’d be ok and he meant it. It was only a matter of both of them working together to make it through whatever life threw at them.

With that in mind, Ludwig kissed Feli’s forehead and rested his chin above his head so that he could fall asleep as well. They may have been thrust at each other without them realizing but they were now joined together by their own choosing and he’d be damned if he was going to allow anyone or anything to take this away from him.

April 8, 2014; 7 Weeks After The Shooting

The small family was happily munching on breakfast when the call came. Feliciano had been feeling a bit better and answered it while Ludwig finished booking their bed and breakfast in Bellagio. His fiancé had insisted in just staying at one of the houses his family owned, but Ludwig had wanted it to be a real vacation. Eventually they’d make their way to one of the houses, or maybe even buy one that they could call their own.

Alex had been thrilled at the idea of going to Italy, he never having been before, but not as thrilled as when he learned that he was being pulled from school as well to be homeschooled by none other than Feli himself. What with the Italian no longer a doctor, he could do it. Not to mention that it would serve as a good distraction.

Of course, before that could happen, Feli would need to speak to Dr. Amara and get himself better. Until then, Nicola, whom Feli could never be mad at, volunteered to start the homeschooling as soon as they got back. Things were really looking up for the family.

That is, as soon as Feli took the call.

The caller ID showed that it was Michelle, their lawyer helping with Alex’s adoption, so Feli answered immediately, figuring that perhaps she was calling to give him an update. He smiled happily when she told them that they needed to go down to the court and nodded, “Si! Si, we’ll be right down as soon as possible! Grazie!”

Feli hung up and quickly ushered Alex to wash his face, “Ludwig, hurry and get ready.”

“What’s going on?” Ludwig watched as Feli ran back towards their room, striping down to his boxers along the way and asked, “Who was that?”

“Michelle. She said that Judge Maxwell is ready to give us our final hearing for Alex! Ve~ Finally, things are turning around for us!” Feli tried to pull on his trousers while brushing his teeth and Ludwig couldn’t help but laugh.
“Slow down, liebe. We’ll get there.” He kissed Feli’s shoulder and reached out for his own toothbrush.

When they were all ready, Ludwig decided to drive out of fear that Feli’s excitement, though justified, would transfer into his driving. Alex hugged his bumble bee next to him in the back seat and smiled at Ludwig through the rear view mirror. At long last, he was officially going to have a family just like Danny and Sammy. Blushing, Alex leaned against the window and smiled.

It was surprising to Ludwig and Feli to find that their family had shown up to the court house as well. But then again, it really shouldn’t have. They all, save for Nicola, Marzia, Lilly and Vash, had a look to them that reminded Ludwig and Feli of how their pets would look after they did something that had upset them.

What surprised Ludwig even more was how Feli blatantly ignored Oswaldo and went straight into the courtroom after greeting his mother and aunt. Ludwig watched with a heavy heart how Ozzie’s shoulders fell as he pocketed a black box into his jacket. He reached out and tugged on his arm as everyone else ushered into the courtroom.

Ludwig waited until they were alone before asking, “How are you holding up?”

Oswaldo shrugged, “I’m holding.”

“Feli told me about what happened with you two at V Enterprises.” Catching Oswaldo’s eye, he nodded towards Feli, “You know he didn’t mean it.”

“Nothing he said wasn’t unwarranted.”

“I’m pissed too, Oz.”

“I know. Sorry, by the way. It wasn’t personal or anything…”

“I know.”

Oswaldo shifted awkwardly before reaching into his pocket again, “Here. I—uh, I made this for him. I know it’s not going to regain his trust but I figured he may like it.” He watched as Ludwig opened it and smiled softly, “It took me a few tries but I finally got it to perfectly align with the real thing.”

In the box was a watch but instead of telling time, it showed the position of the planets, each one represented by a tiny gem. Ludwig looked up at Oswaldo in shock, “You made this?”

“Yeah. Well, Seraph helped with the math stuff because I’m not really good at that but I put everything together. Do you think you can give it to him?”

Ludwig closed it and gave it back to the Italian, “It would mean more if you gave it to him. Maybe even come back home? I know he misses you.” After a moment, he added, “We all do, if I’m honest.”

Oswaldo’s smile damped and he shook his head, “That’s not my home, man. It was nice to pretend but after today, you and Feli are going to be a real family to Alex. I don’t belong there.” Rubbing his arm, Ozzie’s smile returned at full force but even Ludwig could tell that his heart wasn’t in it, “Besides, I’m heading up to Russia with my brothers. Don’t worry, I’ll be sure to give Ivan a good ass kicking before sending him back here.”

Handing the watch back to Ludwig, Oswaldo turned to leave into the court house. He paused and
said, “But please tell him that I love—that I said goodbye and that I hope he can forgive me someday, just as I hope that you can forgive me someday.” He pulled on his sunglasses and reached out to shake Ludwig’s hand, “Good luck, fratello.”

Ludwig pocketed the watch and shook Oswaldo’s hand, “You too.” He watched him hop into his car before entering the courtroom.

The judge was already speaking to Feli but based on the look on his face, Ludwig could tell that he was telling him something he didn’t want to hear. He glanced over to their family and their faces were contorted in both despair and anger but none were as livid as Romulus, who had his hands in tight fists in his lap. Stomach collapsing in on itself, Ludwig turned to Feli who was standing up.

Feli cried, “But your honor, none of what the media accused me of is true! You know me. You know my family, we don’t—He needs me.”

Judge Maxwell’s face hardened as he showed cut outs of articles featuring Feliciano, all with horrible headlines, “Is this what he needs?! Don’t think I don’t know how miserable school has been for him or how badly he’s being treated by his peers because of you and your conduct in society.” Shaking his head, the judge put the articles aside and pulled off his glasses, “I’m sorry, Mr. Vargas but it seems to me like you need him a lot more than he needs you.”

“No,” whispered Feli in horror as he watched the judge pick up his gavel, “Please, don’t do this…”

“I truly am sorry, Feliciano, but my hands are tied. It is with a heavy heart, that I must deny you guardianship over Alexander Novak.”

“No.”

“He will be taken away from your custody—”

“No!”

“—effective immediately.” The sound of the gavel hitting the block echoed throughout the courtroom and a social worker came around to collect Alex.

Alex unsnapped his arm and the social worker accidentally tumbled back with it. He climbed onto Feli and wrapped his good arm around his neck, “No! Please,” he begged, “don’t take me away. He’s a good papa. Both him and Luddy. Please, I’m happy with them! Please! Please…”

Feli wrapped his own arms around Alex and held him tightly, taking a step back as the social worker and the bailiff advanced towards him. His eye was red with unshed tears as he begged the judge once more, “Don’t do this, please. I’ll do anything, but please don’t take him away from me.”

“Mr. Vargas,” said Maxwell sternly, “surrender the boy or I will be forced to take action against you.”

Both their hearts were racing rapidly and Feli felt Alex tighten his hold around his neck, hot tears wetting the collar of his shirt. Biting back every shudder and sob that was raking through his body, Feli nodded slowly, “Can I at least say goodbye?”

Alex looked to the judge pleadingly and Maxwell’s face softened considerably. He reached out a hand to stop his bailiff and the social worker, “Give them a few moments, but I expect full compliance and no nonsense afterwards.”
Lowering Alex down to the ground, Feli knelt down so that they were at eye level. He smiled warmly, wiping the tears from Alex’s face with his handkerchief, “Don’t cry, cucciolo.” Feli pulled him into a hug and whispered, “I won’t stop fighting for you, my little love. I won’t. I’m going to fight till my dying breath.”

“I love you, Feli,” whispered Alex back as he burrowed his face into Feli’s chest and hugged him tightly, “You were the best papa I could ever have asked for. You and Ludwig.” Peering at the judge out of the corner of his eye, Alex thought silently to himself before reaching up to gently touch Feli’s cheeks, right where the bullet had pierced him, “Please don’t get in trouble for me. You...you’re a good man. Even if we can’t...even if we—even if you don’t get me, you’ll always be my papa.”

Feli breathed out a chuckle, his whole being feeling the rip of fatherhood from its person, but he put on a brave face for his little pup. He took off his golden ring baring the family crest and placed it in Alex’s palm before closing it into a tiny fist and kissed his small knuckles, “And no matter what happens, you’ll always be in my heart. Always.”

Judge Maxwell cleared his throat and Feli once again swallowed a whimper before giving Alex a final hug. The social worker reached out for Alex’s hand but he dodged it and ran back to hug Ludwig, “I love you too, Vati. Please take care of papa.”

Ludwig hugged him back and kissed his head, “I will, son. I love you so much.”

Letting go of his dad, Alex glared at the social worker and judge, “Can I say something?” He didn’t wait for permission and continued, “What do you know about what’s good for me? I’ve been at the orphanage since I was a baby because my parents didn’t want me. Megan is a good lady but even she couldn’t find me a home.” His small body shook with emotion but he held his head high, “But I found one. It maybe was on accident but I found it all on my own. It may not be big or normal but it was good.” He looked over his shoulder to the Vargas and at Feli and Ludwig before smiling sadly, “Ja, molto bene.”

Taking the social worker’s hand, he allowed her to take him out of the room. As soon as he was gone, Feliciano turned to Michelle, “Start the appeal.”

Michelle moved one of her long pigtails over her shoulder and reached out to touch Feli’s arm, “Honey, we have to wait a month before we can do that and even if it’s accepted you have to prepare yourself to fight an uphill battle. I don’t know what made Judge Maxwell change his mind, but whatever it was, it’s going to take a lot to make him change it back.”

“What are my chances?”

“Do you want my honest opinion or an optimistic opinion?”

“Please be honest.”

“Right now, you’re looking at a 35 percent chance that they’ll even look at the appeal. They’re going to put Alex back in the system and people are going to trip over themselves to take him.”

Feli gasped, “What why?”

“Because you want him. As terrible as that sounds...even if they reconsider your application for adoption, your chances are even worse that you’ll get to adopt Alex.”

That was it.
That was all it took.

Feli felt all remaining hope drain from his heart and he fell silent. Without so much as a second glance to anyone in the room, he slowly walked out. He made it to the restroom and locked himself into a stall where he collapsed onto the ground, his head slamming back to the wall as his pain manifested into heartbroken howl.

Life, as it would seem, wanted to see him broken, and now he was.

Biting his fist, he moaned in agony, the sound reverberating from his chest. Feli pulled his fist away from his mouth and punched the door repeatedly until he couldn’t feel the sharp jolts of pain run up his arm. He stopped when he caught sight of his reflection in the metal of the stall. It was red faced and scarred and, well, he was wearing an eye patch for god’s sake.

He couldn’t even recognize himself anymore.

“Look at you,” it said, “Maybe it’s for the best.”

Feli pulled his legs into his chest and stared at his reflection with a nod. Yes, maybe it was for the best to just surrender to his darkness. Lord knew that being himself only resulted in failure. He wasn’t a doctor. He wasn’t a Hound. And now he wasn’t even a father.

He was nothing.

Nothing.

He wasn’t who he wanted to be and lord knew he wasn’t who he was supposed to be. All he was now was a failure. A nobody.

“A worthless, useless, pathetic, unworthy, unneeded, waste of space, who only ruins everything he’s ever touched.”

“A nobody,” whispered Feli, feeling the weight of everything crush him.

“They will all leave you. Don’t you see?”

“Yes, I see.”

“It’s only a matter of time before Ludwig abandons you too.”

Feli whimpered at that before curling in on himself further when a knock came to his stall. He stood still when it opened to reveal a worried Ludwig. His beloved tried to pick him up but Feli had somehow made himself heavier. Grunting in effort, Ludwig said, “Liebling, please get up.”

“No,” said Feli in monotone.

“Get up. Your grandpa just went into the judge’s chamber with my dad…”

“Let me go.”

“… I think they’re going to try and get him to change his mind…”

“Let me go.”

“I mean, it’s the least they can do for us, right? I think they actually have a chance to—”
“God damn it,” snarled Feliciano as he wiggled away, “I said, let me the fuck go! I’m tired of all this bullshit! I’m tired of pretending that I deserve anything good to happen to me. I’m tired!”

“Feli, what are you—”

“Don’t call me that. I’m not Feli. I’m nothing!” Feliciano tried to smile but it came out as a grimace, “I don’t know why I even bothered trying to hide who I am.” He walked around Ludwig and pointed at himself in the mirror, “Look, what do you see? Cause I see a fuck up that fucks up everything he’s ever cared about.” He giggled in his throat but it came out like he was crying as he started to hit the image, “Look at that! My reflection finally shows who I really am.”

Hunched over, Feliciano laughed at Ludwig’s horrified face, “What’s the matter? Are you reconsidering what you’ve told me? Are you going to leave me, too?! Well, fine! That’s just fine, bello. Don’t let the door fucking hit your ass on the way out.”

“Liebe,” whimpered Ludwig as tears rushed to his eyes, he reached out tentatively but Feliciano slapped his hands away. He tried again, “Leibe, come back to me. You—you’re not feeling well. I know what just happened must’ve been terrible but—”

“You don’t know shit, Ludwig. I’m not who you think I am. I’m not your liebe and I’m not your little fox. I’m not your precious Feli. I’m Feliciano fucking Vargas and I won’t be hurt by people who claim to love me but really don’t.”

“But I do love you.”

“So you say.”

Ludwig shook his head and reached out to shake Feliciano roughly by the shoulders, “Snap out of it! Yes, you are Feliciano Vargas, but you aren’t an asshole. You’re a good man who just happened to have bad things happen to him. Come back so we can figure it out together.”

Feliciano snarled back, “I’m not a good man, Ludwig. I’m not a good bo—ah!”

Feli blinked slowly and brought a hand to his face. Ludwig immediately hugged him and pressed a cool hand to his reddening cheek. “I’m so sorry, Feli, but you were freaking out on me. I didn’t know how else…”

But Feli only hugged him back and whimpered, “I’m sorry, Luddy. I’m so sorry. I couldn’t—I can’t…I couldn’t block him out anymore. He was right about so many things and I feel so lost. He was right. I’m nothing.”

“Shh,” whispered Ludwig, “shh, no you’re not. You’re everything to me and Alex. You’re the whole universe to us.”

Falling into numbness, Feli pulled away and wiped his tears away, “I have to go.”

“Where are you going?”

“For a walk. I need to be alone.”

“What? No, you don’t! Here, I’ll go with you.”

“No, Luddy. I need to be alone. Go start on our luggage,” said Feli slowly, his eye dull. His lips lifted at the corners as he patted Ludwig’s shoulder, “I’ll be home soon.”
“Feli—”

“It’s ok, Ludwig. I just need to be alone for a while. I’ll be home soon.” Feli walked out of the
bathroom and out of the courthouse, ignoring a few protesters and reporters who immediately tried
to talk to him in regards of the judge’s decision to deny him Alex. They probably asked him a few
other things but he didn’t have it in him anymore to listen or care.

With the voice silenced for now, Feli continued to walk, his group of hagglers eventually leaving
him be after they realized that he wasn’t even aware of their presence. He eventually made it to a
convenience store where he bought a bottle of whiskey. Paying double for what it was worth, Feli
gulped straight from the bottle as he continued his walk around town, the amber liquid burning his
throat but even that felt better than the ache radiating from his chest.

He wandered aimlessly, expressionlessly, watching the world move around him with disinterest.
For a brief moment, he could’ve sworn he saw his doppelganger but it’s near red eyes didn’t
frighten him anymore. If anything, he raised his bottle in greeting—and if he had looked again
before moving away, he would’ve seen him frown with disapproval—before taking a deep gulp.

After a while, Feli took a seat on a bench at the park where he’d take Alex to play with the dogs.
He finished his liquor and tossed the bottle, the effects already taking over him and further muting
his sorrow. It didn’t, however, keep him from observing his surroundings. Not completely anyway.

At the tables a few meters from the playground, a little girl was waiting eagerly for her birthday
cake to be brought out while her friends all surrounded her with cheerful expressions. Feli blinked.
There was once a time where he remembered how excited he’d get over his and Lovi’s birthday.
Now…well, he was pretty sure that it come and gone without him realizing. Such things were so…
trivial now that he was—whatever he was.

The little girl made eye contact with him and smiled gummily as she waved at him. Feli glanced
away and stood back up. The last thing he needed was for her parents to assume he was there to
cause problems, though he was pretty sure that his family were the major contributors to its
maintenance. Shoving his hands into his pockets, Feli continued his walk.

~.~

Ludwig looked over the luggage he packed once again, mentally checking off the items on his list
before nodding and closing it shut. He glanced at the clock…it was well past three and there was
no sign of Feli. Reaching out to his phone, he swiped the screen and the only messages he had were
from his siblings, but he had no desire to read the ones from his older brothers just yet.

“Damn it, where are you,” he muttered as he sent him another text. He dialed Vash’s number next
and asked if it was ok if he could drop off the dogs and Johann at his house. When he gave him the
green light, he made a bag for his dogs before writing a quick note to Feli that he was going to step
out and that he would be back soon.

When he went to his car, he found that his tires had been slashed.

Ludwig stared at them for a moment, his mind not quite computing what he was seeing.

His tires had been slashed.

His tires had been freaking slashed!

But instead of losing his temper, he called for the building cabbie to give him a lift. When asked if
he minded that the only vehicle in operation was the limo, Ludwig had to suppress a shudder as he
knew perfectly well that the limo in question was rather gaudy. Within minutes, the limo pulled up to him and Ludwig settled into the back seat with his dogs as he worked on a final text for his younger brother letting him know that he was on his way.

As he did that, Ludwig didn’t notice how his dogs all suddenly stopped fussing and stared at the divider as it slowly lowered. He didn’t notice how the locks fell into place before a small pouch was tossed through and the partition raised again. So consumed was he in his thoughts of what had happened and on the whereabouts of his fiancé, Ludwig didn’t notice how gas was being released into his side of the car, nor did he notice how sleepy he suddenly became, until it was too late.

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Feli had arrived home later in the evening, feeling ill and thirsty. It didn’t take him long to realize that he was alone but before he could freak out about Ludwig walking out on him, he managed to find a note stating that he went to Vash and Lilly’s apartment to drop off his dogs and that he would be back soon.

Of course, that had been hours ago, and after checking around his own house, he noticed that there was a luggage missing from the closet. Smiling bitterly, Feli shut off his watch when it beeped/notified him to take his medicine. He took his sedative with a huge gulp of wine before going up to the roof where his telescope was. The voice, or Feliciano as both he and it were referring to it, started to talk to him again.

With the sky filled with clouds, Feli gave up on trying to look for constellations and sat on the edge of the building, nursing his bottle of wine while Feliciano spoke to him. His mental state, perhaps worsened by the fact that he’d taken a sedative with wine, had finally given Feliciano the body he always wanted. He stared at Feli from the building’s glass and Feli stared back stoically, sadly.

As much as Feli hated Feliciano for his poisonous words tainting his withering resolve, his putrid hatred towards himself was festering in his heart for allowing it to get this bad to begin with. Feliciano had a point. He was nothing anymore. He didn’t mean a damn thing to anyone but, as it would seem, to the voice that was cooing that very thought into his impressionable ear.

“There is nothing keeping us here, my love,” whispered Feliciano as he tried in vain to get closer, “but heartache and the agony that comes with knowing that those who’ve claimed to love you don’t, and that the one who you trusted to keep your heart safe doesn’t want you either.”

Feli’s lips trembled and, before he knew it, his whole body was shaking as he shook his head, saying weakly, “You’re wrong.”

“Am I? Tell me, then, where is he?” Feliciano stood slowly. Feli looked at the streets below with teary eyes before turning to the Vargas tower, then to the hospital as he too stood, his arms extending outward in a reflection of what his companion was doing.

Fat teardrops rolled down his cheek as he trembled with the thought of what he was about to do, “But he does love me. He told me he does.”

“Where is he then?”

“He said he’ll be right back,” whimpered Feli.

“He said that hours ago and he’s still not back.” Feliciano sighed, “He lied to us. He’s no better than the rest of the fucking bastards and don’t deserve your tears. You deserve more and you can
Feli sobbed silently as he turned his face towards the night sky for an answer to his troubles different from the one being offered by the monster beside him, only to find it in the same state as his mind and heart. Clouded and void of starlight.

Just like his life. Just like his troubled mind.

Taking a deep breath, he raised a foot over the edge but just as he was about to let his weight fall onto it, his cell phone lit up as it started to ring. He waited for it to stop before trying again.

His cell phone rang again, the screen insistently beaming with near blinding light.

Sighing, Feli decided to humor whoever was on the other line and glanced down to see that the screen was almost blindingly alit. He saw that it was Michelle and he answered in confusion, “Hello?” Wincing when she started to yell excitedly into his ear, he pulled the phone away before asking that she speak lower and slower.

Feliciano watched him carefully, his own phone pressed to his ear in reflection. Unlike the real man, he didn’t widen his eyes by what Michelle was telling him, nor did he feel his chest swell with hope. He glared at Feli.

“Wah?! Are you serious,” cried Feli as he listened intently. Apparently, Judge Maxwell had allowed for Berwald and Tino to foster Alex while Feli waited the month to appeal, which according to her, was going to go through and he would be allowed to adopt Alex under the condition that he and Ludwig were married and that they subject themselves through the process all over again but as a couple. It would take a few more months but there was a guarantee that they would be able to adopt him. There was also a certain probability that they would be able to return to the previous arrangement where they could foster Alex after they passed their psych evaluation. That part dampened Feli’s mood but only a bit. Smiling, he thanked Michelle before hanging up.

“Ve~”

“You don’t believe her, do you,” asked Feliciano. He smacked the wall between them and glared at Feli, “Listen to me damn it! You won’t get him. You already tried, remember? Besides, Ludwig walked out on you. ”

Feli glanced up to the sky once again, hoping to see some form of starlight but it was still too cloudy to see anything. Closing his eye, he pocketed his phone and stood pensively on the building’s ledge. His head was killing him, Feliciano’s voice still raging and echoing inside. There was still a very large part of him that wanted to just walk off the ledge. That would be so much easier. He could do it. He really could.

“Then, why don’t you? Come on, let’s do it! Don’t be a coward. It’s only going to hurt for a moment! Do it!”

“A coward,” questioned Feli.

“That’s right, you’re scared of the pain you’re going to feel on impact, but you shouldn’t be. It won’t hurt for long.”

“A coward,” said Feli again, testing the weight of the word on his tongue.

“You can’t even stand the thought of killing someone. You had to let me come out and do it for
you.” Feliciano sneered, “Poor infant prince can’t do shit without me! He needs me, **Feliciano**, to do all the dirty work for him.”

Feli felt himself lifting his leg again but his promise to Alex rang through his ears followed swiftly by the one he made to Ludwig about always doing right by him, and finally the one he made to his family that night on the lake. True enough, he was livid with them but they were just that. His family.

And his family sacrificed a lot to make sure that they were all safe. To make sure that he was safe. Just like he knew that they would sacrifice more in the future to make sure that they’d continue to be safe. Wasn’t it time that he repaid the favor? Not just to them but to his fiancé. His kind and sweet and patient and understanding Luddy who probably just got caught up in his own business with his own family.

It wasn’t fair that he just assumed that Ludwig wasn’t coming back to him. Ludwig always kept his promises and it was time that he kept his.

Bringing his leg back onto the ledge, Feli opened his eye and hopped back to the safety of the roof’s deck. There were no stars for him tonight but he had a shawl in his bedroom filled with glittering constellations that Ludwig made him and no amount of clouds could take that away from him.

Feliciano panicked when he saw that Feli was staring at him now, “Wh-what are you doing? Are you crazy?!”

“No,” said Feli, “I’m just a little sick right now but I’m going to get better and reclaim what is mine. That includes my name by the way.” Scowling, Feli poked at the reflective glass panels of his window, at his reflection, “You are not Feliciano Vargas. I am Feliciano Vargas. There is only one and that’s me, and you can’t have me! I decide when to go out, not you!” He stumbled his way towards the door and muttered, “My dad didn’t die so that I could kill myself, and I’m not a coward for not killing myself. I won’t give you or anyone else that damn satisfaction.”

Feli shuffled back to his apartment and turned up Alex’s Disney playlist on his iPod to drown out the voice who kept trying to recapture his attention. He couldn’t afford to give in to it. Not again.

From the closet, he pulled out his emergency medical bag and hooked himself onto an IV drip to detox his body of the liquor and sedative and any other things he may have taken before heading into his bathroom for a shower. He made sure to wrap his arm to not get the IV wet and made quick work of cleansing himself.

When he was done, Feli then made a call to confirm with his plane that they were going to leave as soon as Ludwig came back. It was going to take a month before he could appeal to the judge but Michelle didn’t need him to be present for that. What he needed to work on was getting better so that he could pass the psychological evaluation, and he wouldn’t be able to do that here in Genovia.

Feli felt happier now that he had a plan and texted Ludwig that he was ready to go as soon as he returned, and called his mother to ask that she watch over the cats for him—and that yes, he and Ludwig were going to go away to rejuvenate and that he was going to call her as soon as he landed. Taking some stationary down with him, Feli wrote a letter to Feliks telling him that the penthouse was his to use and that he would be sure to email frequently but if he didn’t, not to worry because he was safe.

His cell phone chirped alerting him that Ludwig had texted him back and he quickly checked it:
Liebe, there was something wrong with my car so I asked the building to lend me one. Unfortunately, it’s a damn limo, but hey, beggars can’t be choosers. I’ll be there to pick you up in three minutes. Get in the back since the luggage is in the passenger’s seat…Ich liebe dich.

Feli was about to suggest that they just take his car but figured that that would mean that he’d have to go all the way back upstairs for his keys, and he really didn’t want to go up fifty floors. Besides, they were going to leave the limo behind and just take one of his family’s cars in the hanger in Italy anyway. He waved goodbye to his doorman when Ludwig finally did arrive and slid into the back like his fiancé told him to. It wasn’t long until he felt unreasonably sleepy, but he figured, what with the long day he had, that it was only a matter of time before he collapsed.

Yawning, he called up to the front, “Wake me when we get there, Luddy.” He curled into a ball on the leather seat and fell asleep so quickly that he didn’t even realize the maroon eyes staring back at him from the driver's seat.

~.~

It was the turbulence that woke Feliciano up. He snorted awake and glanced around his surroundings in confusion. When the hell had he gotten on the plane? Confused, he rubbed his eye, “Ve, Luddy? Bello, what time is it? Why didn’t you wake me?”

He was met with silence.

“Ludwig,” he called again. “Bello, are you in the restroom?” Again silence. That is until the intercom crackled with life and music started to blare from the speakers.

Be careful making wishes in the dark, can’t be sure when they’ve hit their…mark…

“What the hell?” Feli unbuckled his seat belt and wandered over to the pilot’s cabin and knocked, “Er, Corgi? Could you please take your hand away from the button that turns on the mic?”

…and in the meantime, I’m just dreaming of tearing you apart. I’m in the de-details with the devil…

The verses of the song made him feel unsettled and he knocked again, “Corgi?”

…so now the world can never get on my level…I just got to get you out of your cage…

“Corgi,” shouted Feli as he banged on the door, “Turn it down!”

…I’m a young lover’s rage, gonna need a spark to ignite. My songs know what you did in the dark…

Feeling annoyed, Feli wandered to the back of his plane and knocked on the bathroom, “Ludwig, can you come and tell Corgi to turn it down?” He waited for a response but didn’t get one. Annoyance turned to fear as he knocked again, “Luddy? Luddy why aren’t you answering?”

Throwing caution to the wind, Feli opened the door to the bathroom only to find that it was empty.
He frowned, “What? Ludwig, where are you?”

He checked his phone and saw that he’d missed a lot of calls. Feli’s frown deepened as he sprinted back to the pilot’s cabin door and knocked, “H-hey, Corgi? Can you please turn it down? I really need to talk to you!” When he didn’t get an answer, Feli threw his weight onto the door and twisted the knob, managing to get it open. Though with what he found inside, he now wished he hadn’t. Slapping a hand over his mouth to keep from screaming, Feli backed away from Corgi’s mutilated corpse. The English Hound had been slashed viciously by knives and was lying in a pool of his own blood, a huge Acidanthera flower was painted on the glass of the window with it.

...All the writers keep writing what they write, somewhere another pretty vein just dies. I’ve got the scars from tomorrow and I wish you could see that you’re the antidote to everything except for—

Feliciano quickly shut off the song and looked around the cabin frantically for the radio.

“You cut off my favorite song” said a voice thick with an Italian accent so similar to his but Feliciano knew that it wasn’t the one he had been hearing.

Blood freezing, Feli slowly stood up and turned around just as slowly, eye widening in shock to be face to face with someone that looked eerily just like him. Luciano grinned and sang, “A constellation of tears on your lashes. I’ll burn everything you love then burn the ashes.”

“You?”

Nodding, Luciano toyed with a knife and allowed Feliciano to run past him and back to his seat to get his cell phone, “In the end everything collides…my childhood spat back the monster that you see.” He followed after Feli and pulled him to his chest before grabbing Feli’s leather bag, “My songs know what you did the dark~”

“Let go of me! What did you do to Ludwig?!?”

“He’s safe.”

Feli head butted him, reached for his phone and rushed to the bathroom before dialing Ludwig again. He yelped when Luciano banged on the door, “Ve! Luddy? Luddy?! Save me! Call the Hounds! You have to—” He screamed again when the door was yanked open.

Luciano grinned at him and dragged him out, this time making sure to strap Feliciano to himself, “You are so pathetic, you know that? Jeez.”

“What are you doing?”

“We’re going to have some fun you and I.” Luciano pulled out a grenade and yanked the pin out with his mouth. “Ready to play a game?”

Feli’s heart was about give out on itself as he struggled against Luciano, “No! Are you insane? We’re over the mountains. We’ll die!”

“Yeah, probably. So, about that game…”

“I don’t want to die,” cried Feli as he struggled against his binds, “Please, please don’t do this!”

But Luciano ignored him and he pulled on some goggles with his free hand, “So the game is called…Is there a god?” He threw the grenade towards the tail of the plane and giggled when it
All around Victrola, Genovia the Vargas were doing their own thing at the same time. Romulus was drinking his sorrow away in his Zen room when he felt a horrible pain in his heart. Marzia was in her lab working on her latest experimental trial with her serum when her test tubes shattered as a wave of sorrow washed over her, causing tears to rush to her eyes.

Paolo was drinking coffee as he briefed the packs of Hounds heading over to Russia to group with operatives already in the process of integrating with local gangs and syndicates when he dropped his coffee mug at the sudden burning sensation on his forearm where the Vargas Sun was tattooed, shocking all the Hounds present.

Seraph and Bernardo had been packing for their flight to Russia when they both felt the same burn, only their chests also started to ache with sadness. Exchanging glances, they looked over to Oswaldo who had suddenly started crying but they figured that it had something to do with the fact that he and Feli had broken each other’s hearts. Again.

Meanwhile on the other side of town, Lovino, who had been waiting for Francis’ arrival with Antonio, suddenly felt like something was missing. He pawed at his chest and immediately felt the urge to cry. Shaking his head, he dismissed it as being nervous about seeing Antonio again. If only he knew that his little brother, Fabrezio had felt the same thing while he was in the middle of making love to his husband half across the world.

Eric and Felicia’s voice cracked in the middle of a song during a rehearsal at the same time as this all happened and couldn’t for the life of them explain why. The director took it as a sign to call it a night.

As for Nicola, well, she had been reading a review of her power plant when her own heart felt like it was breaking. Tearing up, she put her paperwork away and searched for Gino and Johann to cuddle with her. Goodness, she hadn’t felt a pain like this since, well, since Cesare died.

And lastly, tucked safely in his bedroom, Ludwig woke up alone in his bed. No, not alone. His dogs were all piled on as they usually are, kicking and snoring and quietly barking in their sleep. Ludwig rubbed his eyes in confusion and called out, “Feli? Feli, why did you let me go to sleep? I told Corgi that we would leave hours ago. What time is it?”

Reaching out for his cell phone, Ludwig’s hand fell onto a piece of balled up paper. Confused, he smoothed it out and blinked a few times to see what it said, but the only thing that was written was check messages. Which was fine by him and all, however his cell phone was nowhere in sight.

Ludwig trudged out of his bed and searched, a sinking feeling in his body made him uncomfortable but he ignored it in favor of finding his damn phone. He searched around his room before making his way to the living room where he found that his house phone was full of messages. Yawning, he pressed the skip to last button and leaned against the counter, his stomach suddenly aching.

Feli’s voice sounded out of the message machine, “Ve! Luddy? Luddy?! Save me! Call the Hounds! You have to—” there was a scream when the sound of a door was yanked open and Ludwig stared at his machine in horror.

Another voice spoke next, “You are so pathetic, you know that? Jeez.”

“What are you doing?”
“We’re going to have some fun you and I...Ready to play a game?”

There was a sound of a struggle before Feli cried, “No! Are you insane? We’re over mountains. We’ll die!”

“Yeah, probably. So, about that game...”

“I don’t want to die! Please, please don’t do this!”

“So, the game is called...Is there a god?” There was a thunking sound of something metal falling to the ground before someone giggled. Then there was a sound of an explosion followed by Feliciano’s screams, then nothing.

Then nothing.

Then new screams, though this time it didn’t come from the machine and they weren’t frightened. They were pained and filled with heartbroken anguish.

These new screams came from Ludwig.
Chapter Summary

Ludwig and Oswaldo face the aftermath of Feli’s kidnapping...

Chapter Notes

Ada and Eliáš are the names I use for the Czech Republic and Slovakia

April 8, 2014—seconds after the explosion on Feliciano’s plane...

Alarms had startled the Hounds currently inhabiting HQ from their activities, the older ones assuring the pups that it wasn’t anything unless Alpha came on the intercom. Sure enough, Romulus’ voice called to them, assuring everyone that he was testing the alarms and to just continue whatever it was they were doing.

It hadn’t been but two minutes before the alarms sounded off again and this time it was Paolo who came on the intercom to tell them to secure the building as discreetly as possible and that they were not allowed to let anyone in or out.

Oswaldo watched his comrades do as they were told, his own brothers moving to clear out a conference room while Francis rushed in with Lovino in tow to start securing a connection to satellites to keep other officials and nations from seeing the crashed aircraft. As they did this, Paolo made sure to keep the men outside ignorant of the fact that it was Feliciano’s plane that had crashed and that at the moment, their future leader was on the verge of being pronounced dead.

“What packs are in the area,” asked Francis as his fingers rushed across his keyboard in an effort to get the exact coordinates of Feli’s plane so that they could create a temporary blind spot.

Seraph worked quickly on his own computer to search for someone who was available to go to the location, “The closest guys in the area are Mastiff’s pack and they’re in Vienna.”

“Naya’s in the area,” said Bernardo suddenly. “Yeah, she and her Diamond Dogs are working in Venice. That’s only a couple hundred kilometers from there give or take.”

“Think she can get off her knees long enough to take a call,” muttered Seraph as he continued to search for a closer pack.

Bernardo narrowed his eyes, “Don’t be an asshole. Nonno, she’s honestly the only person we should call. Despite how dad and,” he glared at his brother, “others may feel, she’s still Feli’s family. We don’t know who did this and right now, family is the only thing we can trust in.”

Quickly running through his options, Romulus nodded, “Call her in. Francis, where are we on the satellites?”
Francis’ finger hovered over the enter key, “We have control over all of the necessary ones and Lovi and I are working on deleting their footage of the past 10 minutes and forcing a loop of the footage before the crash.”

“This is only going to buy us a short amount of time before they notice what happened.”

“Bernardo, were you able to contact Naya?”

Bernardo finished his phone call and gave them a nod, “Si. She’s had her people deploy drones to the crash site. They’ll create a veil to hide it from the satellites as soon as they get there.”

“And is she going as well?”

“Yes, sir.”

Taking a deep breath, Romulus took a seat in his chair, “Bene. For now, we need to make sure that word doesn’t escape these four walls. I want a count of all the Hounds in Victrola and I want to know who the hell was piloting that plane. Oh, and for the love of God, absolutely none of this is to reach Nicola.”

“What about Ludwig,” asked Seraph without looking away from his screen, “He has the right to know what’s going on.”

Paolo answered for Romulus, “No. He’s going to want answers to questions we ourselves don’t have answers to. We’ll send for him after Naya’s report.” He turned to Oswaldo, “Do you understand son—where the hell did your brother go?”

“I don’t know, dad,” said Bernardo as he worked on the list of Hounds his grandfather wanted, “Just ‘cause we’re Cerberus doesn’t mean we share a brain.”

Pale fingers reached out to the voice machine that had fallen onto the floor and pressed the replay button. Feli’s voice sounded out of the message machine, “Ve! Luddy? Luddy?! Save me! You have to—” there was a scream when the sound of a door was yanked open.

Another voice spoke next, “You are so pathetic, you know that? Jeez.”

“What are you doing?”

“We’re going to have some fun you and I…Ready to play a game?”

There was a sound of a struggle before Feli cried, “No! Are you insane? We’re over mountains. We’ll die!”

“Yeah, probably. So about that game…”

“I don’t want to die! Please, please don’t do this!”

“So the game is called…Is there a god?” There was a thumping sound of something metal falling to the ground before someone giggled. Then there was a sound of an explosion followed by Feliciano’s screams, then nothing.

Nothing but a heart beating slowly, trying its hardest to work through its broken pieces. Ludwig’s fingers were numb and stiff from having repeated the motion of pressing down on the replay button over the past few hours. Every time he listened to his beloved’s cries for help, a little part of him crumbled and he’d break down all over again. His eyes were raw as he stared at his ceiling.
Somewhere along that time, Aster had woken from his nap and went in search of his master, his tail drooping upon stumbling on Ludwig’s current emotional and mental state.

“I don’t want to die! Please, please don’t do this!”

Aster whined when he heard Feliciano’s pleas and padded over to Ludwig, nosing his chest before forcing his large golden head under his other hand in an effort to get him to do something. The only reaction he got was a broken noise from deep within Ludwig’s throat that sounded like a mix between a sob and a wail.

Before he knew it, the golden retriever found himself in his master’s arms. Ludwig was crying into his fur as an explosion sounded from the message machine. He groaned painfully, “I love him, Aster. We were supposed to go to Italy. We were supposed to heal there so that we could come back and get married and adopt Alex. Why did this happen?” Letting go of his dog, Ludwig grabbed his machine and threw it angrily at the wall, “Why?!” He curled legs into his chest and buried his face into his arms as he pressed himself as far as he could into the wall, and continued to whisper to himself over and over, “Why did he have to die? Why? Why?”

The fucking Hounds.

Feli wouldn’t even have been on that damn plane if they hadn’t driven him to the breaking—Ludwig’s eyes shot open in realization. How the hell did he even get on the plane? He was supposed to wait for him so that they could go together. And that’s another thing, how did he get back into his apartment when the last he remembered, he’d gotten into the building’s limo?

He ransacked his mind to try and remember what happened between the moment he got into the limo with his dogs and him waking up in his bedroom. But despite how hard he tried, his mind kept coming up with a blank. Ludwig gripped his knees and looked to his machine as Feli told—no begged him—to call the Hounds.

The shrill chime of his phone went off, startling him. Ludwig ignored it and continued to wallow in his sorrow. The phone call went to his answering machine, interrupting Feli’s cries but whoever called hung up without leaving a message. He really hated when people did that but at the moment, he couldn’t bring himself to give a shit.

His poor Feli was dead—or if he wasn’t, on the verge of death while here he was safe in his damn—

The phone rang again and again the caller hung up without leaving a message. On the fifth call, the caller finally called out to him softly, “You’re killing me, Luddy.”

Ludwig’s head shot up from his arms at the voice and he scrambled to get up but Oswaldo quickly whispered, “No! Don’t move.” At Ludwig’s furrowed brow, Ozzie chuckled humorlessly, “When Feli moved into this building, we installed cameras to keep an eye on you two. Please don’t get mad, I promise I didn’t perv on you guys. A-anyway, listen to me very carefully, buddy. My dad is probably looking for me right now and this place is the first place he’s going to check, hence why I’m asking you not to react to this call.”

Sighing through the broken machine, Ozzie’s voice came out slightly garbled, “Ok, I’m seeing Vash pull up to the building. I’m guessing he’s here to see you or something. Get him out of your hair as soon as possible and come down. Go about it as normally as you can…I know this isn’t making much sense but I swear I’ll explain once you get to me. Go into the garage and take my car, I parked it in your spot and left the keys in the glove box. Also, in the glove box is a location. Go there and I’ll see you soon.”
The phone call ended and Ludwig couldn’t help but stare at his machine. Did Ozzie want to meet him to break the news that their beloved was dead? No...he sounded rather composed. Did that mean Feli was alive? Hope swelled in his chest as he tried to contain his excitement enough to make it back to his room to change without rushing. He had to act normal after all.

By the time he was done changing, Vash was already letting himself into the penthouse. The young Beilschmidt’s eyes widened at the mess, “What the hell, Lud?” Vash walked further inside and glanced around with furrowed brows before settling on Ludwig, “What happened? You were supposed to come to my place to leave your mutts and the feline but you never showed up. Lilly got worried and sent me-”

Ludwig suddenly reached out to brace his hands on Vash’s shoulders, “I need you to stay here, bruder.”

“Wait, why? Ludwig!”

“I don’t have time to explain,” muttered Ludwig as he pulled his messenger bag from his coat closet, fiddling with his safe to get the golden ring Feli had made for him. He glanced up, “Do you have a gun on you by chance?”

“Psh, asking me if I have a gun.” Vash pulled out his semi-automatic pistol and waved it around, “Of course I have a damn—wait, why?”

Ludwig walked over while sliding the ring on and took it out of his brother’s hands, “I need to borrow this.”

Vash tried to take it back, “Uh-huh, and I need to know what the hell is going on and why you need my gun.”

“Vash, I really don’t have time to explain any of this to you because, to be quite honest, I don’t know myself. I need to go now. Can you stay with the dogs?”

The younger German met his older brother’s eyes, taking note of the desperation and sorrow in them. Sighing, he nodded, “Just don’t do anything stupid, Luddy.”

“I can’t make any promises.”

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As Ludwig sped down the street, weaving through lanes that had absolutely no business being as busy as they were so early in the morning, he held onto the steering wheel tightly. Feli’s cries kept forcing their way into his mind but he tried to push them out. Pressing the gas pedal harder, he made a left to turn into the parking lot a block away from where Feli’s childhood home was being reconstructed.

He walked as calmly as he could around the block until he saw the little green house on the Vargas property. Marzia had finished rebuilding that just last week…

An arm looped through his and tugged him towards the greenhouse, “It’s me. Oz. Don’t react, just keep walking.”

“Where are we going?”

Oswaldo kept silent until they made it inside the greenhouse, letting Ludwig’s arm go so that he could mess with soil on the floor, “Luddy, something terrible happened.”
Fear swelled in Ludwig’s veins once again, “So it’s true? Feli’s plane really did—”

“Shh,” hissed the Italian, slapping his dirt covered hands over Ludwig’s mouth. When he was sure the other wasn’t going to say anything, he removed them and motioned for him to follow, “We can’t be too careful right now. Tell me everything you know once we get inside.”

“Inside where? Where are we going?”

A small hiss was released when Oswaldo finally found what he was looking for in the dirt and a few panels shifted to the side revealing an entry to a tunnel. Ludwig followed after his companion and the panels shifted back. Ozzie looped their arms together and started to jog, “There are so many tunnels under the city. Our families used them during the war and now we use them as a means to get to the Hound’s Den. This one connects to another that leads right under your dad’s hospital and feeds into a larger that will take us underneath V Enterprise.”

“Why didn’t we just drive there?”

“Grandpa has everything on lockdown. No one is allowed in and no one is allowed out.”

“How did you get out?”

Oswaldo smiled grimly, “I’m a Hellhound; we’re trained differently.”

As they jogged through the tunnel, Ludwig told him about how Feli had gone off on his own after the hearing—which unfortunately had resulted in them denying him Alex—and how Feliciano had momentarily lost his senses, acting like a completely different person. Oswaldo had paled at this and forced them into a run instead.

“I’m so sorry for all of this,” panted Oswaldo, “All this shit is my fault. If I hadn’t listened to my family—”

“Who knows what would’ve happened,” grunted Ludwig as he started to feel a slight burn in his still healing leg. “This sounds like a really complicated operation.” He glanced at Oswaldo out of the corner of his eye, “Not that I’m saying you keeping quiet wasn’t an ass move, but I think they would’ve found a way to make sure Feli didn’t believe you.”

Oswaldo didn’t bother saying anything and continued to tug Ludwig along, “We still have a ways to go. How are you holding up? Do you need me to carry you?”

“I’m fine; I just want to find Feli.” Ludwig continued to tell him how they were supposed leave for Italy that night to take some time away from everything and lick their wounds, but that somehow when he left to take his dogs to Vash’s and Lilly’s apartment, his tires had been slashed. Not wanting to delay their schedule, Ludwig had just called the building’s car around to take his dogs. There was a memory gap between then and waking up back in his apartment but Ludwig tried his best to tell his friend every last bit.

“And then there was this note by my bed telling me to check my messages—Hey!” Ludwig suddenly stopped them and grabbed Oswaldo’s arm, “Didn’t you say you have cameras in my house? Can’t you see who it was that left me there?”

“I’ll comb through the feed,” said Ozzie as he tried to get them moving again, “I will. Only thing is that that floor is secured so that no one without authorization can get past the elevator. Lars designed it that way for protection.”

“Lars? As in my cousin Lars?”
Annoyed with the lack of running, Oswaldo picked Ludwig up bridal style and continued to run despite his protests, “Yeah. He inherited his dad’s architecture firm, right? Who do you think built this city? Your hospitals? Our hotels, apartments, penthouses, and just about everything else we own, aside from the power plant, was designed and made by his old man. It’s only logical we remain loyal customers.”

Renouncing his dignity this once, Ludwig glared at him, “You mean to tell me he knew all about the Hounds of The Republic and that you were using Feli and me for your plan?”

“He knows only what he needs to know about the Hounds and that’s it. Unlike your little brother, Lars doesn’t ask too many questions. Just sort of takes the money and does his job.”

There was a short disgruntled silence on Ludwig’s part before he finally told Oswaldo about the horrifying message that was left on his machine. He tightened his grip around Ozzie’s neck, “He was crying. He was screaming for me to help him! To call you guys and I just—what if he’s dead? God, what if—I can’t do this, Ozzie. I can’t—not alone. I can’t without Feli.”

It was killing Oswaldo to hear all of this but he held his emotions in check. He had to be strong now for both his and Ludwig’s sake. Gently squeezing Ludwig’s leg, he came to a stop before a door, “We’ll figure this out, amico. He’s not dead, ok?”

“How do you know?”

“It…It’s just, it’s a feeling I have. Let’s go inside and see where we are in locating him, ok? Come on,” said Oswaldo as he wiped away his tears in the same way Ludwig had wiped away his when they were talking about their shared love for Feliciano, “What’s Feli going to think if I made his favorite Luddy cry?”

Ludwig snorted softly and wiped at his own face, “Given how you didn’t want me to say anything in public about Feli, am I correct to assume that no one knows that his plane crashed?”

“Yeah. Try and keep quiet until we get to the rest of the family.”

Knocking in a rhythmic fashion, they waited until the door opened and Ozzie quickly ushered them inside. He fist bumped Beagle on the way in, “Thanks, man. I owe you one.”

Beagle waved him forward, “Damn right you do. Lord, the things I do for you.”

“Did my dad notice?”

“What do you think? He’s pissed.”

“His future queen deserves to be here.”

“What’s going on? Does this have something to do with the alarm? Did something happen?”

“The less you know for now the better, Beagle. Thanks again for letting us in.” Without waiting for his pack member to say anything else, he dragged Ludwig past other Hounds and went straight for the conference room his family was set up in.

Inside, large screens were already set in place and a bird’s eye view of the crash could be seen as people in white heavy coats worked through the still smoking debris. Paolo met his eye but didn’t say anything about Ludwig’s presence in the room. The older Italian knew deep down that Ludwig, in fact, truly deserved to see what they were about to see.
Francis had moved his computer away and was now holding Lovino firmly in his arms as the younger man trembled when they pulled out a body from the plane in a bag. He gently hushed his little brother, “There’s no guarantee that that is our petit friar.”

“Damn it, I know but,” whispered Lovino, not wanting Ludwig to hear, “but you saw how bad that plane looked! They barely put out the fire just a few minutes ago. There’s no way h-he—he s-s-survived. And his biosensor… We felt ours heat up and those things don’t lie, right? What if…,” he broke down in a broken sob before shaking his head. No. No. His brother was alive. He was.

He had to be.

Another screen came to life. This time there was a woman Ludwig had never seen before standing before a camera as she fixed it so that they could get a proper look at the autopsy table inside the tent. She already had on a surgeon’s mask and dark goggles and was now slipping on a lab apron, “I’m sorry for the delay, Romulus. I arrived as soon as I could.”

“It’s fine, Naya,” said Romulus tightly, “Did you receive the DNA information?” At her confirmation, his gaze shifted to the other screen with the airplane, “What can you tell me about the crash?”

“My pack found the tail a few kilometers from here,” she said as she pulled on latex gloves, “I only skimmed the body of the aircraft but from the way the metal curls outward, I believe a bomb of some sort blew the tail off. I’ll know for certain as soon as my brother finishes the test—”

The woman—Naya—cut herself off mid-sentence when she finally noticed Ludwig standing in the room. The poor man had pressed himself against the wall furthest away from the screens and was staring at them with a pained expression. She sighed and removed her mask and pulled back her hood revealing blonde choppy hair and red painted lips with small metal studs poking from the bottom lip. Two more piercings peeked through her bangs from her eyebrow and another barely visible at the bridge of her nose from under her goggles.

She gave a polite bow to him and smiled sadly, “I’m sorry, Ludwig, for meeting you under these circumstances. I promise you that I’m going to get you some answers.” Naya pointed to her goggled covered eyes, “With these, you’ll see everything I see.”

Ludwig glanced around the room, the others staring at him to see his response, before giving her a quick nod, “Thank you.”

Quickly putting her mask on again, she motioned for the first body to be brought onto the table. The flesh and face had been severely burned; it has hardly noticeable if there was a tattoo etched over the pectoral like Feli had. Everyone watched anxiously as she worked diligently, murmuring to each other as they passed on their findings to Oswaldo and Ludwig.

Three Hounds stationed in Victrola were missing, all of them alive. As the records showed, they were Corgi, a British Hound that was from Seraph’s pack and the pilot assigned to fly Feliciano and Ludwig to Italy as the manifest in their systems stated. Maltese, an Italian Hound from Bernardo’s pack and the man assigned to guard the planes owned by the Vargas at the airport hangar that evening. And lastly Dalmatian. Why this Hound was missing was beside them. He was always stationed inside V Enterprise; his natural disposition to ward off people who didn’t belong in the building was the sole reason why he was in the running for a promotion to get his own pack to lead. He would’ve never run off while on duty…

Ludwig half listened and half watched as Naya finished up with the first body, now running tests on tissue samples to identify the victim while another body was dragged from the wreckage. One
of the people in white whispered into Naya’s ear, his gut twisting anxiously when Naya turned back to the camera to ask, “How many people did you say were listed in the manifest?”

“Two,” said Paolo stiffly. “One of them is Alpha Greyhound and the other was supposed to be Corgi but our systems are showing that he’s still in Victrola.”

Naya tilted her head to the side, giving Lovino a quick glance before addressing Paolo again, “Then this one can’t be the prince. He doesn’t have a tattoo on him at all.” She motioned for the body to be placed on another table before she started to work on that one.

Remembering the message again, Ludwig tugged on Oswaldo’s arm, whispered, “There was a man. Feli and the pilot weren’t the only ones on there!”

“What?” Ozzie glanced up at his family before pulling Ludwig closer to whisper back, “What do you mean? Like another Hound?”

“Nein. I don’t know who it was but he was toying with him. Said he wanted to play a game called ‘Is there a God.’ I think he’s the one who kidnapped him.”

Oswaldo nodded and moved to share this information with the others while Ludwig continued to twist his ring around his finger anxiously. His attention shifted from watching what Naya was doing on the screen to glancing over at the huddled group of Vargas as they discussed quietly. He could see Romulus close his eyes in pain before shaking his head and responding to whatever Lovino asked him.

Pale hands started to shake terribly as the message from his machine replayed in his mind once again. Ludwig’s legs felt like they could barely hold him up anymore and he slid down the wall, ‘Of all the things that could’ve happened, why did this have to be it? Oh God, what am I going to tell Alex?’

He tried his best to shift his thoughts to something more positive. He really did try but images were starting to develop in his mind’s eye, now that he’d seen the actual crash site and bodies, and they weren’t helping in the slightest.

A warm hand settled on his shoulder and gently squeezed. He opened his eyes and was face to face with Bernardo, “Don’t lose hope, Luddy. They haven’t found his body yet. Maybe he wasn’t even on the—”

“We found another,” came a cry from the screen instantly making the hand on him feel like it had been dipped in an ice bath. The whole room felt like it was an ice bath.

“Fuck,” mouthed Bernardo as he stood up and ran back to stand closer to the screen, praying that it was someone else. Praying hard to let it be some poor soul who had been at the wrong place at the wrong time. As fucked up as that was.

Ludwig got up on trembling legs, forcing them to move one ahead of the other, until he too was close to the screen. One of the people in white forced the others out of the tent before closing it off and taking their mask off. He had Feli’s nose and looked strikingly similar to Naya, aside from the face piercings and darker hair. The man whispered something into her ear before she had a chance to unzip the body bag, sharing a meaningful glance with his sister.

What did that mean?!

Licking her lips, Naya backed away and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. As she did this the man turned to the camera and motioned to Ludwig, “I don’t think he should be here for this.”

“Why,” asked Francis before anyone else could. His grip on Lovino tightened, “Who’s in that
The man was about to say something but Naya stopped him, “Nico. Brother, go bring me another pair of goggles. I got blood on these. Afterwards, finish up that last body and check to see if there is a match on the DNA.” There was disorienting movement on of the screen before it went black.

“Sis, are you sure? You don’t have to do this alone. It’s…he’s not all there,” he finished in Italian.

“I’ll be fine. Go.”

From the screen streaming footage from the camera facing the tables, they saw Naya straightening out her new tools before unzipping the new body bag. She pulled out a headless person from it. Her jaw clenching and unclenching as she leaned it against her with the body’s back facing the camera.

Oswaldo came up to Ludwig and reached out to discreetly hold his hand, squeezing it as they watched Naya position the body’s fingerless hands palm-side-up on the table. A silent thought of ‘That’s not him. That’s not our angel on that table’ was shared by the two men. Ludwig squeezed back when the dark screen came back to life and Naya slid the goggles over her face again. The visual was out of focus but as soon as she turned back around, the room became a vacuum and it sucked every bit of life out of everyone present. As for Ludwig, he felt as if his heart was on the verge of shattering itself into an irreparable state. Somehow, both he and his heart were holding onto a sliver of hope that the body he was staring at wasn’t his Feliciano.

But the lacerations on the body were in places where most knew Feli had scars. On his belly, on his arms and legs and even the still healing tissue where he had been shot in his chest; they had all been reopened.

And if that wasn’t proof enough, the black sun that he wore over his heart with the V in the center was, despite how bloody and puffy the skin was around it.

Ludwig could barely register the muffled wail from Lovino as the Italian pressed his face into Francis’ chest. Francis held tightly to his adoptive little brother as he tried his best not to cry as he watched Naya move to bring a small machine over to run the DNA test.

Everyone watched as she took a sample over the tattoo and quickly inserted it to the machine. Time dragged on despite Paolo assuring them all that this one wouldn’t take as long as the others, that it was one he recognized as Blaze made. Why or how she even got her hands on something like that was best saved for a later time…

The machine started to print out a receipt with the verdict and everyone held their breath, praying to whoever would listen that it wouldn’t confirm what their eyes already did. Naya shook her head violently and balled up the receipt.

It had said positive.

Throwing the paper away, she swabbed again and ran it through the machine, again making it print its confirmation that it was Feliciano Vargas.

“No,” she whispered to herself and tried again, this time swabbing somewhere else, “No, this can’t be right. You can’t be dead. You can’t!”

Romulus swallowed thickly, speaking up for the rest of them, “Naya, dear, stop.”

“No! He isn’t dead. He can’t be! He can’t be. He—” She cracked her fingers in a nervous habit the older Italian knew signaled that she was tittering on the edge of a meltdown. Nico started to run
towards her but she stopped him with a finger, “Don’t. I’m fine.”

Naya finished swabbing the area near the body’s hands and ran it through the machine. In three minutes, it printed out its answer: negative match for Feliciano.

“What the fuck,” cried Seraph, unfolding his arms, “How’s that possible?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out.” Naya took out more strips and took various samples from the body, including again from the tattoo and ran them through a much larger machine. As she did that she examined the body once again, poking through the lacerations. It wasn’t until after thirty minutes that all the machines had beeped. Nico walked over to hand in the results of the other bodies; one of them unfortunately had been an innocent bystander on the mountain. Before she could check who the other body was, as Feliciano was the priority, she quickly looked over the machine’s findings on her samples.

“You’re going too fast,” snapped Seraph, “Slow down.”

She frowned and removed the goggles altogether, “Give me a minute. Nico, you wear these.” She flipped through the papers with her back turned to them and reread them over and over again, “This is impossible.”

“Damn it, what is,” cried Lovino this time, his voice cracking, “Is that my brother or not?!?”

“According to this machine, it is but it isn’t.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

Motioning her brother to move closer to the body, she pointed at where she got her samples from, “Everything but here is not Feli but this is and I don’t understa—oh.”

“Oh? What’s oh? What’s going on?!”

Stomach heavy with dread, the Vargas, and unfortunately Ludwig, were starting to figure out how that machine would think that the body was Feliciano and someone else. Naya glanced at her brother, “Bring me the Hound’s DNA database.”

Paolo narrowed his eyes, “How do you have that?”

“Not now, Typhon.”

Romulus shot his son a look to keep his mouth shut and not disturb her work. Now was not the time nor place.

When Nico slid in the chip containing all known Hound’s genetic information, he re-ran all the samples while Naya took out some tweezers and gently prodded the skin around the tattoo. The machine beeped quickly this time and printed out three new receipts. He waited until his sister finished before handing them to her.

Her mouth became a tight line as she nodded, “The first body was Corgi. The second is undetermined and this third one is both Feliciano and Maltese.”

“How,” asked Oswaldo. He glanced over at Bernardo’s computer screen showing the two Hounds’ vitals as alive and safe in Victrola. Especially whiplashed over Feliciano, he narrowed his eyes, “How can that be both Maltese and Fe—Alpha Pup?”
And this was where Naya bit her lip, “Well,” she motioned to the body, “This is Maltese.” Picking up her tweezers holding up flesh tattooed with the Vargas Sun, “And this is Alpha Pup.” She motioned her brother closer to show the smooth skin underneath where she removed the large patch, “Someone put this on Maltese so that we would think it was Feli.”

Ludwig stared at the bloodied flesh held by the tweezers and felt ill. He knew that skin. He knew how it felt when his fingers brushed against it, knew how it tasted when his tongue danced across the sun rays. He knew the warmth that it gave him when he pressed his ear against it and heard Feliciano’s steady heartbeat. Now, though, seeing it away from its body, it made his heart clench painfully. His entire body tightened before his vision went black. Bernardo and Oswaldo were quick to catch him, the latter looking up to see Lovino scream at the screen, “What kind of sick fuck would do that?!”

“That depends. What kind of sick fucks did you guys piss off this time?”

Seraph growled into the screen, “Do you think this is funny? Feliciano’s—”

“Alive probably,” snapped Naya, now glaring at her former student, “And no I don’t think this is funny but if I know who we’re dealing with then maybe the Diamond Dogs could be of assistance. I could commence the Twilight Bark if you want.”

“Thank you but if we need you to fuck someone, we’ll call you—”

“The fuck you just say,” snarled Nico. He forced his way into the camera’s view, blocking it’s shot of Naya and growled, “Listen here, you punk ass bitch, you have no fucking idea what my sister gave up, for you to come here and—”

“That’s enough, Obsidian,” snapped Naya, “Go start packing up. I’ll take it from here.”

Seraph watched as Nico’s face softened at his sister’s command and did as he was told but not before caressing her face, covering the microphone to whisper something in her ear that made her give a curt nod. A low sound rumbled in Seraph’s chest and he opened his mouth to retort.

“Seraph,” hissed Bernardo as he slapped a hand over his brother’s mouth, “shut the fuck up.” He shoved him down onto a seat and whispered harshly into his ear, “Now is not the time to pick fights with her. Feli’s alive but we still don’t know where so if you can’t be civil with the only person we can trust right now then just sit here and look pretty.” Bernardo pulled away from Seraph with a sad frown, “She’s family, man.”

“Whatever,” muttered Seraph as he crossed his arms and glared at the corner of the screen. He raised a brow when he noticed how Naya’s fingers were twitching again. He glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed, specifically his dad, but they were all too busy watching Naya’s personnel enter back into the tent to start packing.

Clicking his tongue, Bernardo returned his attention to Naya who was now talking to their grandfather. She was wearing dark glasses again. She stood straighter as she addressed Romulus, “Sir, does this have to do with that group you were telling me to keep an eye? Acidanthera?”

“I believe so. The plan worked and Ivan managed to smuggle drugs into the country. Our Intel states that he owes money to the Bratva and he was their way of bringing their product into Genovia. Their hired hands were Acidanthera and they are pretty lethal for a mercenary group so be careful. We don’t know much aside from what you’ve gathered for us.”

“They’re Spanish.”
“Well, they’re supplied by the Spanish but Cerberus interrogated someone and it was confirmed that they are in fact Russian.” Rubbing his hands over his face tiredly, Romulus thought silently for a moment. In the time he took to reach a decision, Ludwig woke back up and heard him say, “This was obviously done to keep us from interfering with the gerrymandering of drug distribution in the country. We need to move forward with phase three of the plan. Francis, you go and have Interpol bring in Ivan Braginsky to us directly. Cerberus, your packs are to infiltrate the Russian crime syndicate while you three go and offer the Vargas’ shield and sword. If they’re smart, they’ll accept our protection. We need to move as if nothing has happened.”

Ludwig couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Struggling to get back up he glared at everyone, “Are you serious? What about Feliciano? Why aren’t you sending everyone to go look for him?!”

“The Hounds are stretched out enough as it is with other operations, including Russia. To pull them out now would only bring too much suspicion. Not to mention if we do that we’ll only put Feli in danger,” said Romulus patiently, “Naya, I don’t want you to induce the Twilight Bark. Thank you for—”

“Wait a minute, what’s the Twilight Bark?”

Francis cast him a glance over his shoulder, “It’s when the Hounds in the area are alerted of something that needs to take priority over whatever they’re currently assigned and they focus on getting it done. Mostly we use it when information needs to be passed around while on a job and we can’t reach them without disturbing their cover. Information is passed via a radio transmitter using BARK. Uh, that is just the language we use; literally just dogs barking, howling, and growling but we Hounds are trained to pick up differences in the tone and pitch to get the messages.”

Ludwig stared at him for a minute before shaking his head, “But Feli—”

“Is safer if we don’t make a big deal out of it,” said Lovino. He winced when Ludwig shot him a look of betrayal but he tried to reason with him, “We’re not saying that we aren’t going to look for him because we are. All I’m saying is that, not only will it bring down morale in the men if they find out that their future Alpha is missing, but they may talk.”

“That’s true.” Romulus toyed with a pen in his hand, “They may also try to look for him themselves and, in the process, unknowingly let our enemies know that Feliciano is missing. That could be disastrous not only to him but us as well. They’ll try and use him as a bartering tool for allowances that we’ve all worked hard to eradicate in most of Europe.” Shaking his head, the Vargas Patriarch looked at everyone sadly, “For now, we’ll do as I said. No one, with the exception of Paolo, is to make ripples. If anyone can find him it’ll be the Father of HellHounds.”

“But—” Oswaldo squeezed Ludwig’s hand again and looked into his eyes before pulling back. Ludwig sighed, “What am I supposed to tell Alex? What about Nicola?”

“Don’t say anything to either of them. You and Feliciano were supposed to go to Italy, si?” When Ludwig nodded, Romulus returned it, “Then that’s where you’re going to pretend to be. Do not contact anyone outside us or your family and do no mention Feliciano’s disappearance.”

Licking his dry lips, Ludwig pulled at the hem of his shirt, “And we’re for sure that he’s alive, right?” He felt Ozzie squeeze his hand again in reassurance, “Ok.”

“I’m going to go take him to the dormitories to rest,” said Oswaldo suddenly. He gave Naya a grateful smile, “Thank you so much. You too, Nico.”
“You don’t have to thank us, Oz,” said Naya, tilting her head towards Seraph, “You know you can always count on us. Even if there are some who think me traitor, or my dogs as vipers.”

Oswaldo pulled Ludwig out of the conference room and led him to his dorm where he had a laptop open on his bed. He quickly checked it and exclaimed joyfully, “Oh, thank god! Oh my god, thank you, uncle Chad, you greedy son of a bitch.”

“What is it,” asked Ludwig as he tried to look over Oswaldo’s shoulder.

“Here, lay down for a sec. You look like shit.” Ozzie ignored the dark look Ludwig gave him and continued to type rapidly on his laptop, “Check it, you heard how we Hounds have biosensors in us?”

“Yeah…Lovino said Feli’s was telling you guys that he was dead.”

“Uh-huh. Well it was also telling us that Corgi and Maltese are alive but they’re dead which means that whoever kidnapped our angel probably found the sensors and transplanted them into someone else. Why they did that, I have no fucking clue but I bet they destroyed Feli’s so that we would think he’s dead. That also explains why they removed the tattoo off of him.”

A shadow loomed behind Oswaldo’s gold and blue eyes, “When I find the sick fuck who did that, I’m going to kill him slowly.” Shaking his head, he focused on his work, “Actually, I think that they were hoping the officials found the wreck first. That way news of Feli dying would’ve been broadcasted and everyone…”

Ludwig forced himself to look away from the ceiling to Oswaldo, “What?”

“Oh, it’s…it’s nothing.”

“Tell me.”

Oswaldo shook his head, “It’s just that, the aftermath would’ve been similar to what happened with Remus after my grandpa shot him. News of the death was broadcasted everywhere and it scared other criminal groups to obey the Vargas and recognize my grandpa as their king. If it were to get out that the heir to the criminal empire was murdered, then it would really hurt us. Everyone would start scheming on how to get the crown into their own hands and things would get ugly like they were before.”

“Things are already ugly,” muttered Ludwig as he settled back on Ozzie’s pillow.

“Yeah. But not as ugly as it could be.” A little ping from the laptop pulled Ludwig’s attention to it again. On the screen, Feli’s face came up along with his body vitals. His heart was still beating, slowly but still beating. Ludwig reached out to touch it at the same time Oswaldo did, both freezing to look at each other before Ludwig allowed his companion to keep his fingers on the screen with his.

“He’s ok,” whispered Ludwig to himself, “Where are you, little fox?”

“The triangulation right now is saying northern Italy.”

“How is this possible?”

Oswaldo blushed and didn’t meet Ludwig’s eye as he closed the laptop and moved to start packing a small duffel bag, “You know how my mom is a Blaze? Well, they’re like the American version of the Vargas only they’re not mobsters. Still, they’re pretty important people and my Uncle Chad
runs Blaze BioTech. He has all of the Blaze family members wear a bio tracker he created, kind of like the Hounds, but theirs is three times the size of that one white blood cell. The um…oh, the monocyte.”

“How did you get it in him?”

At this Oswaldo’s blush intensified, “I met up with him after he got his PhD and he let me work on his tattoo. I convinced him to let me inject it into him in case something happened to the one he had from the Vargas. Look long story short, we now have an idea of where he is.”

“Why didn’t you tell the others?”

“I wasn’t sure if it would work. It’s so small that it barely registers on their satellite and it also only sends out a signal every three hours. Plus I wasn’t sure if it got damaged when he got shot.”

Ludwig dug through one of Oswaldo’s drawers for a change of clothes, “Ok, when do we leave?”

“We?”

“I’m coming with you.”

“The hell you are. It’s going to be hard enough for me to escape my dad without having to drag you along, too. Not to mention it’s going to be dangerous as hell ‘cause without the Twilight Bark, I’m going to have to do this the old fashion way. And let me tell you, I actually value your opinion of me too much to let you see me while on the field.”

“What could you possibly do that’ll change how I see you?”

“…stuff that may change your mind about letting me come anywhere near Alex or Feli again.”

Ludwig rolled his eyes, “If I didn’t stop you from living with us after learning that you had a wet dream about Feliciano, what makes you think that—”

“Ok, first, I was a horny teenager, and second, sexy dreams and killing someone are two different things, Ludwig.” Oswaldo scowled and firmly shook his head, “The answer is no and that’s final.”

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An hour later, and after talking things over with his brothers, Oswaldo sat in a leather seat typing away on his laptop in hopes of getting a smaller triangulation of the last signal Feli’s transmitter sent out. He glared over the screen at Ludwig who was sitting rigidly in front of him. The German had followed him despite his empty threats of breaking his legs. Bernardo even scolded Ozzie for not letting Ludwig help.

“I swear, if you get hurt,” muttered Oswaldo after closing his laptop. He brought out his issued weapons bag and pulled them all out to check them one more time.

Ludwig gave him an icy glare back, “Stop talking to me like I’m some sort of child. I know how to defend myself just fine.”

“He’s not saying it to be mean, Luddy,” murmured Bernardo sleepily. The man had taken a sleeping pill so that he could sleep through the flight, something about not trusting something that weighed a ton to keep him safe thousands of feet in the air. Grinning, he added, “Ozzie’s just worried about you. He’s just too shy to come out and say it upfront.”
“Oswaldo? Shy about talking about his feelings?”

“To people he’s not used to caring for, yeah.”

“Shut up, jerk,” hissed Oswaldo as he fiddled with a weapon that was hidden under a leather strap. He glared at his work, “Listen, since you’re already here, I’m going to give you some ground rules. First, you don’t get to beat anyone up for answers, only I do. Second, I’m going to let you keep that gun you think I don’t know about but you’re not allowed to use it unless it’s absolutely necessary. I’m also going to give you a knife but you can’t touch anything else in my bag unless I say you can. And lastly, absolutely do not, I repeat, do not go off on your own or anywhere with anyone without telling me first.”

Ludwig rolled his eyes, “Ja, ok. Anything else?”

“Si.” This time Oswaldo looked at him with pleading eyes, “Please, listen to me. I’ve spent eleven years doing this, which granted isn’t much but it’s a hell of a lot longer than you’ve ever seen combat of any sort. My first mission ever, we learned the hard way what happens when we don’t listen to someone with more experience in the field.” He nodded over to Bernardo, “Just ask that moron over there when we get back. He’ll tell you the time when we didn’t listen to our pack leader and Seraph and me had to carry his dumbass while we climbed down a building because he got caught.”

“We’re nearing drop off point,” said Seraph, suddenly at his brother’s side. He pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Ozzie, “Here.”

“What is it?”

“It’s what Naya was tapping out with her fingers. A name of one of her who—Diamond Dogs I guess.”

“She tapped something out?”

“You didn’t notice? I’m surprised. It’s what she normally does when she wants to tell people something without others knowing.” Rubbing the back of his neck, Seraph lazily glanced over to Bernardo, “She normally does it to the recipient’s palm.”

Oswaldo took it and shrugged, “She never taught me that but thanks.”

Nervous dread made Ludwig’s stomach twitch uncomfortably as he watched Oswaldo pack up his weapons and laptop. He gripped his own bag tightly and followed after the Italian, but an arm came up to stop him. He glanced down at Bernardo, “Hm?”

“Good luck, amico.” His eyes watered and he squeezed Ludwig’s arm, “I’m so sorry for what we did.”

Swallowing, Ludwig patted his black hair, “What’s done is done. I don’t understand why it happened the way it did but I can see that you mean your apology.”

“Do you forgive us?” When Ludwig didn’t say anything, Bernardo let go of his arm sadly, “I… I hope someday you and Feli will. I’m sorry.”

Ludwig hesitated before bending down to kiss the drowsy Italian on the head, “Be safe in Russia. Feli and I will be waiting for you to come back and make it up to us.”

Tears rolled down Bernardo’s round cheek, “O-ok. You be safe, too. Please bring back my cousin
and brother back.” He watched as Ludwig made his way back to where Oswaldo was, feeling incredibly sad for being such a terrible friend to him. He now understood his brother’s fury when he learned that neither he nor Feliciano were aware of their role in their grandfather’s plot. They were such good people and they used them like common pawns. Them, the future king and queen…his family.

Curling in on himself, Bernardo sent a prayer to Zeus and his fellow gods to watch over Ludwig and Oswaldo. More importantly, he prayed to his Uncle Cesare to watch and protect Feliciano wherever he may be. The Italian felt a last tear escape his eye as he finally surrendered to sleep, murmuring, “Please, uncle, he needs you now more than ever.”

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**A few hours earlier, after the bomb exploded on the plane**

There had been a shrill ringing in his ears when Feliciano realized that he was no longer falling. The air was thick with the smell of gas and fire and the ground below him was freezing. Blinking his eyes slowly, he tried to move but quickly realized that it was impossible because his body from the neck down was trapped inside an insulated bag and that his legs and arms were bound.

Panic gripped his heart as he remembered what happened. Feli tried to glance around him but all he could see was snowy mountains and blood splattered here and there. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the man who had hijacked his plane tugging something towards them. His heart sped up in dread when he realized it was a body bag.

“Guess there is a god after all,” said Luciano cheerfully, “That or you’re just lucky.” He dropped the body bag next to Feli in favor of straddling the Italian instead, “Or maybe you are more cat than dog. Let’s test that; we’ll play a different game now. I call it, ‘How many lives does Feliciano Vargas have?’”

“P-please,” whispered Feli, feeling as though his mouth were full of cotton, “I don’t want to die…”

“Eh? But you’re a cat. You have,” Luciano tilted his head in thought, “Five lives left?” He took out a syringe and injected Feli with a sedative, “The fourth you lost just now when you passed out in fear when we were sucked out of that plane and fell.” When it looked like Feli could no longer move his limbs Luciano smiled and unzipped the insulated bag to unbind his arms, “The third you lost when you sacrificed yourself to save your precious Ludwig and his darling little sister. You actually lost like three though, but since I’m a nice guy I’ll only count it as one.”

Luciano got up on his knees only in order to get his knife out of his pocket before sitting back on Feli’s stomach, “The second you lost when you were fourteen and you slit your wrists because you wanted to die. Naughty, Feli,” he chastised.

The man sliced through Feliciano’s shirt and traced the tip of his knife over the sun tattooed over Feli’s heart, “I’ve been watching you, you know?” He glanced down with a sneer, “You were living the big life, huh? Great paying job, wonderful penthouse, driving a cool car, fucking a hot piece of German ass—” Luciano was caught off when Feli’s cheeks started to blush with something other than the cold.

Smirking, he said, “Oh? Maybe I was wrong about that part. Does he do all the screwing while you lay there and take it? Well that’s ok too, I guess. My Lutz is versatile so I know how it feels. Anyway, back to what I was saying, you were living it large, weren’t you? Even had a kid lined up to adopt and everything.

“Thing is, you can’t have all of that without pissing off a few people. When someone is at the top
of the world, it tends to make people jealous and suddenly things aren’t all as great as it seems.” Luciano pulled out one of Feli’s pliant arms out and felt around it until he felt a hard bump. Making a mental note of its location, he let it fall onto the snow and started to clean around the sun on Feli’s chest.

Feli stared up at Luciano’s face with horrible realization that he may not win this game. He was going to die out here in the middle of nowhere with no way of letting his family know that he still loved them. It didn’t help that the man who was going to do it looked so much like him, maybe a few years younger, but damn near identical. And he’d been watching him and knew so much… how? More importantly why? Did what he have to say have anything to do with it? Was all of this really because he had made a few people jealous?

His golden eye would’ve widened if it could. Godfrey and Collins! Those two were always jealous of what he and his family had and it was a given that they were Acidanthera. But Acidanthera was hired by the Russians…so did that mean…

A horrible sound garbled past Feli’s mouth when he finally realized it. Godfrey and Collins were Ivan’s contacts in Victrola. He must’ve been the anonymous financial backer for the Collins man who was running for senator. He had to have done it with the intentions that they would help bring in Russian product once the line had been established. But the only ones who could really stop them were the Vargas seeing as everyone knew that they were in the shady business even if no one really talked about it.

‘Not until my trials at least,’ thought Feli bitterly, ‘but if that’s true then that means my family isn’t safe…If they went as far as to hire this lunatic to kill me, then they’re probably not too far behind on their hit list.’ His heart all but stopped when he remembered, ‘My family includes Alex. Did… did they have something to do with the court’s denying me adoption of him? What about my medical license? They probably had a hand in that too in hopes to destroy me. Oh god! What about Ludwig?! No…if he wanted him dead, he would’ve killed him then and there but he said that he was safe in his apartment…”

Luciano watched in amusement as Feli’s thoughts shone through his golden eye. He tsked, “There is a secret way to kill people like you and that is to make them as insignificant as possible. After the mess you left behind this past month, do you honestly think anyone is going to look for another insignificant person?

“But you aren’t insignificant are you,” said Luciano as he brushed the knife close to Feliciano’s tattoo. His maroon eyes narrowed, “You were never insignificant; not then and not now.” Feli’s heart beat rapidly under the sharp tip of Luciano’s knife as it started to dig into his flesh. Luciano smirked, “Maybe they will look for you. I bet they’re going to lose their shit when they realize that your tracker is gone. But that’s ok. I saw what they did to you and, between you and me; I think that was real fucked up.” Tracing the knife away and along Feli’s arm, Luciano’s smirk grew, “I think that they should feel the same pain they made you feel.”

Feli’s eye watered as pain shot up through his arm as Luciano dug his knife deep into the muscle followed by a finger to fish out his tracker. He crushed it in between some rocks and grinned, “There. Aw, you fainted? Well that’s ok. I’m just gonna leave them a little treat to find in that flying death trap and then we’ll be on our way.”

Luciano worked at peeling Feli’s tattoo off his chest, taking only what he needed before reaching into his pocket again to pull out a container, “Now don’t go saying that I’m not a nice guy. Look, I’m even giving you this so you can grow new skin, hehe~”

He cleaned the area he cut before placing a sheet of artificial skin over Feli’s wound and stitching
it back together quickly. Luciano hummed to himself as he worked, putting ointment to the area so Feliciano wouldn’t get an infection, and finally covering it with gauze.

Feliciano wasn’t sure how long he’d been unconscious for, his vision only coming and going between long periods of time. One moment he could see daylight and hear busy streets, the next he could feel the moonlight softly caressing his cheeks. This carried on for a few days until one night he heard his captor talking to someone in Italian. Was he in Italy? The dialect sounded familiar… Southern Italian…

Groaning when his face was suddenly grabbed, his cheeks were still sore from the bullet wound, Feli came face to face with his captor who was looking at him seriously. He tried to speak but Luciano shoved a few pills into his mouth and forced him to swallow, “Here, one for pain slash infection and one for your depression. These are going to hold you off for a while.”

Leaning down to Feli’s ear, Luciano mock whispered, “I don’t really trust these fools to know how to take proper care of you after all.”

The man across from him scowled, “If you care so much about him why are you selling him to my boss? Besides, aren’t you two family?”

Luciano gave him a cool smile, “Are they paying you to ask questions or to deliver him?” When the man remained silent, he added, “Not to mention, the thought of being related to someone like him turns my stomach.” He drew a small knife from his boot and toyed with the nurse’s badge on the man bearing the name of the health clinic he was from, “Remember idiota, I don’t much care what happens to this man, but do tell your boss that killing is like making love. It’s no fun if it ends too quickly; it’s best if you savor each moment.”

Smirking, the young man tugged at Feli’s fingers to remove the black stoned ring Ludwig had given him and gave it to the nurse, “Here ya go. Give it to a nice girl or boy.”

The nurse took it hesitantly before moving to take Feli to his car. Luciano stopped him and leaned into Feli’s face one last time, “Don’t forget that we’re still playing a game and you are down to five lives, little lion king.”

Through the haze in his mind, Feli managed to frown at that. Lion King? He tried his best to wake himself up but felt too tired. The last thing he remembered was his doppelganger waving at him as he promised that they’d see each other again someday. If he won the game that is.

~.~

The first thing Feli could register was the horrible burning sensation on his chest. His skin felt like it was on fire and when he moved to see why, he registered the next two things: he was blindfolded and cuffed to a really uncomfortable bed. Fear surged through him as he struggled to get out, “W- where am I?”

“He’s awake,” whispered a woman from Feli’s right. He tried and failed to place her accent. One thing he was certain of, however, was that she wasn’t Italian.

On his left, a male answered back, “About time. It’s been three days…any longer and he might not have made it. Do you think it’s safe for us to take the blindfold off, sis. They said we could once he was awake.”

“If we let you free, will you hurt us?”

Feli realized that the woman was talking to him and he quickly spoke up, “I won’t. Please untie
me.” His binds were removed first followed by the blindfold. He had to blink a few times to get used to the bright light above them. The two people with him both wore light blue scrubs but the white bracelets on their wrists told him that they were patients. He glanced down at his body and saw that he was wearing the same thing along with a white bracelet with the number 061524.

He jumped when the man suddenly shoved a paper cup to his face. The man shied back, “S-sorry. I just thought you were thirsty is all.”

“Ve…”

“I’m Eliáš by the way.” The dirty blond man offered his hand in greeting, blushing when Feli only stared at him in suspicion, “And that’s my sister, Ada.”

Feli turned his suspicion on her but Ada only smiled, “It’s ok, mister. We aren’t here to hurt you.” She stuck out her hand, “I swear we won’t.”

Feli looked at her one more time and finally shook her hand, brushing a thumb under her wrist and asked, “You aren’t with the people who kidnapped me?”

Dark green eyes widened before she shook her head adamantly, “No! Wh—no, we’re patients here. We…you say you were kidnapped?”

“Si.” The Italian watched the two siblings exchange fearful glances before he reached out with his other hand to shake Eliáš’ hand as well, also putting his thumb on his wrist, “Is something the matter?”

“No,” stuttered Eliáš, “Well, it’s just that we were kidnapped too. A few months ago while we were vacationing here, ah, actually, we were in Rome but…yeah.”

“We’re from the Czech Republic,” explained Ada, “We couldn’t afford a vacation since we’re students and all but we learned about a student travel agency that lets students travel at the fraction of the price if we can maintain a high grade point average. The catch is that we’re supposed to stay in an apartment complex owned by the travel agency…”

Eliáš nodded solemnly, “We studied our butts off, too. When we had enough, we both decided to come here since it’s so pretty and we’ve never been…”

“The first few days were ok and the other students who were staying in the same complex were so nice. Some were even staying there for their third time!”

“How were we supposed to know it was a scam?” Eliáš rocked back and forth on his heels, “This man said that he would take a group of us to eat at one of the best restaurants in the city.”

“My brother and I didn’t want to but he said that it would be cheaper because of the discount the agency had—”

—and we’re always up for good food—”

“We didn’t realize that he was actually going to take us to our doom.”

Feliciano let go of their wrists and crossed his arms. Their pulse hadn’t changed other than quicken in the way one’s pulse does when remembering something horrible. He gave them a sympathetic look, “He brought you here.”

“Not quite,” said Ada. She bit her lip and tucked a strand of black hair behind her ear, “He drugged
us with water. My brother and I woke up in a dark room with another man…I think he bought us and we were drugged again. The next thing we knew, we were here.”

“And we’ve been here ever since,” finished Eliáš.

“Where is here,” asked Feliciano as he took some of his bandage and wrapped it around his left eye to protect it.

“It’s called Mente del Cielo.”

Feli frowned, “Heaven’s Mind? That’s a good place.” He shook his head, stopping only because it gave him a horrible wave of nausea. “All the bad asylums were shut down after Basaglia Law passed in the late ‘70s. Their methods in dealing with the mentally ill were…outdated to say the least.”

Ada shrugged, “Maybe you’re thinking of somewhere else. This place is horrible but I’ll admit that it isn’t as bad when you compare it to the bottom part.”

“Yeah,” added Eliáš, “It’s the bottom floors you need to worry about. We try and help the others up here because once you go down there…”

“You don’t come back,” whispered Ada, “We’ve lost some good people but it’s also made us try and stay sane in here. We try and help others do the same so they don’t end up down there.”

A sharp shiver ran down Feli’s spine when he glanced to the floor of the room, the white and blue speckled tile deceptively innocent looking. He really wanted to go home; he wanted to go home so bad. Gently massaging his arm, Feli shook his head, “I don’t want to go down there. Please don’t let them take me.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll—”

“No,” cried Feli suddenly, “You don’t understand. I won’t survive here alone. I need medicine but I don’t know what to take. My old stuff wasn’t working anymore and I was supposed to—” He gripped his arm tightly and tried to control himself. Now was definitely not the time to lose his cool. The Hounds were no doubt going to try their best to look for him and the last thing he needed was for his sensor—

His eye widened as he remembered what his captor had done to him on the mountain. He glanced over to his arm and started to unravel the bandages in a near crazed panic. When the last of the bandage was removed, Feli’s heart sank, “It’s gone.”

He laughed as he brushed his fingertips of the stitches along his forearm, “It’s gone. It’s go- hahahaha.” His laughter morphed into hysterics, “It’s fucking gone!” How the hell was his family supposed to find him now? No, wait. The man on the mountain had smashed it…which meant his family wasn’t looking for him. And if they were, the last place they would’ve looked for him would be in the airplane but that was gone. They would assume his body had been incinerated and—and they weren’t going to look for him beyond that ‘cause they probably thought he was dead!

Chest tightening and throat clogging in both fear and mucus, Feli found it hard to breathe. They weren’t coming for him. They weren’t coming for him. They weren’t coming for him! The two siblings quickly tried to calm him down but it was no use. In the back of his mind a loud voice screamed at him to get a grip, that this reaction was not going to help his situation. He tried to listen to it because he knew it had a point but his body wasn’t exactly listening, but—oh god, they
thought he was dead!

Feliciano felt a pinch in his arm followed by a small cold and damp square. A few seconds later, he felt himself calm down and his breath return back to normal. He glanced at Ada who was holding a now empty syringe then to Eliáš who looked like he wasn’t sure whether to run away or stay and help his sister. Feli felt his vision slowly darken and he fought it, “Wh-what did you give me?”

“It’s a sedative to help you get through the night,” said Ada as she disposed the needle in a small bag and hid it in the bed above Feli’s. She clicked her tongue, “But it was my last one…I had to use a few of them on other patients so they wouldn’t get taken.” Ada walked around the bed and hugged her brother, “Shh, it’s ok. Let’s go to bed Eli and tomorrow we’ll figure out how to get more. Dobrou noc, mister.” Eliáš mumbled good night as well before going to his own cot next to the bunk bed. He hated sleeping too far away from his sister...

The next day, Feli woke up to the sound of a lock hissing and the door opening. Ada and her brother were already awake and dressed in a different set of matching scrubs. He yawned, his head throbbing as sunlight entered from the barred window and touched his eye. Rubbing it, he noticed that his arm had been bandaged again but it did little to soothe him. If anything, it only served as a reminder that his sensor was gone and his family thought him dead.

Still…he smiled at the siblings, “Ve, grazie~”

Eliáš smiled back, “You’re welcome. How are you feeling?”

“Your voices sound funny but you sedated me so that makes sense. Where am I?”

“At Mente del Cielo, remember?”

No, Feli wanted to say, he didn’t remember or else he wouldn’t be asking but that would be rude and these two had been kind to him. So instead, he glanced at the neat stack of clothes at the foot of his bed and realized that it had been the ones he was wearing when he woke up. Looking down at himself, he noticed that his arm had been bandaged again but it did little to soothe him. If anything, it only served as a reminder that his sensor was gone and his family thought him dead.

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“We have to wear these. It lets the staff know that we belong up here and not…not down there.”

Feliciano touched his shirt and furrowed his brow, the material was really itchy. Shaking his head, he deepened his frown, “I don’t belong here.”

Ada smiled sadly and helped him up, “No one belongs here. Come on now, mister. It’s time for breakfast. If we’re not there by 7:35 sharp, they’ll punish us by forcing the leftovers down our throats.”

Looping an arm through Feli’s other side, Eliáš added, “She’s not kidding. They rather us choke on food than get blamed by Big Brother that we’re not getting fed.”

The lights in the hall were worse than the ones in their room, it didn’t help that they had suddenly been swept into a sea of bodies, and Feli felt a wave of nausea overwhelm him. He pushed away from the siblings and threw up into a trash bin. Tears burned in his eye as he wiped at his mouth, “I want to go home. I don’t— they can’t keep me here.”

A nurse noticed them lagging behind the rest of the patients and Ada quickly forced Feli back up to drag him along, “Listen, we can’t help you if you don’t meet us halfway. I already told you that none of us are here out of our own free will. We...”

Feliciano stopped listening when he spotted a door in the cafeteria. There were windows too so he
knew that it had to lead outside. Pulling away from Ada, he ran towards it, his fingers barely
brushing the cool metal of the handle when he suddenly ran face first into a guard. The painful
searing sensation in his chest came back with a vengeance but he ignored it in favor of glaring up at
the man in front of him. Gripping the collar of his shirt, he snarled in Italian, “Let me go!”

The guard chuckled, “That’s cute. Listen, you’re new here so I’ll cut you a break. Run along now
and get back in line before they run out of the good stuff. The French toast here is pretty good.”

Cute? Feli narrowed his eye, “I doubt that. Don’t you know who I am? I’m Feliciano Vargas and I
don’t belong in here. There’s been a mistake.”

“Vargas, huh?” Anger rose within Feliciano when the guard—Luca according to his badge—
started to laugh as if he’d said something funny.

“I am a Vargas,” said Feli louder, “A damn doctor, too and let me tell you these people look
terrible! They can’t be here either.”

“Mi dispiace,” said Luca in between bursts of laughter, “So sorry, Dr. Vargas, I didn’t recognize
you without your familial crest that all of you seem to love so much. Say, I don’t suppose you’d
show me yours?”

Feli tugged his collar down to show Luca that he was indeed a Vargas but then remembered that he
was wearing bandages. He frowned in confusion and thought, ‘That’s odd. I don’t remember
getting hurt when we fell…”

He glanced at the guard in a silent question and Luca gave him the go ahead to remove his shirt.
Carefully, Feli started to remove his bandages as well. His skin started to prickle from the feeling
of every one’s eyes on him as he worked the last bit of it off.

When he pulled away the gauze from his skin, his heart stopped. The pain he’d been feeling? That
had been his skin trying to fuse back together with the graft. His breath increased rapidly as he
stared at flesh now void of the proud sun and V, “Wha—what happened?! It was here. I had it here
just…” he trailed off as he tried his hardest to remember how long it had been since he’d been
kidnapped. It had been so hard to tell when he was delirious during the travel.

Time, however didn’t matter. What mattered was that he didn’t have his seal on his skin which
meant that not only did his family think him dead, but according to his mark less flesh, he was
without a family as well. The sun would’ve been his only salvation at this point, the only thing that
would scare them into letting him go and maybe even letting him take the others with him. He was
a prince damn it! They would’ve listened to him. They would’ve let him go.

“I’m waiting,” said Luca mockingly.

“I—I… I had it! It was right here,” stuttered Feli as he gently brushed a hand hear the stitches. “I
am a Vargas! I’m Feliciano—”

Luca’s smile slowly grew grim and he picked Feli’s shirt back up, “That’s enough. Put this back on
and get back in line before I lose my patience.”

Feli hesitantly put the shirt back on before shaking his head, “N-no, you don’t understand. I’m—I
need to get back home. I’m not supposed to be here.”


“But Ludwig’s waiting for me….and my son—I need to see my family!” Feli tried to the door
again but this time Luca grabbed him by the arm, folding it behind him before shoving the young Italian, chest first, against the wall. It sent painful bolts throughout his body, making Feli’s eye water, “Please! Please, I’m begging you, let me go!”

Some of the staff started to make their way closer to the two men, one already preparing a sedative, when Ada suddenly appeared next to him. She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear before cautiously reaching out towards Feliciano, “Mister Luca, sir. Please, that’s going to hurt him.”

“How does it look like I give a sh—”

“I’ll make sure he learns his place,” she said quickly. Ada carefully pulled Feli away from Luca, handing him over to her brother and Eliáš led him to a table with three plates of food. He glanced over his shoulder with a dark glare at Luca as the guard gave his Ada’s rear a slap. Shifting his eyes over to the Italian that had caused all this unneeded drama, Eliáš softened his eyes. The poor man had gone pale with something other than pain from his chest wound and was now silently crying into his gloppy porridge.

Eliáš sighed and reached forward with a napkin, “Here. I’ll see if I can find you some painkillers for that. For now you need to eat, mister. I already checked the food so it should be ok to eat.”

Slowly taking the napkin from Eliáš, Feli stared blankly ahead, “I’m going to die here, aren’t I?”

“Only if you don’t do what Ada and I tell you. You can’t keep making trouble like this, man. I’m telling you. The trick is to…”

Feli drowned him out again, picking up things here and there like how he had to choose something to focus on when bad things happened, which apparently was very frequent. Apparently, they try to make the ones that arrive here sane, insane, and the ones with real mental issues reach the highest peak of their condition to test drugs on them. That caught his attention and Feli asked him why.

It was Ada who answered as she took her seat, “The doctor here, Big Brother as he wants us to call him, wants to recreate his brother’s work.” She wiped her mouth in disgust and rinsed her mouth out with orange juice before spitting it into her porridge. Feli watched this with concerned eyes while Eliáš gripped his plastic spoon to the point of snapping it in half.

Neither said anything else for a long while which was more than fine with Feliciano who withdrew into himself in attempt to collect his thoughts. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed but before he knew it, Eliáš was shaking him, “Hey, mister!”

“What,” croaked Feli as he batted Eliáš’ hands away, “Wha—where are we now?”

“It’s the day room…we can play with whatever we want here so long as we stay quiet.”

Feli rose a brow, “Then why are you talking to me?” Honestly! He was going to die here apparently; the least he wanted was to go in peace while he still could…

‘And leave your darling Ludwig behind,’ whispered the voice in his mind. It chuckled when Feli froze in his seat, his eye widening as every muscle in his body tensed, ‘Told you that I was here to stay. Want me to come out and teach Luca that a tattoo does not a Vargas make?’

“You need to go away,” hissed Feliciano under his breath.

Eliáš frowned, “Excuse me?”

The voice laughed at Feliciano, ‘I’d be careful if I were you. Wouldn’t want to lose our only friends
“The only one I want to lose right now is you!” Feli started to tug on his hair in hopes that the pain would help distract him.

Eliáš quickly caught and grabbed his hands, “Stop that! Hurting yourself isn’t going to make it go away. You need some medicine.”

“Does it look like I have any on me,” growled Feli as he pulled his hands away angrily, “What do you care what happens to me anyway? About any of us in here?! Shouldn’t you be more concerned about your girlfriend or wife or whatever you two ar—mmph!”

“Shut up!” Eliáš glanced around him to make sure that nobody heard before dragging him towards a brightly colored plastic toy house. He shoved Feli inside, closing the door only after tucking himself inside as well.

Glaring at the angry Italian, he moved to poke at his chest but Feli caught his hand and pressed Eliáš against the wall so that he could place a foot in between them, “Don’t touch me.”

“Don’t talk about shit you don’t know,” whispered Eliáš as he tried to reach for Feli’s hair instead only to have the other hand gripped as well.

“I said don’t touch me!” Eliáš grunted as Feli pushed him off of him and pinned him to the ground, “You need to stop telling me what I need or don’t need to do. I got enough of that from my family, Genovian society, and, recently, a pesky, annoying, very convincing voice in my head telling me what I need to do with myself. I’ve had enough!”

“Good, that’s good.” Eliáš grinned up at Feli, “Take that anger and use it as a focus. You said you’re a doctor right? Why don’t you help Ada and me? That’s how we’ve been keeping sane in here.”

Feli glared down at Eliáš before moving off of him. He curled his legs in and watched at the man did the same opposite of him, or tried to. It was so cramped…

Eliáš sighed, “Please don’t say anything.”

“About Ada? Why? Do you have any idea how lucky you are to at least have her with you?”

“Lucky?” Eliáš snorted bitterly, “You mean to tell me that you’d want your girl in stuck with you in this hell with you?” His face contorted in sadness, “To pretend to be siblings so that you can share a room ‘cause that’s the only way to make sure nothing bad happens to her at night like it does to almost everyone in here. To be forced to watch as she flirts and does… things in order to get what we need to help others.”

“Things?” Feli’s eye widened at Eliáš’ stare before frowning, “You mean this morning…”

“She probably sucked that fuck Luca off so that he wouldn’t send you to L’Asilo Di Inferno as it’s oh so fondly called by the Italian patients in here.” Cold guilt settled in Feli’s veins and he let his head drop onto his folded knees, not caring that the voice’s laughter was echoing within his mind. He glanced up when he felt Eliáš put his hand on his shoulder. He gave Feli a half smile, “Don’t think she did it for you. You said you’re a doctor right? What kind?”

“…MD and PhD.”

“Wow! What’s the PhD in?”
“Astrophysics.”

“Holy crap, and the MD? Is that just a physician or can you do surgery too?”

“Just minor surgery like cutting into someone to drain liquid or take a sample.”

“Good! Good, ok. Then forget the anger crap I said. You need to hold onto your knowledge. You remember all that right?”

“Si.”

Eliáš relaxed the best he could in his side of the toy house, “You’re lucky. They don’t have real doctors here. Just the ones that like to play God in all the wrong ways.”

“I wasn’t aware that there was a right way to play God.”

“You’re right,” agreed Eliáš with short laugh, “completely right.”

It was quiet again in the tiny house with only hushed conversations taking place outside by the surrounding patients—victims, Feli corrected himself. He considered what Eliáš told him about having a loved one with them in hell and he nodded to himself. The man had a point. He would never wish this fate on Ludwig or Oz—on anyone period.

Closing his eye, he ran a hand gently along his own jaw, tracing his thumb pad along his lower lip just like Ludwig did when they were alone together. Feli’s brow twitched at the slight stubble he found under his hand but ignored it in favor of imagining that it was his beloved’s hand on him providing comfort. What would he say if he could see him now?

‘Probably be disappointed in you,’ murmured a soft voice not like the one that had been with him as of late. Feli frowned and waited for it to say something else. When it didn’t, he couldn’t help but agree with this one. They would all be disappointed in him. Hell, he would be disappointed in him if he just rolled over and wasted his knowledge when he could go out like any other Vargas. Fists swinging—curses flying in most of their cases—and helping those that needed it along the way while taking down those that deserved to rot with them.

Feli giggled at that.

They totally would, his family.

He could already imagine Lovino pickpocketing keys to the medicine room, Francis seducing one of the nurses and a guard and somehow managing to convince them to allow him leniencies, and Cerberus working together to figure a way out. Seraph of course would be the brains while Oswaldo handled logistics and Bernardo handled anyone who got in the way. Hell, even their little cousin Marcello would figure something out. He’d probably gather dirt on everyone and pit them against each other, starting a revolt and letting them take care of each other. And, of course, everyone else would make it out safely.

But what about him? What could he do? His mind wasn’t exactly in the best condition to scheme and that knowledge put a damper in his moment of good humor. His family were all Hounds. They were lethal. Even his mother, aunt, and Felicia could handle their own.

‘Everyone so much more qualified to be the Prince,’ murmured the dark voice.

It was drowned out by the kinder voice who whispered, ‘But lacked something to make it so. You are more than just the Sun Child, more than just the Vargas Prince. You are you.’
“But I’m nothing,” said Feli quietly to himself, ignoring the sad look Eliáš gave him, “I don’t even deserve to be called the Alpha Greyhound or the Alpha Pup.”

‘…No, you don’t. Greyhounds are just dogs after all, never mind if they are an alpha. You are not a dog and you are not a cat. You are you.’

“Me alone isn’t enough…”

‘But you aren’t alone, are you, little fox…’

The nickname the voice called him made his heart ache for Ludwig. Why he called him that was still somewhat of a mystery to him. It probably had something to do with his hair and eye combination. But that couldn’t be all to it, right? Could it be that he was seeing something within him that he has yet to see? The same thing his family supposedly saw in him?

Could they even still see it? Lord knew he still hadn’t figured it out. But whatever it was, they would take back every good thing they had ever said about him. Whatever reasons Ludwig had for calling him his little fox would be cast aside if he could see him now.

‘Or I can live up to it,’ thought Feli to himself. He carefully placed a hand over the healing skin over his heart, ‘A fox is still a canine and canines help those who need it. I help those who need it.’

Eliáš opened the door and started to crawl out, leaning down to offer his hand to Feli, “So what’s the verdict?”

“Ve?” Feli took the hand and stood back up, stretching his back until he heard the bones pop.

“Will you help Ada and me help these people?”

Glancing around the room at the others who were trying to distract themselves from the horror they were living, Feli nodded, “Yes.”

“Thank you, mister! You have no idea the good you’re going to do. Let’s go see the inventory of meds Ada collected.”

Feli reached out and grabbed Eliáš’ arm, “Wait. I need to apologize for what I did and said. That wasn’t—”

“It’s fine. You were freaking out so it makes sense that you lost your temper. Heck, I would too if whoever kidnapped me took my eye and peeled my skin off.” Eliáš paused before giving him a stern look, “But you have to promise you won’t say anything. Promise me.”

“I promise I won’t say anything.”

“Good. Now let’s get going, mister~”

“Ve…please stop calling me that. It’s weird.”

“What should we call you then?”

“Feli is fine.”

“Are you really a Vargas?”

“Does it matter? I can’t prove that I am and maybe that’s for the best. I’d hate to think what would happen if someone else found out I were here. Now come on, let’s go see your sister.”
“Right!”

Russia

“Where the hell are you,” hissed Natalya angrily when Dimitri’s voicemail answered yet again, “Call me as soon as you get this. It’s been months…please.” She continued to pace nervously in her office. Eduard had said that Ludwig would come for her after he saw that Feli was a mobster. That had yet to happen and she should know that her ex-fiancé should know what Feliciano was by now. It had been all over the Genovian news channels after all as well as the web.

“So why is it taking the idiot so long to come to his senses? Unless…” She stopped her pacing to scowl out her window, “Unless, he decided to stay with him despite the fact.” Her heart clenched in anger. How was it possible to love someone so much that they’d be willing to be with someone dangerous like that? Not that she should be following the pot’s example in calling the kettle black. She wasn’t a saint herself after all. Of course that had been different. What she did had been just as much for her sake as it had for Ivan’s.

Her eyes traveled to the picture on her desk of her and her siblings. She picked it up, and mumbled, “Suppose I did it for you too, big sis.” Smiling at the thought of Natasha’s swollen belly, she placed the picture frame back on her desk, “Stupid cow.”

~.~

Documents upon documents sat in front of Ivan, each waiting to bear his signature but he couldn’t focus enough to go over them. His eyes kept wandering away from the business proposals and exportation manifests towards his cellphone. It had been months since he’s last heard from Feliciano. He wasn’t even sure if he liked the gift he sent him on Valentine’s Day Eve.

The sunflower bouquet had been very pretty on the website so he’d been sure that his friend would’ve appreciated the gesture. Unless…

Ivan scowled.

Unless, Ludwig told him not to accept them. The thought annoyed him. And why couldn’t Feli accept a bouquet of flowers from a good friend? He’d known him first.

Ivan shook his head, “Nyet. Ludwig is a nice man. Things probably got busy for those two, what with their engagement and that’s why Feli hasn’t had time to contact me. Isn’t that right, little comrade?” Taking his little wooden Pinocchio into his hand, Ivan ran a hand through his hair as he checked the time, “I don’t know why I even came in so early.”

He frowned and glared at the proposals his brother-in-law drew up for him, “These all end the same. You would think little Eduard would get the hint and stop asking me for type A shares in the company.” Sighing, he leaned his head on his hand and lazily moved the papers around on his desk, “I don’t understand why he even wants voting power…it’s not like this company is doing all that great.”

Loud vibrations on his desk startled Ivan from his conversation with his Pinocchio and he jumped in his seat. Excitement that perhaps it was finally his Italian friend who was calling him, he reached out for it and clicked answer without looking at the caller ID, “Hello?” His smile and excitement slowly vanished when the person on the other end was Natasha, “Oh…No, big sis, I just thought it was someone else…eh? Natalya? No, I haven’t spoken with her yet. I did see her go into her office though…Nervous?”
Ivan tilted his head in thought before answering, “Well she did seem kind of antsy but…no, why? …She hasn’t said anything to me about why she would be feeling nervous and to be honest, I don’t really want to ask—oh, hold on. I’m getting a call from the office phone. Why don’t you come up to my office and we can talk some more?…Ok, I’ll see you soon.” Hanging up his cell, he answered his other phone, “What is it?”

On the other end of the line, his security guard was speaking in rapid Russian. He kept stumbling over his words until Ivan had had enough and snapped at him to get on with it. Ivan growled in irritation when their conversation was cut short by the loud commotion outside his office. Without bothering to say goodbye, he slammed the phone back onto the receiver and went outside.

Natalya and Natasha rushed over to him as soon as they saw him, the younger took his hands in hers, “Brother, they just came into the building.”

Men in black uniform were pushing their way past security until one man with bright red hair and emerald eyes managed to make it past them, followed closely by a woman with equally striking red hair. Pulling out her badge and a pair of handcuffs, she pointed at Ivan, “You, are you Ivan Braginsky?”

Ivan tilted his head, “Why do you want to know? And more importantly, who are you and why are you people making so much noise in my offices?”

“I am special agent Babicheva from the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. We’re here to assist Interpol with your arrest.”

“I’m Robert Kirkland from Interpol,” stated the redhead that had accompanied Agent Babicheva with a flash of his own badge. He watched as his Russian counterpart pushed Ivan against the wall, forcing his hands back so that she could cuff them. He said, “We have a warrant for your arrest on behalf of the people of The Republic of Genovia.”

Natasha plucked Ivan from Agent Babicheva before she could put the handcuffs on him and dragged Natalya close to her side, wrapping an arm around both of her siblings protectively with narrowed eyes and asked, “On what grounds?”

“Are you sure you want your employees to know what your little brother did,” countered Robert with a raised brow.

“I don’t see how it matters given the ruckus you’re making,” Ivan said darkly, “If this is because I didn’t pay that parking ticket I got in Genovia, I can have my lawyer arrange—”

Agent Babicheva interrupted him by pulling him away from his sisters and shoving him against a desk to handcuff him. “Enough. You are being charged with two instances of arson at the second degree, conspiracy for murder against Feliciano Vargas, four counts of homicide at the second degree—”

“What are you talking about?” Ivan’s eyes widened as Robert picked up where Agent Babicheva left off. His violet eyes glanced around him as his employees stared at him in horror, “I never did any of that! Where—urgh!”

Agent Babicheva hoisted him up and pushed him towards the elevator, “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in the court of law…”

“Eduard,” cried Natasha as she pushed him forward. As soon as she did that, however, Natalya too was pushed against a desk by another officer. Fear gripped her tightly but she tried her best to
shove it down in favor to try to pull her sister away, “What are you doing? Natalya didn’t do anything wrong!”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” said the arresting agent. She read off the charges against the young Russian before ushering her behind Robert and Ivan.

Natalya twisted around to look at Natasha, “Don’t worry about us, sis. It’s not good for the baby. This is just a misunderstanding. I’m sure your useless husband will figure something out.”

The older woman nervously twisted her wedding ring as she turned to see Eduard talking with Robert. He was furiously waving his hands until finally Robert handed him a small card before walking out with his men. Eduard sighed and walked back to his wife, “This isn’t good, Tasha.”

“What?” Natasha held herself, “What do you mean? This is a mistake! There’s no way Ivan or my sister could—”

“I know, love. Don’t worry I’ll try my best to get them out.” Eduard straightened his glasses before pecking his wife on the cheek, “These charges are serious though. I may have to fly out with them to Genovia to get to the bottom of this. I’m also going to have to find them competent legal counsel since I’ve been told that they are going to be tried there.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No!”

Everyone in the office tore their eyes away from the windows where they had all rushed to watch Ivan and Natalya. They turned to watch Eduard instead. Blushing, he carefully touched Natasha’s baby bump, “It won’t be good for the baby or you if you two fly this late in the pregnancy. Plus, I have no idea how long it’s going to take to get all of this sorted out. You stay here and watch over these people, ok? They’re going to be scared.”

“Why?”

Glancing behind him, Eduard saw that they still had an audience so he led his wife back into his office and shut the door. “I’m not going to lie, darling. Things are not going to look good for this company.”

“But the numbers were starting to look up. Dr. Vargas gave Ivan enough to keep us stable for this quarter and it did. Shouldn’t we have enough for investors to—”

“That’s not the problem, love. If Ivan and Natalya are found guilty in this, then N.I.N.B won’t have the luxury of private investors.” Eduard took Natasha’s hands in his, “This company is going to go public whether you want it to or not and if that happens, well, who knows what changes will happen in the long run or if the new owners will even let you stay or keep working in the lab.”

Natasha felt like the world was collapsing all around her. She glanced around the office then at the scenery outside the window. This was the only good thing their mother had left them. This was the only good thing that they had left. Without it…She didn’t want to think what she would do if they lost it. Sniffing, she rubbed her belly, “What are we going to do?”

Eduard wrapped his arms around her, “Don’t fret. I already said that I was going to fly out to Genovia. If things are as bad as they seem, then…well, I suppose I can take care of the company.”

Natasha sniffed miserably, “How? It’ll be out of our hands and in the hands of s-some…strangers.”
“Maybe not.” Glancing over her shoulder in confusion, Natasha opened her mouth to speak but Eduard silenced her with a firm kiss. He pulled away and whispered, “I promise that I will take care of you. Of this company.”

Little by little, Natasha slowly pulled away to look at Eduard incredulously, “How? You don’t have any money. How are you—”

“Don’t you worry about a thing; I said that I’ll take care of it. I promise.” Eduard pulled his wife back into his arms and smiled when she pressed her face against his chest with a trusting nod. He kissed her head before pulling away, “Alright, I have to go down to where they took Ivan and Natalya. I’ll probably be gone by the time you get home, so—”

“Eduard, you can’t expect me to stay at work after what just happened.”

“I can and do.”

“But—”

“The people here need you, dear. They need to know that they can still depend on you.”

“But—”

“Trust me, Natasha, ok?”

“Ok.” Natasha rubbed her belly with a nod, “I’m so happy little Raivis went away with your relatives last month. I-I just can’t imagine having to explain to him why his uncle and auntie were taken away.”

It wasn’t long until Eduard reached his and Natasha’s home. He quickly packed up a small bag before booking and printing his flight ticket. All the while, his mind was working, checking things off in his mental list and making adjustments to his plan. His eyes widened as he remembered something important. Oh, wait—two important somethings. He made a quick phone call as he entered his car again and pulled out of his driveway.

It only rang twice before someone answered. Eduard smiled despite the caller not being able to see him, “Ah, hello…yes, it’s me. I was wondering if you could put that thing I asked you to watch over in a crate and ship it to Genovia as soon as possible… no, no, I’ll be there in time to pick it up…it won’t be any trouble, though right? It should just be passed along through customs without issue?…excellent…yes, I’ll wire you your payment as soon as I land. Thank you so much for taking care of it for me!…yes, bye-bye.”

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In less than 7 hours, Ivan’s life had fallen apart.

The plane ride to Genovia had only served for his mind to run wild with the accusations he was being charged with. Arson? That one had been his sister but there was no way in hell he was going to let her take the fall for that when she had obviously done it for him.

He gritted his teeth in frustration; why did she have to do such a stupid thing. Had he driven her to such a brash and horrible mindset? The personal attack on Feliciano had been his idea initially but he never went through with it. That had been Natalya as well. But the drug trafficking or whatever bullshit Genovia had come up with, that was a stretch. It had to be.

When they finally ushered both him and his sister into separate rooms upon arrival to Victrola, he
assumed that they were finally going to start the interrogation process. He pulled on his cuffed hands and sighed. Where the hell was Eduard?

Ivan glanced around his small room. It looked like your stereotypical interrogation room. A mirror was facing him, which was no doubt hiding curious eyes. His table was metal as was his chair and there was even a dingy light hanging over his head. Ivan scoffed, “You would think that such a rich city would have better quality rooms, right, little comrade?”

He smiled down at his toy Pinocchio only to freeze in his seat. His toy was gone. When the hell had they taken it from him that he hadn’t noticed?! Freaking out, Ivan tried to feel his pockets for the wooden figure when suddenly the door slammed open and Francis walked in. Ivan watched him apprehensively as he dragged another chair to sit across from him.

“Hello, Ivan,” he said, placing his briefcase onto the table and clasping his hands over it.

Ivan frowned, “Who are you?”

“A possible ally if you are willing to cooperate.” Francis opened the leather briefcase and pulled out a few folders, “Are you aware of the charges against you?”

“Those are crazy! I didn’t—”

“We have proof that you did everything you’re being accused of.” He opened the first file and showed it to Ivan. He pointed to a picture of Emil, “See this man? A member of his family was contacted from your phone, and again from your sister’s phone, and was asked to,” Francis fixed his glasses and read from the file, “eliminate a pest who will ruin all of our plans.” He pushed the file back to Ivan, and said, “Now, I know you are from Russia and therefore don’t know the relationship between you pest and this man’s family, so let me enlighten you. The Vargas and Køhlers go back to when Genovia was but a province fighting for her nationhood. Vincenzo Vargas saved Frigga Køhler from a wrecked ship and she followed him into any and every battle ever since just as her descendants do now. That being said, did you truly think that they would attempt anything against Feliciano’s life?”

Ivan shook his head desperately, “I would not either! He’s my friend.”

“Hm.” Pushing that file aside, Francis opened another. This one held picture of both burned orphanages, “The next charge, two instances of arson of the second degree coupled with four counts of homicide of the second degree.”

“I—”

“We were upset that Ludwig was in a relationship with Feliciano and therefore sent order to have these two places burned down in a disgusting attempt of intimidation. Four people died, Ivan. Two of which were children.” Francis ignored Ivan’s slowly reddening eyes and continued with the next file, “Shortly afterwards you solicited an aggravated assault on Feliciano.”

Tugging on his handcuffs, Ivan growled angrily, “I told him that one wasn’t me! I mean I did tell someone to beat up whoever Ludwig was dating but that was months before I actually knew who it was and by that time, he had already broken off the engagement so it didn’t matter to me anymore. Feliciano is my best friend; I would never wish harm upon him. Please, please believe me.”

But Francis ignored him and showed him the last one. His eyes steeled as he moved the first page aside to reveal Feliciano’s body after the incident at the bakery. He watched as Ivan froze mid tug and stared at the pictures before him. Feli’s body was bruised and caked with dried blood and
medication Dr. Blaze and Alfred had covered him in before the bandages. His face swollen beyond recognition from where the bullet had pierced his cheek and broken the small bones along its path before exiting out his eye.

Francis could see the moment Ivan’s mind registered what he was seeing because he paled significantly and the tears he had been holding back finally burst through his will. The sight filled him with a cold anger but he kept it in check for now. Francis flipped to the next page revealing Ludwig in a similar state. His leg and abdomen were heavily bandaged. The next page showed Lilly in a simple hospital gown with her back exposed to show the bruises she had gotten from the assault.

“This is bad, Ivan,” said Francis finally, “What’s worse is that we apprehended the men you hired for this and they confessed. We have proof that you ordered this attack on Feliciano and Ludwig.” He didn’t give Ivan a chance to retort, and continued, “We even have proof that you used Vargas trains to import your drugs under the guise that you were exporting your company’s medications.”

“I-I didn’t—That can’t be—No, this is a mistake. This—” He silenced himself when Francis raised a hand. His stomach churned with all these revelations. No wonder Feliciano hadn’t been in contact with him. How could he when he had been bed ridden and apparently thought that he had been the cause for all his misfortune?

“I’m not a lawyer, Ivan. No need to waste your breath trying to defend yourself to me. These are felonies here in Genovia and I’ve calculated life in prison with no chance of parole. Which will be bad for you considering how many men in there are loyal to the Vargas. Could you imagine what sort of horrible things they will do to the man who hurt their beloved prince?” Francis neatly stacked the files and placed them aside before pulling out a final file. He pushed it towards Ivan and said, “I can’t promise you freedom but I can help you get into the good graces of the right people when you are inside the prison. I can even arrange a deal with the DA so that you could get parole after whatever sentence is given to you.”

Ivan silently stared at the closed file containing Feli’s pictures, tears still escaping from the corners of his eyes. His eyes slowly moved over to the new pictures Francis was showing him. He frowned at the boxes stamped with his company name, pictures of the acidanthera flower, and mug shots of two of the most powerful crime bosses in Moscow. Francis tapped on them, “Tell me, Ivan, who supplied you with these drugs? Was it them?”

“I have no idea who these guys are.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Feeling overwhelmed, Ivan shoved all the files off the table and banged it with his cuffed fists, “I don’t care if you believe me or not! Feli will, and that’s who I want to talk to. You said that I did all of this but I didn’t and I know he will take my side as soon as he hears from me that this is all a misunderstanding.”

“Ivan, tell me who paid you to bring in the drugs into Genovia. Who are you working for?”

“I don’t—”

“God damn it,” snarled Francis as he slammed his hands onto the table, “Stop lying! We know, ok? We know it was you who did it. We know it was you who had mon petit frère and Ludwig so horribly assaulted! You are lucky you are getting this one chance to lessen the penalty for your crimes and you are being foolish to not take it.”
Walking around to Ivan, Francis pulled the Russian around to face him. Through his own panic, Ivan couldn’t help but notice the own panic in Francis’ eyes. They held sadness and anger twisted with anxiety. If he were in a better state, perhaps he would’ve used this information to his advantage and find a way out of his situation. But he couldn’t. Something told him that the emotions running through Francis had more to do with the pictures he showed him and less with what he was asking. Or maybe they were connected somehow.

Whatever it was, he didn’t get a chance to dwell on it. A fist flew out from under him and collided with his cheek. Stunned, Ivan glanced up at Francis.

“Speak damn it!” Francis shook him violently, “Tell me who you’re working for! Who is so important? Who are you so indebted to that you felt the need to attack the brightest starlight to ever—Fелициано…h-he—Who…who is worth the pain you gave him, huh? Tell me.”

Shaking more out of sadness than fear, Ivan shook his head, “I don’t know. I don’t know why you think I would do such a thing. He’s my—”

“Fine.” Gathering his things, Francis knocked on the door to signal that he was done. He glanced over his shoulder, “I’ll let you sleep on it. You have until before we hand you over to the Genovian authorities.” Taking his leave, he ignored Ivan’s pleas and muttered under his breath, “Which is much more than what you deserve.”

Francis walked past the other interrogation room where Daniel was currently talking with Natalya and Eduard. Daniel stared her down before sighing, “I’m not going to say this again, Miss Braginsky. The crimes against you are dire and you will be tried separately from your brother. And I feel that I should also remind you that your brother-in-law will not be able to represent you here as he doesn’t have a license to practice Genovian Law.”

Natalya eyed the man in front of her coldly and shook her head, “I have no idea what you are talking about. Why would I want to hurt Ludwig’s stupid lover? Truth be told I never wanted to marry that kraut bastard. I don’t want to marry anyone period. I was only doing it because Ivan asked me and because if I didn’t, I was going to lose my share of the inheritance our mother left us.”

Daniel rubbed his temple with a sigh. How the Hounds of The Republic had the patience to deal with stubborn people he had no idea. At this point, he had half the mind to just—no. There was no way in hell he was going to let his mind go down that path. There was a reason why the Hounds did the dirty work. It was so that people like him, who were the shiny white knights of society, didn’t have to.

Motioning to the pictures again, he asked, “Who did you hire to burn down the Vargas home? We’ve already have the men who assaulted Dr. Feliciano and Dr. Ludwig but they were not the ones responsible for the fire.”

Tensing, Natalya gave a side glance to Eduard. So that was why she hadn’t heard from Dimitri. They had already been apprehended. And yet…Eduard’s lack of reaction calmed her a bit. If he wasn’t worried about that idiot and his subordinate then perhaps she shouldn’t be either. Odds were that they were extremely loyal to her and Ivan, so there was no need to worry about them selling her out.

“Acidanthera, Miss Natalya,” urged Daniel. “They are the group that left this same flower behind on the first fire on Sacred Heart Orphanage. That is a Vargas funded establishment you know. Wh—”
“Argh!” Natalya pulled on her restraints and snarled at the district attorney, “Vargas, Vargas, Vargas! All I hear is that stupid name. What? Are they really that special? Did they put you up to this? Is the DA on Vargas fucking payroll? Are they really that intimidated about a Russian crime group that they felt the need to ask you to pick on me until I get you names?” She laughed bitterly, “Well guess what? Not all of us in society’s elite are mobsters. How the hell am I supposed to know who these people are? I don’t wallow in filth like the damn Vargas.”

Eduard dug into his briefcase for his legal pad and silver pen, “Th—that’s right Mr. Héderváry. I believe that there is a misunderstanding here, but just to be sure, will it be ok if I look through these files myself? I may not be able to represent Natalya but I am still a lawyer. I can still advise her on which course of action to take until she finds someone more suitable to represent her.”

He thanked Daniel and reached out for the files, accidentally letting his pen fall to the ground. It released a little beep before playing a recording.

It was Eduard’s voice that Natalya recognized first, “I need to get back to work, Natalya.”

She froze in horror when she heard herself next. “I didn’t know Igor very well but I do know that his death was the reason why my dad left us. Funny isn’t it? How much of an impact the death of a child can have on a parent. It’s enough to drive them apart.”

She watched in disbelief as Eduard scrambled to pick it up and shut it down. Her indigo eyes watered in anger, “You bastard! Why would you record—you recorded our conversations? And you brought it here?!”

“It—I use it to record the meetings at work. It must’ve been an accident.”

“Accident or not,” said Daniel, reaching a hand out for the pen, “this can be considered as evidence against Natalya. I have to submit it.”

Natalya’s eyes flared angrily, “What the hell?!”

“I’m representing those you hurt, Miss Braginsky. It’s my responsibility to them to deliver evidence.”

“But—”

“But nothing. You had four children killed in the fire of Sacred Heart—”

“I didn’t do that one!”

“Regardless,” snapped Daniel, his patience finally reaching an end, “It doesn’t matter because you did order the second fire and now I have proof that you had it done because you hoped that a child died in the process. Alexander Novak is innocent in whatever it is you think Ludwig or Feliciano did to you.”

Shaking his head, Daniel packed everything up, “You know what? I take back my previous offer. I don’t care if you know who is pulling strings for Acidanthera or if you are familiar with who provided your brother with drugs. You don’t deserve any leniency in this trial, and you better believe that I will find a way to make sure you are punished to the fullest extent of the law. With the charges that are against you, you are looking at anywhere between 30-50 years in prison. Now, I’m not an unfair. I will tell whichever judge that will be appointed to this case of this evidence and share it with whoever will be representing you. Good luck.”

Natalya tightened her hands into fists in fear, “Wait!” When Daniel turned around, she motioned to
Eduard, “It was his idea. Th-the drugs, I have no idea about that but he said that I should do something to prove that Feliciano was a mobster. He told me to do these bad things!”

“No, I didn’t.” Eduard walked around the table and frowned at his sister-in-law, “You asked me for advice and I gave it to you. It’s no secret that the Vargas have skeletons in their closet. I offered to help you expose them to Ludwig. News articles and such. I never told you to plant drugs or to start fires. That was all you.”

“You bastard!”

Daniel shook his head and left the two to squabble. Enough of his time had been wasted and, truth be told, he had other things he would rather do before the upcoming battle against Natalya. The case would be simple enough due to the overwhelming amount of evidence. However, his cousin was almost due. Elizabeta’s sister-in-law was also almost due. His own wife was almost due. Feliciano had almost lost the opportunity of being a father.

Call him biased but Daniel felt a burning desire to seek justice for the children who lost their lives because of Natalya’s tantrum.

Back inside, Eduard started to pack his own things while Natalya screamed curses at him. Calmly closing his briefcase, he fixed his glasses and peered down his nose at her, “Enough. What happened a few minutes ago with my pen was an accident but now that I think about it, I realize that there are no such things as accidents. The universe wants you to pay for your crimes.”

“I didn’t mean for anyone to get hurt,” cried Natalya now. She bit her lip nervously before adding, “No one innocent at least. You said that I should prove to Ludwig about Feliciano and I did. But I didn’t do the drug thing. You would’ve known about that. Oh my god…this isn’t a felony right?”

“I don’t know much about Genovian law, but it might be. It is in Russia anyhow.”

The reality of that was slowly turning her belly to lead. She started to shake, “B-but…a felony? That…no! No, I can’t be charged with felonies. Don’t you know what will happen to me and Ivan? To our company? Please, Eduard, you have to help me! Help me and Ivan get out of this. Please, for Natasha’s sake. She won’t know what to do without us!”

“Don’t insult my wife, Nat. I’m aware of what can happen and I want you to know that I’ll take care of the company and Natasha. You should worry more about yourself.”

“You’ll take care of the company…You?”

“That’s right. I have to take responsibility of these things. My baby is coming soon and I need to be sure that Tasha and it are well taken care of.” Eduard narrowed his eyes, “I will not have you and your brother ruin your sister. She deserves better than that.”

Natalya watched him walk away, confusion and too many thoughts swirling within her mind. It was all too much; she couldn’t hear herself think let alone speak with the woman who had introduced herself as her defense attorney. She stayed quiet and thought about her actions, slowly going back in time to figure out where she had gone wrong.

Eduard checked his cell phone for any new messages from his wife but instead found two. One was from his little brother and the other from the postal service he used to bring a package to inform him that it had made it safe and sound and that it was currently waiting for him at the train station. Smiling, he pocketed his phone and changed his route for the station instead.
It was an old building that welcomed him. The Italian influence very apparent in its ribbed glass ceilings and overall interior design. And yet, or rather of course, the Vargas had kept up with maintaining it in proper shape over the years, filling it with shops and bistros. Eduard wandered into one that had large lollipops and other sweets to wait out the group of people who arrived on the 11 o’clock train. Over the intercom, a woman was reminding everyone that the final train departure for the night would leave in 15 minutes.

Buying two rainbow colored lollipops, Eduard checked his phone again. He had a new message from his brother telling him that he was already at the station. The platforms were near empty now that the final trains were leaving and he decided that now was the perfect time to retrieve his package. Eduard checked out a small luggage cart and dragged it to the railway parcel pickup where the employee behind the glass was talking on the phone while balancing a text book on his lap.

“Listen, man…no Emil, dude,” said Leon, “listen to me…You listening?...Alright, Lilly is just being hormonal but trust me, she doesn’t hate you. She loves you so much!...How do I know? …’Cause I have sisters and one of them was pregnant too, remember? She said all sort of things to her wife….uh-huh. Plus Lil’ was texting me earlier today pretty much sobbing about how she thinks you’ve lost interest in her because her tummy is big. Emil, ya gotta, like, make love to her and stuff…You’ve tried? What happened…Aww, you guys are so damn cute, you know that? And pretty freaking dumb. We’re living in an age where we can like find all sorts of info on the web. Plus, isn’t her sister-in-law pregnant too? Why don’t you ask her and Roderich how they’ve been doing it? I can’t imagine having sex with a pregnant girl is any different from—”

Leon cut himself off when he glanced up from his text book on the development of speech and saw Eduard patiently waiting for him to finish his call. Blushing, he spoke into his cell, “Emil? Listen, I gotta let ya go. I’ll text you when I get home…yeah, you go find out how to make love to your baby mama…yes, I totally did say that…hehe, alright, later brother.” Shutting off his phone, he stood quickly and greeted Eduard, “Good evening, sir. Do you have your ticket?”

“I do,” replied Eduard as he handed him his cell phone with an amused grin.

“Thank you~”

“Hm.”

Leon quickly scanned the barcode on the phone before handing it back. He typed a few things into the computer and went to go fetch the package. He came back empty handed with a sheepish smile, “Er, like, would you mind wheeling that cart over here? It’s kind of heavy whatever it is you got.”

“Sure thing.” Eduard pushed his cart to the side and let Leon take it to the back room with him. He bounced on the balls of his feet while he waited for him to come back. A few minutes later, Leon returned and handed him a document to sign before letting him take back the cart. Eduard paused and said over his shoulder, “By the way, tell your friend that it’s easier to do it if she is on top, but better if they’re both on their sides. I personally like it when we’re on our sides. It’s more intimate.” Not bothering to stick around for a reaction, Eduard pushed his cart towards the back of the train station where his brother was waiting for him.

Toris tucked his cell phone away with a glare. He looked around him frantically, “Where is he?” When he didn’t spy their little brother, his eyes flashed angrily, “You bastard, where is he?!”

“Relax, I didn’t want to deal with the paper work of this transaction.” Eduard took off his glasses and cleaned them nonchalantly, knowing full well that after this night, it was going to be a lot harder to convince his brother to do anything for him anymore and thus wanted to milk the
situation to the last second. But after Toris’ final exasperated sigh, Eduard finally placed his glasses back onto his face before pushing the cart to the brunette.

“What’s th—Hey!” Toris reached out for his brother to stop him as Eduard moved to walk away, “Where are his things? I’m going to need his birth certificate and personal records so I can register as his guardian. Hey! I did everything you told me to do. Where is he?!”

“I told you that you would get custody of him and I meant it. Everything that you need is in that damn box,” said Eduard with cold calmness, “Don’t open it until you’re at home.”

Unease settled into Toris’ stomach, making it churn but he did as Eduard said and dragged the large box to his apartment. The unpleasant feeling didn’t dissipate. If anything it only got worse, his hands trembling as he used a crowbar to pry the nails off the wooden box one by one. They fell to the ground noisily until he finally pulled the last one.

Tossing the crowbar to the side, he lifted the lid and pulled out the straw. He released an angry sob when he saw what was inside. Toris dug his arms inside and pulled out his sleeping baby brother, frail and short for someone his age. The tears coursing down his cheeks…he wasn’t sure who they were for. He wasn’t sure if they were for his poor eleven year old brother, if they were for his guilty conscious of the things he did that led up to this point, one being pushing Feliks away, or if they were for his horrible excuse of a brother. Probably all three of them.

Toris fell onto his rump and pulled up his knees to cradle Raivis against his chest. He buried his face into the blond’s fluffy hair and cried, “It’s ok, little brother. It’s going to be ok. I’ve got you now. You’re safe. You’re home.”

Four days. It had been four days since Ludwig and Oswaldo jumped from the airplane just above Mont Blanc. Four days since they’ve found sanctuary in a bed and breakfast in the neighboring commune of Courmayeur. Four days of pacing restlessly inside their room while Oswaldo was out gathering information. He hadn’t even been allowed to help and the only thing keeping his sanity was the steady beeping of Feliciano’s heart on the monitor.

But even that was starting to drive Ludwig mad. It was one thing to see his beloved’s heart on a monitor. It was something completely different to actually feel it under his palm. And that was something he really wanted to do. Ludwig needed to see Feli in person again, to touch him and be one hundred percent certain that he was alive and well.

Oswaldo had told him that he was going to take care of questioning but, really, how long did it freaking take to get information? Speaking of which, Ludwig glared at the man’s bed and tugged on his long shirt sleeves anxiously. It was taking a little while longer for him to get back. Usually he returned around 11 in the evening.

“He’s thirty minutes late,” grumbled Ludwig as he shifted in his own bed and reached out to touch the laptop’s screen. His fingers traced up and down the waves Feli’s heart beat created, wishing that somehow it would tell him where the Italian was. The sound of a key unlocking their door rustled before Oswaldo finally walked through. Ludwig stood up hopefully and asked, “Anything?”

“Well, I’ve got good news,” said Ozzie as he started to strip from his clothes, tossing them onto the bed and digging through his bag for something clean.

Ludwig ignored the impulse to pick up after him and waited. After a moment of silence he sighed impatiently, “And?”
“Found the Pit of Vipers.”

“Feli’s there?”

“No, Carnelian is.”

“Who?”

“Carnelian,” said Oswaldo distractedly, “He’s the guy I’ve been looking for.”

Ludwig’s eyebrow twitched as he tried to wrap his head around what Oswaldo just said. Four days. Had he mentioned that it had been four days? Because to him it felt like he was just learning the fact it had been four days. Four days that he thought his companion was looking for the man they loved but were really spent looking for this…thi—Ludwig growled and grabbed Oswaldo by the shoulders, “What the hell do you mean you were looking for Carnelian?! What about Feli? You said you were going to help me find him!”

“And I am,” snapped Ozzie as he tried to pry Ludwig’s hand’s from his shoulders, “I need help to do that.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“Dude, no offense, but you are way in over your head with this.” Grunting he finally escaped the Ludwig’s hold. He rubbed his shoulder with a grimace, “Damn. Ok, listen, I can’t do this alone, alright? What am I supposed to do with the people I interrogate, huh? I don’t have time to dispose of their bodies—yes I said bodies, don’t give me that look. I can’t have these assholes go and report to their bosses that the prince of the criminal empire is missing. We’ve already established that, right?

“Also, I can’t call my fellow Hounds because no doubt my dad and grandpa already have a notice on us.”

Ludwig glared angrily, muttering, “And the only person who can help us is this Carnelian person?”

“Yeah, he’s one of Naya’s Diamond Dogs and she apparently gave the name to Seraph to pass on to me.”

“So I take it we can trust him.”

“Yeah.”

“Because he’s your cousin’s lackey.”

Oswaldo winced at the term and continued to get ready, “I wouldn’t exactly call him her lackey. To be honest, I don’t even understand how the Diamond Dogs operate in terms of a hierarchy but since she and him are ex-Hounds, I’m assuming they run pretty much the same. Every team, or pack if you will, is composed of five people. The team leader, or alpha, one medic, one analyst, or beta, and two grunts.”

“Ex-Hounds. Lovely. So we’re placing Feli’s life and ours in their hands, then?”

“Hey, now. Don’t you be an asshole to them, too. It’s bad enough Naya and her lot get flak from my brother and dad. They don’t need it from you too.”

Sighing, Ludwig sat back down on his bed, “How do you know you can trust them?”
“They’re ex-Hounds for one. Despite what my dad and Seraph think, they aren’t traitors. They just…well, I don’t know why they left but I do know that their methods of handling things are a little different from us. Not to mention, while she and I aren’t blood, Naya is crazy about family. She wouldn’t give me a person who she thought would backstab us. She once put a bullet in a pup because—”

“She killed a dog?!”

Oswaldo blinked slowly before shaking his head with a small chuckle, “No, she—no. A pup is what we call Hound recruits. She killed one in my group because he tried to blackmail the Vargas. Trust me man, she only creates loyal Hounds.” As an afterthought he mumbled, “One way or another.”

The Italian took out a makeup kit, throwing another to Ludwig, and started to work on covering his tattoo. Ludwig glanced up in a silent question.

“Go take a quick shower and use the brown dye on your hair. Don’t worry, it’ll wash off after like the third shower. Also, put on the hazel—no—the green contacts. Hurry up, I want to get there before more shady people arrive.”

“Wh-really?” Ludwig’s chest burst with warmth at finally being allowed to do something and he rushed to do as he was told before Oswaldo could change his mind.

He heard him shout through the door, “Don’t do anything stupid alright? Only reason I’m taking you is because we aren’t coming back. I’m hoping Carnelian will point us in the direction of a local safe house. I can’t sleep in this damn place, not safe enough.”

Oswaldo packed up their things and continued to talk to Ludwig through the door, “Er, a few things you should know about Diamond Dogs. They’re really, uh…well, they’re kind of really into their roles so whatever happens just run with it. I’ve come up with a persona for you too, so just stick to it and we should be fine.”

Rinsing his hair out, Ludwig frowned despite knowing Ozzie couldn’t see. He asked, “Persona?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What kind?”

Ludwig found out soon enough by the time he and Oswaldo arrived at a seedy looking club. Glancing behind him at the glittering lights of Courmayeur, then back at the club, he scowled and dug his heel into the sidewalk. There was no way in hell he was going to step foot into a place called The Devil’s Den.

Oswaldo rolled his eyes and grabbed his hand to tug him forward, “Come on. You wanted to come with me so now you’re going to deal.”

“Why the hell are we here? You said we’re going to The Pit of Vipers.”

“That’s inside.” Pausing, he gave Ludwig a once over, fixing his hair and straightening his shirt. Ozzie quietly whispered, “Ok, do you remember your name?”

“I’m Luther Schneider.”

“And I am?”
“Does it even matter? Won’t Carnelian know who you really are?”

“Ludwig…”

Growling, Ludwig nodded, “Alright, alright. Your name is Enzo Mocci and we are here on a skiing vacation.”

“Yeah, ok. Now don’t mention that unless they ask you. For the most part no one should approach you. Not as long as you wear your collar.”

Ludwig clenched his jaw and stared at Ozzie as he pulled out a black leather collar from his pocket. He eyed it then looked at the Italian in the eye and said, “No way in hell am I wearing that. Just what sort of club is—”

“The Pit of Vipers is a bath house, man.”

“(…)I’m staying out here.”

“The hell you are. It’s dangerous. This side of town is dangerous.”

“It’s a tourist town!”

“Exactly! Do you have any idea how many tourists get kidnapped and sold into the human trafficking gig?” Oswaldo shoved the collar into Ludwig’s chest and looked away with a flush, “Do you honestly think someone who looks the way you do won’t get taken? I already fucked up with Feli; I don’t want to add losing you to my list of things I need to atone for.” Peering up through his lashes, he gently pushed the collar against Ludwig’s chest again, “Please, for the love of god, just wear it. The faster we get in, the faster we get out, the faster I can shift gears and really start looking, the faster I can get Feliciano back. Please.”

Well, when he put it like that…

Ludwig secured the leather band around his neck. He’d forgo his pride a bit if it meant getting to his little fox sooner. Blushing in embarrassment, Ludwig allowed Oswaldo to take him by the hand and lead them across the street and into The Devil’s Den. They bypassed the long line of eager patrons waiting to get in, waiting only momentarily for the bouncer to check their IDs before entering.

Deafening music pulsed through the atmosphere of sweaty bodies grinding against each other. Ludwig wrinkled his nose in disgust. It kind of reminded him of Marcello’s Den of Iniquity. The only difference was that at least his club had tiers that varied in tact so that they didn’t have to be with people who partied a little too hard. He allowed Ozzie to pull him towards an elevator where they had to present their IDs yet again, though this time they also had to agree to a pat down.

One of the bouncers spoke to Oswaldo in Italian before stamping their hands with four small diamonds. Ozzie’s stamp had the topmost diamond colored Red while Ludwig’s had the bottom diamond colored blue. They both released their breath as soon as the elevator doors closed to take them down. Ludwig glanced around, trying to figure out who owned the place. He really hoped the Vargas didn’t…

“Naya does,” said Ozzie after a while. He nodded to the stamp on their hands, “That’s the mark of a Diamond Dog, though in this case, it’s also to tell people that you’re a sub and I’m a dom.” Before he could let Ludwig utter a word, he continued, “I won’t let anyone touch you, ok? As far as anyone knows you’re taken. Please, please, please don’t touch anything. I’m sure Naya keeps her places clean but I don’t want you to—”
Ludwig huffed again, trying not to dwell on the overwhelming amount of information, or on the fact that he was in a place he had no business being in. But this was for Feliciano. This is for Feli. For his little fox, and his fiancé. For him. He could endure this for him.

The elevator stopped with a ding. Ozzie breathed in and let it out through his nose, his shoulders relaxing and eyes darkening. He wrapped an arm around Ludwig’s waist, “Ready, Luther?”

As soon as the doors opened, Ludwig was overcome with the urge of turning back around and crawling back into bed with Oswaldo’s laptop and continue to stare at Feli’s heart beat while said Italian did his thing. There were people everywhere. Couples and groups of men and men, women and men, and men and women, were in various states of dress and arousal.

_Dear mutti in heaven_, he thought to himself. He masked his disgust and embarrassment with stoicism, tightening his hold on Oswaldo’s hip as they walked past them. _Think of Feli, think of Feli, this is for Feli._

Oswaldo found them a semi private corner, at least one where people were fully clothed, and allowed Ludwig to sit down. He glanced around him for a waitress and flagged her down, whispering into her ear before taking a seat himself next to Ludwig. Wrapping an arm around his shoulder, he toyed with a small device attached to the back of his ear while they waited. Waited for what, Ludwig wasn’t so sure until another waiter arrived. At least, he thought he was a waiter.

The man had striking green eyes and wild blond hair. His tight black clothing did little to let the imagination wander, but the four small diamond tattoos arranged to form a larger diamond tattoo with a paw print taking the place of the right small diamond on his hip was all Ludwig needed to confirm that this was the Diamond Dog they were looking for. Well, that and the way Ozzie’s eyes lit up momentarily before dimming back into the soft lust everyone else had.

Grinning, Carnelian motioned for them to follow him.

They slid into a VIP room where a few more people were entwined intimately but Ludwig paid no mind to them. They found the guy, now they could go, right?

“Stay here for a second, Luther,” said Oswaldo, pointing to another chair, “I’ll be over there talking to Fox Hound.”

“Carnelian,” corrected the Diamond Dog, then added, “I ain’t no Hound no more.” His grin grew mischievous as he palmed Ozzie through his pants, “But that doesn’t mean we can’t have fun again.”

Oswaldo gripped his hand and pulled it away, “I’m here on business, man.”

“It’s always business with you. Fine, come on” Ozzie gave a final glance to Ludwig before following Carnelian to a couch further away from where Ludwig was sitting, leaving him to his own devices.

Crossing his arms across his chest, Ludwig sat rigidly in his table, trying to figure out where it was safest to look. In the end, he settled for staring at a wet spot on the table until unfortunate curiosity entered his mind and he wondered what the hell it was. Or rather, what the hell it came from. If anything, he now understood why Seraph and Paolo were hesitant to associate themselves with the Diamond Dogs. This was disgusting.

People were eyeing him to make matters worse. He could feel them undressing him with their eyes and the knowledge pissed him off. Glancing over to where Oswaldo and Carnelian were, his blood
only boiled more. Ozzie was huddled far too close to Carnelian and was even allowing him to trace his fingers along his leg while they whispered to each other.

“This is such a waste of time,” he grumbled to himself, as he tightened his arms around himself, not wanting to touch anything anymore than he had to. At least no one was trying to hit on him.

“Hey there.”

Aw, hell.

Narrowing his eyes, Ludwig glared up at a man probably older than he was. It was hard to tell given his youthful appearance but contradicting greying hair. He had a red diamond on his hand and a whip in the other. The whip would probably be a turn on had Feli been the one holding it but as it were, his fiancé was alone and afraid somewhere while this asshole had the nerve to speak to him.

Still…he was supposed to pretend like he belonged here, so he turned down the heat in his eye—lest the man mistake it for lust—and settled on mild annoyance as he pointed to his collar, “I’m taken.”

The man smiled, “I can see that, but where is your dom? It’s not him over there, is it?”

Ludwig turned to see where the man was pointing and felt his fingers dig into his arms at what he saw. Carnelian had pinned Oswaldo to the couch and was kissing him.

“I wouldn’t treat you like that,” continued the man as he inched closer.

Ignoring him, Ludwig continued to stare at the Italian whom he had come to see as a friend despite their mutual love for Feliciano. Somehow the sight of him lip locked with someone else pissed him off. He stood from his seat with every intention of telling him off for wasting time, when he felt a sturdy grip on his bicep. Freezing, he turned to glare at his capture, “Let me go.”

“He’s not worth it. Let me take care of you.”

“I don’t need you to take care of me. Enzo is enough.”

“But—”

“You heard him,” said Oswaldo, suddenly standing behind Ludwig, “Let him go.” He placed a soft hand on the man’s shoulder and gently squeezed with a calm smile that reminded Ludwig too much of Feli’s when he was angry, “You really shouldn’t touch what doesn’t belong to you.”

“It doesn’t look like he belongs to you either.”

“Well I’m not going to fucking kiss him to prove that he’s off limits to you!”

Carnelian stepped in between the two to diffuse the situation, toying with the man’s whip, “Come now, no need to fight, these two lads were just leavin’. Why don’t you come with me? I’m sure I can find you someone or—if we can’t, I’ll be more than happy to play with you, bello.”

The proposition seemed to placate the man who released Ludwig and disappeared into the crowd with Carnelian. Ludwig refused to let Oswaldo hold his hand as they maneuvered back to the elevator. The ride up was awkward between the two friends, the walk to their new safe house even more so. When they finally arrived, Ludwig felt exhausted, all the previous anger he had melting away to sadness and anxiety.
Their things had been moved to the new location, courtesy of the Diamond Dogs, and he made a beeline to the bathroom to wash the smell and horrible feeling away. How the hell anyone could work in those conditions was beyond him. When he was done he found Ozzie sitting in his boxers and a t-shirt with his knees curled up to his chest and face in his hands.

At the sound of Ludwig zipping his soiled clothes into another bag, Oswaldo approached him, “I —”

“Did you get what you wanted,” asked Ludwig quietly.

Oswaldo sighed and nodded, “I had a lead. When I was out, I overheard this guy talking about how he sold someone important. Did a little snooping and found out that there’s this tavern he frequents.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you would’ve wanted us to go after him, which I would’ve but, from what I gathered, he has wanted in the Moretti Family. Two days ago, when I last saw him, he actually had a posse. They’re notorious human traffickers and, while I could just wipe his group out, that would cause a disturbance within the community and Grandpa wants this handled quietly. I told Carnelian, and he told me that he had a dog working at the Moretti Tavern so it would be no problem to execute a pickup there. We came up with a plan—”

“Really?” Ludwig angrily zipped up his bag and threw it to the ground before untucking the sheets on his bed, “Because from what I saw, you were too busy making out with Carnelian. I’m curious, Oz, was all this said before or after you shoved your tongue down his throat.”

“We were talking Ludwig.”

“With his hand on your thigh?”

“That’s—he was talking to me! It’s Morse code. The kissing…” Ozzie rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment, “Well, that was Morse code too.”

“…He tapped out Morse code with his tongue?”

“I-it’s not as uncommon with them as you think…. When Ludwig didn’t respond, the Italian elaborated, “I told you the Diamond Dogs do things differently, didn’t I? We couldn’t let everyone there know what we’re planning. All sorts of shady characters frequent the place and it was too risky to actually talk about it out loud.” When Ludwig didn't say anything, Oswaldo whispered, "I'm sorry.”

Ludwig shrugged and curled under the covers, turning Ozzie’s laptop on so that he could watch Feli’s heart beat for a while. He heard the Italian sigh before taking his turn in the shower. When he came back, Ludwig had, turned off his side lamp, placed the laptop on Oswaldo’s bed, and was fast asleep.

Sighing, again, Oswaldo brushed his fingers along Feli’s heart beat before setting it on the bedside table between the two beds. He was half way asleep when Ludwig spoke up, “Don’t do that again.”

“Uh—”

“That thing you did at the Pit of Vipers, don’t do it again.”

Oswaldo didn’t try to figure out what exactly he meant by that, as he had done a few things that
might have annoyed his companion, and instead simply said, “Ok.”

The next day, he went over the plan with Ludwig and explained how they were going to execute it when their mark arrived at the bar. With his weapons spread out on the table, he motioned for Ludwig to pick one. Smiling slightly, Ozzie packed up the rest when Ludwig selected a pistol, “Good. Same rule applies though, don’t use it unless it’s a life or death situation. Guns are loud and loud draws unwanted attention. So does dressing like a tourist for that matter. Go put on some jeans and a black t-shirt and this hoodie. And don’t forget, for now you are still Luther. When we apprehend the guy, you will be…uh…”

“Can I be German Shepard,” asked Ludwig as he pulled a hoodie on.

“You’re not a Hound, buddy. I guess it doesn’t really matter. Your name is Luther until we find Feli.” Oswaldo checked his own weapon before strapping it onto his wrist and pulling on his black hoodie. The hood fell over to his nose in a soft point, “But, if you were, I think you’re more of a Weimaraner. You’ve got their cool eyes.” He took a final look around their room before taking a set of keys and motioning Ludwig to walk ahead.

The tavern wasn’t too far of a walk away from their safe house. The duo arrived a little before the evening crowd and Ludwig made sure to sit a good three seats away from Oswaldo—the safe zone—as he called it. There was hardly anyone there save for a tanned girl and an older gentleman but that soon changed when sunset rolled around. Patrons steadily waltzed in filling the tavern. Ludwig ordered a beer when he saw that Ozzie ordered one as well. He kept it close and glanced around for anyone suspicious, stopping only when he caught Oswaldo giving him a look. Be cool, it said.

Huffing, Ludwig took a swig of beer and settled in his seat. Carnelian—dressed decently, thankfully—waltzed up the bar and ordered a pint for himself before smacking Oswaldo on the shoulder, “Hehe, Enzo, you bastard, where have you been? You ran off without giving me a proper goodbye last night.”

Ludwig kept his eyes trained to where the Diamond Dog was touching his friend and noticed how his index finger was moving rapidly up against Oswaldo’s neck. He made a mental note to learn Morse code so that he could keep up.

Oswaldo gave a small nod and emptied his beer before motioning the bartender to give him another. He stared at the rack of wines, motioning the bartender again and pointing to a heavy looking bottle of wine. Grinning, the bartender went to retrieve it for him.

A quarter to seven, four beers down, and a bowl of peanuts later, Ludwig glanced up to the door when it was suddenly slammed open. A group of four men walked in, startling most of the patrons into hushed whispers. One of the group, a short balding man, grinned toothily at them and said, “Come now! There’s no need to settle down, it’s just me~”

He walked in and motioned for his group to move the guests sitting in a booth. Chuckling, he took their seat, “Thank you for so kindly giving me your table. I’ll just finish your bottle off.” Once he and his group were settled, conversation slowly returned to their usual volume.

Ozzie shifted in his seat and caught Carnelian’s eyes, giving him a curt nod while running a finger along the rim of his cup in a counterclockwise motion. Ludwig recognized it as the signal and sat straighter in his seat when Carnelian’s eyes darkened with excitement. The Diamond Dog picked up an order from the bartender and assumed a drunken saunter as he made his way over to the group of men.

Grinning, Carnelian placed the pints down and lifted his own in a toast, “Hey, guy! To prosperity
and advancement in this cruel dark world. May you get your just rewards~"

Cackling, the short balding man raised his pint, “Cin-cin!”

“Heh, but I’m not finished yet, my friend. We all know who you are. You’re Signore Rossalini,” slurred Carnelian as if he was only increasing his drunken state from his drink. He drank some more and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand—a signal for the other Diamond Dogs who accompanied him to the tavern. Ludwig discreetly shifted his eyes around to see who was moving that shouldn’t. To his surprise, two women and a man he recognized as Naya’s brother were quietly positioning themselves. Another three women stopped drinking and were sitting tensely at their seats, waiting.

Carnelian raised his cup again, “Shignore Roshalini, you are a man who must be properly saluted for you have done something any normal human being would’ve shied away from.”

Rossalini’s smile wavered but he forced it to stay in place. The Diamond Dog tossed his head back and drowned the rest of the beer, licking his lips as his eyes cleared. With a sneer, he said in a low voice, “What a normal human being should never do to another fellow living being.”

“Wha—” Rossalini was roughly shoved down just as Carnelian smashed his glass on the head of one the men who was accompanying him.

The rest of the Diamond Dogs reacted swiftly to the signal and started to brawl with the other patrons. Oswaldo waited three seconds before sliding the now empty wine bottle to Ludwig who grabbed it and smashed it onto the patron next to him just as he was reaching for a gun. Surprised with himself, Ludwig kept what remained of the bottle and followed after Ozzie who was walking purposely through the violence and over bodies, his eyes never leaving Rossalini’s cowering form.

“All right, Luddy,” said Oswaldo while Ludwig selected only the very important items from his bag, “That tavern is owned by the Moretti family. Remember I mentioned them yesterday? More than half of their patrons are members of the mob so I want you to—”

“I sit in the ‘safe zone’” grumbled Ludwig with air quotes around safe zone as if there really was such a thing as safe in a bar owned by the mob. Well, a bar owned by the mob that didn’t belong to the Vargases. He continued to recite the plan, “The Diamond Dogs are going to be scattered amongst the patrons so that when our mark arrives, Carnelian will engage them. The signal to do so is a counter-clockwise motion around your drink. The signal for the rest of the Dogs is him smashing his beverage over one of the members of the mark’s group.

“Stay close to you. Don’t engage unless I have to or you give me permission. Don’t ask questions about Feliciano, or mention that I am associated with Vargas. Only shoot my gun if I have to, otherwise improvise with what I have around me—if that.” Ludwig recited what Ozzie had all but drilled into his head with mild annoyance. He glared at the Italian, “Did I get all of it?”

Ozzie pursed his lips and nodded, “Yeah. And when we get there—”

Grinning in spite of himself, Oswaldo gave him a thumb up sign, “You leave the rest to me, Luddy.”

The look in Oswaldo’s eyes was positively predatory. Without removing his gaze from Rossalini, he caught a bottle tossed in his direction and used it to smash it behind a patron’s head. Why the
Italian wasn’t simply using his own blade, Ludwig didn’t understand but continued to stick close. He caught a man running towards Ozzie before he had a chance to stab him with a broken bottle and punched him in the stomach a few times before shoving him into a table.

Oswaldo gave a knee jerk reaction when a patron pulled his hood down and elbowed his assailant in the face, twisting around to pull him over his shoulder to use as a human shield for the sudden gunfire. He growled silently to himself and dragged Ludwig closer, counting the shots before tossing the body carelessly down and jumping over a table towards the man with the gun.

Flicking his wrist back, a blade emerged from under his sleeve and he thrusted his arm forward, driving the blade just under the gunman’s armpit and into his heart. Stepping back, Oswaldo flicked his hood back and ran towards the mark before he could make his escape and rapidly jabbed his fingers into Rossalini’s body, making the stout man pass out.

When Rossalini came to, he found himself tied to a laundry pole on the roof of a building. He frantically glanced around and paled when he saw a hooded man wearing a horrifying, black, and silver dog mask. Rossalini gasped as another hooded man cut a rope and his body roughly flew upward, making him dangle upside down in front of the Hellhound. He cried out, “Please! Please don’t hurt me! I—mph!”

“Shut up,” growled Oswaldo, squeezing his gloved hand tighter around Rossalini’s mouth, “maybe if you would’ve kept your mouth shut, you wouldn’t be in the position you find yourself in.”

Ludwig took a seat on a discarded crate and watched with impatience as Ozzie toyed with their mark. After ten minutes he stood up and marched over to the Italian, dragging him away from Rossalini and hissed, “What are you doing?”

“Interrogating him.”

“Why aren’t you doing anything? He’s not going to talk unless you do something to him.”

“Luther…”

“No! You’re beating around the bush, why don’t you hit him? Cut him or something so he tells us what he saw!”

“I can’t…”

“BECAUSE OF WHAT YOUR DAD SAID?!?” Ludwig tried to pull his own hood back so that he could look at Oswaldo properly but Ozzie stopped him.

“I know what I’m doing, Luther. Trust me.” He walked back over to Rossalini and tilted his head to the side, “Sorry about that. Now, where were we?”

“I don’t know nothing,” cried Rossalini. Literally cried. The man had tears running down his red cheeks as he tried to beg, “Let me go. Please, sir, I swear I won’t tell anyone what I saw. I swear on my mama’s grave that the Vargas don’t have to worry about their prince.”

Ozzie’s eyes hardened in confusion but thankfully Rossalini didn’t pick up on it. He gripped the stout Italian’s hair, “I don’t care about what you saw. We care about what you did. You know the law, no one is to sell high end merchandise without a license. Especially not some lowly peasant like you. The Moretti family should know better.”

Bending his wrist back, Ozzie slowly allowed his blade to come out until the tip grazed Rossalini’s neck, “Do you know what I am?”
“C-Cerberus, the hell hound,” whimpered the Italian.

“Hm, and what would satisfy someone like me, do you think?”

Rossalini whimpered again in both shame and fear. He could feel his pants grow wet as Oswaldo pressed his blade harder against his throat. Swallowing, he pleaded again, “I will give you anything you want. Money? Girls? Boys? I know a place that will give you whatever you want but please, please spare me! I won’t say anything.”

Tsking, Ozzie grinned ruefully, “Sorry, but once you break one of King Romulus’ laws, you must pay the price. And if the king sees it fit to send me to collect, then you should know that,” standing up, he slowly slit Rossalini’s throat shallowly, “I will drag your soul to hell.”

Rossalini screamed in terror and flailed his legs, “Ok! Ok, I admit it!” When Ozzie pulled his blade away, he continued, “I didn’t sell no one! I swear I didn’t! I only said that because the Moretti wouldn’t give me the time of day and I thought if I said that I sold someone big, that they would and they did! But I swear to you, boss, I didn’t do it!”

“Hm…”

At this point Ludwig was standing right next to Oswaldo. He slapped Rossalini’s belly making him sway, “You said you saw the person who did it. Why would the Vargas have to worry about their prince?”

“Y-yeah. I mean, I saw Mr. Vargas pull up with a shady looking person and then hand over his brother. I’m guessing he’s trying to ensure that Lovino doesn’t try to steal his throne like Romulus did with Remus, huh—argh!”

Ludwig punched Rossalini in the stomach with every word he growled, “Feliciano isn’t like that! He would never, ever do something so vile!” He grunted when Oswaldo suddenly pulled him aside, “Let me go!”

“What the hell did I say,” hissed Ozzie, “What the hell did I say?”

“He—”

“Is a moron with a big mouth and thinks he knows shit but really doesn’t.”

“Why would he think Feli sold Lovino?”

“He probably didn’t get a good look at the faces. But that doesn’t matter. I need you to stay put while I go ask him one last thing.” Ozzie straightened his mask and walked back over to Rossalini, “Sorry about that. Now, about this transaction. Who was Lovino given to?”

Rossalini shook his head, “I don’t know. I…” His eyes suddenly lit up and he nodded, “Wait, I remember seeing the license plates of the guy’s old red and black fiat before he took off! Yeah, it had RC on it and—a-and the guy spoke with a Calabrese accent! Or more Sicilian? I don’t know, but it sounded like a combination of both. The car, I think it had the numbers 6023 something after the RC.”

Just to be certain, Oswaldo pulled out his picture of Feli and showed it to Rossalini, “Was this the person you saw being sold?”

“Yes. Yes! That’s him.”
Ozzie exchanged looks with Ludwig before cutting Rossalini down, “I see. Well, it seems like I made a mistake.”

“Yes, you did but that’s ok. I swear I won’t breathe a word of this—” A silent bullet pierced through Rossalini’s head, cutting him off mid oath.

Carnelian tucked his gun into his holster and motioned for his pack to clear the body. Donning a pair of black cargo pants, and a tight black shirt with a utility belt, he furrowed his brow at Oswaldo. In a cockney accent he asked, “The prince is missin’ then is he? Is that what made ya take a butcher’s hook around my neck of the woods? And here I thought it was because of how those Moretti Hampton wicks are running this town like they own it. Naya had to send in another one of our groups to control how many people be disappearing.”

Nudging the spot where Rossalini had been with the toe of his boot, Carnelian glared at the floor, “Things is bad, Cerberus. We’re havin’ trouble keepin’ up and there are only six packs like mine who keep our noses to the ground and ears to tha win’. Ain’t it bout time the Vargas step in and do their annual cleanse? Us Diamond Dogs got enough shit to do without having to do that too.”

“I’ll be sure to tell that to my grandfather,” said Oswaldo as he cleaned his blade off, “I don’t have to remind you to keep your mouth shut about Feli, do I?”

Carnelian sighed and shook his head, “Nah. We’re good, brother. I hope you find him. The sooner you do the sooner you blokes can go back to work.”

“It’s just me, searching.”

“Yeh, you and this pup.”

Ludwig sputtered to retort but Ozzie stopped him, “Yeah. He’s…he’s—listen we’ve got to go.”

“I understand. Good luck, mate. I know what he means to you.” Carnelian tossed Ozzie some keys and smirked, “They’re to my bird. It’s in the hanger a few kilos from ‘ere. Don’t worry ‘bout returnin’ it. Black Diamond will be sure to send for it.”

“Grazie, amico,” said Oswaldo, falling into his preferred language. He gave Carnelian a hug and waited for Ludwig.

Ludwig gave the Diamond Dog a nod and was about to follow but Carnelian hugged him as well and whispered, “Listen, no hard feelins’ about the Pit of Vipers. We DD’s prefer to do things the pleasurable way. It’s just who we are. If it makes ya feel better, Ol’ Ozzie aint even attracted to someone romantically unless he has a strong bond with ‘em. Poor lad, ain’t ever gonna find someone like that if ya ask me but I think if you try hard enough you might get him to look your way.”

Flushing red with embarrassment and confusion as to why the hell Carnelian would even think he wanted Oswaldo in that way, Ludwig thought it easier to nod again and follow his friend out. If memory served him correctly, Italian license plates had letters of region abbreviations as the first part of the plate, followed by numbers. RC stood for the region of Reggio Calabria.

When they located Carnelian’s plane, Ozzie quickly reached for his laptop. The DD’s had already loaded it along with their bags onto the plane much to the pair’s delight. He searched for the car’s description and partial license plate numbers within the area and let his computer do its job while he rushed to the cockpit to start the plane. Ludwig lingered behind curiously to watch rapid images of people with similar cars display on the screen. He clicked on a minimized window and saw that
Feli’s heart was beating faster and serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine levels were lower than the last time he saw it.

Stomach aching, he felt himself tear up with self-loathing at not being able to get to his little fox faster. That window blinked once before everything went away and a radar took its place. Oswaldo gently tapped his shoulder to move him out of the way and watched a map open up and a triangulation reformulate on it. He bit his lip before saying, “I called my uncle with coordinates of the region. He made his satellite focus all its juice on that area for Feli but even then…” Ozzie typed in a few things into the laptop and the map zoomed into Reggio Calabria, “All it can do is confirm that this is the area he’s at. Not give us the exact location.”

He checked the other window to see if the program found a match. Thankfully it gave him three, which was a lot better than he could’ve hoped for. Two were for guys in their late twenties and the other for an elderly woman approaching her sixties. Ozzie printed out their profiles and pulled up the window with Feliciano’s information on it. The heart monitor showed that his heart had stabilized and that his hormones were only slightly higher than what Ludwig had originally seen.

Ozzie motioned for him to follow him into the cockpit and made sure that he was safely strapped in before moving the plane out of the hanger. When he had them in the air, he gave Ludwig a side glance, “I really can’t, you know.”

Rubbing the exhaustion from his eyes, Ludwig asked, “What?”

“I can’t control myself when I get violent. I… I have anger issues, like Seraph. When we’re out on missions like this, it’s always us three and we keep each other from reaching our breaking point. They’re not here and I don’t want you to see me…I don’t want you to think me as some sort of monster.”

Ludwig snorted softly and shook his head, “What is with you Vargas and thinking you’re monsters?”

“It’s true. You can’t do what we do and not be affected by it. I try very hard not to lose myself. Sometimes, when I do, the only way to come back is by talking to Feliciano. I don’t know why but he’s the only one who can ever tame me again.”

Ludwig was reminded of the phones calls Feli would take whenever they were together, and even before they were together. He’d excuse himself in the middle of working on paperwork and wouldn’t come back until he had finished his call. That’s right. Feli had even mentioned to him once that Oswaldo would have temper tantrums and would need him to calm him down.

Smiling to himself, Ludwig’s heart ached for his little fox. He understood why Ozzie felt that way. To an extent, Ludwig felt the same. Feliciano simply had a way of speaking and touching that seemed to heal whoever was blessed to be in his presence. It was part of what made him such an excellent doctor to their patients. An excellent father to Alex. An excellent soul mate to him.

He glanced over to Oswaldo. An excellent… guardian for the Hell Hound’s heart.

The sunlight that all the Vargas seemed to burn within their eyes was dimming within Oswaldo’s and Ludwig felt a little guilty for pushing him so hard. The pain and guilt he had felt when he accused Feli and nearly ended their relationship all those weeks ago would probably not hold a candle to the shame Ozzie was feeling. Poor bastard no doubt blamed himself for his part in the chain reaction that led them to this point.

And yet, unlike the others Ludwig blamed, he couldn’t bring himself to loath the man. Clearing his
throat, he patted Ozzie’s hand, “I understand. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to—”

“But I don’t think you’re a monster. And if Feliciano were here, he would be very disappointed that you think yourself as such.”

“I’m sure that he thinks that I am too.”

“Nein. Feliciano loves you. I will not pretend to understand the love it is he has for you but I don’t mind as long as he loves me too. The way I see it, we both love him deeply and only want to make sure he’s always safe and sound. The way I see it, that makes us brothers.” Ludwig smiled out the window, knowing that Oswaldo was staring at him and probably had his mouth hung open in shock. “We’ll find him, Oz. We’re closer to getting him back now. So close.”

Back in Courmayeur, Carnelian was disinfecting every surface of The Pit of Vipers while humming to himself. He paused and tilted his ear to the air before swinging his mop into the intruder. It was sliced in half by a blade and the Dog couldn’t help but blink in confusion at the two sets of green eyes. Cautiously standing straighter, he said, “I never thought I’d ever see you again, sir.” Smirking, he added, “Not in a place like this at least.”

“You have some information for us,” interrupted the woman. She curled her fingers into a tight fist until her knuckles popped and asked, “Where did those two idiots run off to?”

End Notes

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