May I

by WhisperWeeper

Summary

At a world meeting, Austria comes down with a mysterious illness and everybody finds out he won't live much longer. With Switzerland volunteering reluctantly to watch over him, will the Swiss come to terms with his feelings? Or will it be too late?

Aka, a story where sick Roderich is a flirty defeatist, and Vash is a fool for only just realizing it.

(Not abandoned! I'm just a really slow writer!)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*On a cold October day in Geneva, Switzerland...*

Another day, another world meeting. Great.

America was rambling on again about the whole global warming hero while England fiercely shot him down. France was waiting for the perfect time to interject and piss them off. Russia sat smiling next to a silent Canada with his sisters and the Baltics on the other side of him. Sweden sat quietly on one side of Sealand while a happy Finland sat on the other, the rest of the Nordics on various sides of the couple.

China was restraining himself from slapping Korea as he babbled on to Taiwan and Hong Kong about how he invented rice balls. Japan's face was flushed pink as Greece leaned on him as he napped and Spain was infuriating an already ticked off Romano. Italy—who was being surprisingly quiet next to Germany—was twiddling a white flag between his fingers as he rested his head on the huge oak polished table in front of all of the rest of the dispersed countries of the world.

Switzerland sat in controlled indifference beside his sister Liechtenstein across from Austria, Hungary and Prussia. He paid very little attention to the rest of the world around him.

"All I'm saying is that *if* we did manage to make a hero big enough to surround the world—"

"No, you bloody fool!" England huffed at him. "There's no way that could work. It's the most ridiculous idea ever, even for you."

Hungary sighed, a small smile playing on her lips. Despite the complete idiocy that these meeting have been producing lately, she was enjoying herself. It was a chance to get away and to see how the other countries were doing. Lately Austria's house had been quiet and uneventful, aside from . . . *Well*, that was a line of thought she'd rather ignore at the moment.

The flamboyant aristocrat that she so loved had even refrained from playing his beloved piano the night before. That was nothing new, though. He always got extremely nervous before big meetings
and kept himself in his room.

Glancing over, the Austrian in question sat perfectly poised like a gentleman, his hands folded neatly in his lap. One wouldn't be able to see that nervousness now, though, as he always disguised it with etiquette. He raised one of those delicately gloved hands to cover a small cough and straightened his collar. He kept his gaze on the wooden table as he returned his hand to his lap.

"Well, frankly, I think your ideas are just as stupid, Angleterre."

"You bloody frog!"

"Not cool, dude. France why don't you just go and—"

"Will all of you just shut up! We have more pressing issues at hand here today!" Germany shouted, standing up suddenly and slamming his hands down on the table. Italy jumped in fright, dropping his flag onto the floor. Hungary sighed again. One would think by now he'd be used to Germany's outbursts.

Everyone fell into silence and America sat down as the room grew still. Austria coughed.

Germany seemed to calm a little, pleased with the newfound silence, and sat back down. He eyed Spain for a moment, who quickly stopped playing with Romano's poor cheek, before starting his spiel. "Now then, we need to all talk and voice our opinions in an orderly manner."

Austria coughed again, his hand returning to his mouth. It stayed there as yet another cough shook him and he tried to control himself, not wanting to interrupt the German.

"Everyone deserves a chance to present a solution and you'll each get only ten minutes to do so, no longer."

Cough.

"America, you've already given your argument, so please sit back and be quiet."

Cough.

"When all of us have spoken we can have a group discussion afterward."

Cough cough.

"Mein Güte, Austria!" Germany exhaled angrily, turning to the aristocrat. "Do you need a drink of water or something?"

Austria shook his head, smothering his next cough in embarrassment. "My apologies, Germany. I just have—" he began quietly, pausing to cough again. "It seems I have a tickle in my throat."

Germany grumbled to himself and tossed a water bottle over to him. Hungary caught it deftly and handed it to the musician with a smile. He thanked them, nodding for Germany to continue. He didn't want the attention to be focused on him any longer, his interruption even seeming to wake Greece up from his slumber on Japan, the older country sighing in relief.

Switzerland watched all of this with a look of detachment. Liechtenstein looked up at him. She noted that, even though her brother and the Austrian were no longer friends, he still kept his watchful eyes on the man.

Not wanting to be caught being impolite, she quickly turned her gaze away. She knew that her
brother was probably worrying over him and there was no way he would admit it to her, whether she asked or not. That's how he was. She shook her head at her silly thoughts.

Liechtenstein glanced across the table at Austria, which didn't seem as impolite since most everyone else was doing it, too. She saw a slight red tint float down into the liquid as he took a drink of water. She leaned forward, her eyes widening as he set the bottle down.

*What is that?*

She shook her head again and leaned back in her chair.

The water didn't seem to have helped. Austria immediately went into a severe coughing fit. He covered his mouth with both hands in an effort to quiet himself. Prussia gave a half-amused glance to him and Hungary patted his back rather forcefully, worried that he may be choking. Everyone stopped what they were doing to take watch the mini spectacle. It had been some time since one of them showed obvious signs of a cold.

Germany, followed by Italy, walked over to try and assist the aristocrat.

The aristocrat removed one of his hands to grab for the water again. Liechtenstein's gaze followed it, and she noticed a bright red liquid seep out from between his fingers and plop onto the polished oak.

"You're bleeding!"

Liechtenstein's sudden exclamation made the other nations visibly jump. Switzerland's shock faded sooner than most as he snapped his head back to the gentleman just in time to see the blood for himself.

Austria forced himself to stop coughing and buried his hands in his lap, away from the other nations' prying eyes. "I'm perfectly fine," he said, clearing his throat.

In a flash, Switzerland shot forward across the table and grabbed one of his arms, surprising everyone around him. He lifted the appendage and flipped his hand palm up to reveal that the glove was completely soaked in crimson.

"Tch. Liar." Switzerland's eyes narrowed.

Austria yanked his hand back. He tried to glare back at the man, but his attempt was squashed under another round of coughing. Hungary's concern rose and she stood up, gripping his shoulder tightly. She signaled to Germany and the two of them helped the musician stand up.

Austria tried to swat them away and reassure everyone in between coughs that he was, indeed, *fine*, but gradually gave up and let them lead him towards the door.

As soon as they reached the exit, a sudden pain ripped through his chest and Austria clutched at the front of his coat. His knees buckled beneath him and, despite his escorts, he went tumbling to the ground, landing heavily on all fours.

"Roderich!" Hungary cried out as she fell with him. Germany managed to catch himself and stood over them in a half crouching position, still holding Austria's arm.

There was an audible gasp in the room and most of the countries stood up to get a better look, Switzerland included. He stood there awkwardly, unsure of what to do.
"Is he all right?" China inquired, peering around Korea to see.

"Whoa, he looks like he's hacking up a lung," America marveled.

"Don't be rude!" England smacked him upside the head.

"How about we get him some more water, oui?" France offered, walking around towards the aristocrat's abandoned bottle.

"Water won't help. It's almost like he's dying, da?" That statement earned the Russian weak glares from those around him. He continued to stare at the suffering aristocrat, smiling indifferently.

Hungary rounded on him, turning away from Austria and fixing the sadistic country with a glare. "Don't you dare say that."

Russia froze, and even Canada beside him shrunk back towards the table at her intensity. Glancing up at the Russian he saw a minuscule shiver run through the larger man. Russia averted his eyes away to stare down the row of countries at Belarus and he shivered again. The woman's gaze rivaled that of his sister's.

Austria's insistent coughing made the Hungarian turn back around, her face softening in an instant.

Blood continued to trickle through his fingers and onto the marble floor and his eyes were wide with fright. His whole body rocked from his violent coughing, his chest heaving painfully and he began to shake. It sure felt like dying, his coughs seeming to have no end in sight. The Austrian turned his head slightly to look up at Hungary, a different kind of pain shooting through his chest at her worried look.

He was causing everyone trouble. *How unfortunate.*

Austria could feel black begin to creep around the edge of his vision and he shook his head to try to rid himself of it. He caught the woman's gaze again.

"Take me home, bitte," Austria managed to whisper before he squeezed his eyes shut just as the darkness overtook him.

...xXx...

Switzerland ushered the mass of countries out of the room. The meeting was very appropriately canceled for the rest of the day. He sighed as the door clicked closed.

The meeting had been postponed until the next day on account of the Austrian's mysterious attack. The Swiss' eyebrows furrowed slightly in confusion, wondering what it is that could have made Austria's health deteriorate in such a short amount of time. He wanted to know if that fool was going to be okay, or if what Russia had said had some truth to it.

The blond shook his head, cursing himself for getting all worked up. He focused on calming himself and turned to face the empty conference room.

Liechtenstein sulked a few meters away from him, quietly mopping up the blood on the floor. She had begged him to let her go help Hungary take the musician home, but he told her there was no reason for her to help the Austrian.

Switzerland walked over to her and set his hand on her shoulder in an attempt to comfort the small country. She stared up at him, her big jade eyes shining with tears. He took the mop from her
"Come on, Lilli," he murmured at her sad face. "Don't be like this. You know why I didn't let you go with them."

Liechtenstein nodded, wiping at her eyes. "I know. It's because we're neutral. I'm just worried about Mr. Austria. Every time I see him he's always so nice to me."

Switzerland tensed a bit at that, his eye twitching with minor annoyance. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, trying to control his rising irritation.

Austria had always been a gentleman ever since he'd known him, and even after their separation years ago he hasn't changed one bit. He was still the same pansy aristocrat who wore flashy old clothes and spent most of his days making music instead of fighting for himself. *Oh, how the Swiss was grateful that they weren't allies anymore. Everything that the Austrian man did ticked him off. Sometimes he wished he could just punch the musician square in the face . . ."

"—you, big brother?"

Switzerland's opened his eyes, realizing that Liechtenstein had been speaking to him. He glanced down to see his sister looking up at him with expectance. He shook his head, clearing his earlier thoughts. "I'm sorry, Lilli, I wasn't listening. What did you ask me?"

"I said that you were pretty concerned about Mr. Austria, too, right, big brother?" Liechtenstein asked carefully. "I mean, earlier when he was coughing you looked so worried. And then with what Mr. Russia said, you had a scary look on your face—like you were going to hit him. Or am I wrong?"

Switzerland's face heated up at her accusation and his shock made him stutter. "W-Well, I—uh, of course you're wrong!" He turned away from her, trying to regain his composure. "There's no way in hell I care for that idiot!"

"I did not say that you cared for him, just that you were worried like everyone else," Liechtenstein said innocently.

Switzerland's flush deepened and he was thankful that she couldn't see his face. He couldn't stop his heart from racing. *Dammit! he thought, Get a hold of yourself! It's not like she was implying anything about you. Calm down before you say something you'll regret!* He smacked his forehead to try to clear his thoughts.

The Swiss startled slightly when small arms snaked around him, and he stared out of the far window.

"Don't worry. I won't tell anybody," Liechtenstein said quietly behind him. "I can understand why you would be concerned. You two used to be such close friends, growing up together and fighting together and all."

Switzerland couldn't help but roll his eyes a little. It had been him that did most of the fighting and rescuing. He sighed, unwrapping his sister's arms from around him and turning to face her. The blond man gave her a firm look.

"For the last time, I am not concerned about that fool," he insisted, handing her back the mop. "Now, let's get this cleaned up so we can go home."

Your blush says otherwise, Liechtenstein thought to herself, not quite brave enough to say it aloud.
She returned to her mopping, not willing to push the subject any further. She watched as Switzerland quickly began to wipe the smear of blood off of the table where Austria had been sitting.

It was silent for a few moments before she spoke again. "Big brother?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you think we could . . ." Liechtenstein trailed off, suddenly nervous. "Never mind."

Switzerland looked up from the table. "What is it?"

"Could we visit Mr. Austria's house afterward? Just to see if he's okay?" she asked quickly. The girl closed her eyes and tensed, preparing herself for her brother's immediate answer which would be more than likely a no.

"Fine."

Liechtenstein perked up. She whipped around to see her brother absorbed in his cleaning and beamed, clapping her hands together happily. "Really? Oh, thank you! I'll make your favorite dinner tonight!" She swiftly returned to her mopping, wanting to get the chore done as quick as possible.

A small smile crossed Switzerland's features and he sighed. "Yeah, yeah."

Chapter End Notes

Angleterre - England
Mein Güte - My goodness
Oui - Yes
Da - Yes
Bitte - Please

And we're off!

Drew a little doodle for this first chapter and you can see it here!
The siblings show up on Austria's doorstep, Switzerland is presented with a conundrum, and things get heated among the Germans!

Switzerland groaned inwardly as the taxi pulled onto the long, winding gravel driveway of Austria’s estate, and he stared apprehensively up at the baroque palace looming towards him.

The large mansion sat atop a tall hill with a rocky mountain cliff backing behind a plethora of trees, and all the surrounding hills belonged to the private estate. Most of the home went far back across the top of the hill, the face looking out across the valley. The stone was a deep plum in color with ivory tracery and cresting, and there was a newer edition to the palace built on the left side. The edition was still grand and opulent as the rest of the palace, but acted as a more modern aside for the man to live in since there wasn't much use for a full palace of ballrooms and state rooms nowadays. The driveway and gravel front for guests had a loop off to the side to bring visitors straight to the personal home instead of making them walk through the entire palace. There was a small garage against the trees, and the front of the home had a massive enclosed porch with worn marble columns supporting the overhang, soft swirled patterns engraved at the base. Quartz rose and burgundy verbena lined the gated, cobblestone stone walk up to the door, and there were weigela and lilac shrubs across the front of the porch.

The old mansion had an overall stoic presence, and the Swiss couldn’t help the anxious feeling beginning to seep in his gut as the car pulled to a stop near the iron gate.

He followed Liechtenstein out of the cab and into the cool outside air, stopping to pay the driver before turning back to face the familiar home. His sister was already through the gate and trotting her way up the stepping stones towards the door. He heard the car back out of the driveway as he made his way up towards the estate. The blonde sighed at his sister’s eagerness. “Lilli, slow down!”

Liechtenstein stopped and waited for him, slightly embarrassed. “Sorry, big brother.” She gazed back up at the mansion, awe in her green gaze. It traveled higher to stare at the sky as Switzerland caught up to her, noticing that it was a dark gray in color. She shivered from the cold. “I hope it doesn’t storm. It sure looks like it’s going to . . .”

Switzerland steadied her as a strong breeze blew, nearly knocking them off their feet, and his eyes narrowed as he followed her gaze to the growing mass of clouds. Alarm started to fill him against his will. *I guess he really isn’t feeling well,* he thought.

“Come on.” He began to quickly usher her up the stairs and onto the marble porch. “Let’s get this over with before it starts to rain,” he grumbled.

Just before he could lift his hand to knock a loud crash sounded from the other side of the door followed by muffled yelling. Loud running sounded within the house, coming straight for the door.
Switzerland yanked his sister back just in time before the door burst open and Prussia went flying out into the yard, landing with a loud *thud!* An extremely pissed off Hungary gripping a frying pan stalked out onto the porch after him, her eyes tinted with a malicious red. Prussia managed to sit up on the walkway, rubbing a large bruise on his cheek painfully.

“Get out of here, you mangy mutt! Who the hell gave you the right to come here and—and . . !” Her breaths came out in short huffs, her chest heaving with fury. “You son of a—!” She threw the pan with all her might at the cowering country. Prussia yelped and scrambled down the stones, trying to escape her wrath. The pan nailed him right in the back of the head and sent him tumbling through the front gate and onto the ground again.

Prussia stood up slowly and brushed himself off, turning back to glare at the furious woman. He barely had time to flip her off before Hungary whipped out another pan from beneath her apron and held it aloft. He gave a very high yelp before turning and running off down the driveway towards a parked car. Hungary huffed again, putting away her other pan. She glanced off to her left to notice the two shock filled countries staring at her wide-eyed. “Oh, hello.”


Hungary glanced from him to his sister. She leaned down and smiled happily, her eyes now back to their normal green. “Hello, Liechtenstein,” she said cheerfully. It baffled Switzerland on how she could switch moods so quickly. “What brings you both here today?”

“I wanted to see how Mr. Austria was doing,” the tiny country said, apparently unfazed by what just happened. She shivered again as another breeze blew across the porch. Her big eyes were filled with worry. “How is he, Ms. Hungary?”

“Well,” Hungary started, walking down the pathway towards the gate to close it. “He’s awake, but has a fever and is lying in bed right now.” Her eyes flickered through the doorway as she bent to retrieve her first pan, glaring slightly as she straightened. “Or, at least he *should* be, anyway.”

“I’m fine, Elizabetha.”

Switzerland stiffened as that low, familiar voice trickled out of the doorway, and his heart sped up against his will. Austria stepped out onto the porch with a thick wool blanket wrapped around his thin frame. He watched as the wind ruffled his slightly messy brown hair, his hand reaching up to tuck loose strands behind his ear. His creamy skin looked slightly flushed, a bit paler than normal, almost sickly. Switzerland’s heart stopped momentarily when he turned his attention on him, his violet eyes widening as their gazes met. “Vash . . .”

The blonde nation angrily looked away, ticked off at how he was unable to control himself. “Tch. I told you not to call me that.”

“Of course,” Austria murmured quietly, clearing his throat. He tore his eyes away awkwardly to look at the smaller blonde standing next to Switzerland. He smiled softly. “Hello, Liechtenstein. How are you?”

Liechtenstein gave a small bow in greeting, her eyes widening slightly at the question. “I’m well, Mr. Austria. We’re here to check up on you. You seemed really sick,” she said sincerely.

“Exactly,” Hungary agreed, pointing the pan at him as she walked towards them. “You get your butt back in that house and go lay down, mister.”
The Swiss held back a snicker at the woman’s tone. She sounded like she was scolding a dog.

Liechtenstein felt a warm weight come down on her shoulders and she jumped slightly. She looked up to see that Austria had put his blanket around her and was now guiding her inside the mansion. “Please come in and sit for awhile, won’t you?” he asked politely. “You’ll catch a cold if you stay out here too long.” The small blonde thanked him and pulled the blanket tighter around her arms. She hadn’t even noticed she was shivering, but now she could definitely feel the chill in her bones.

Switzerland followed them slowly, reluctant to enter somewhat. He stared around the grand hall as Hungary shut the door behind him, sighing.

*This place hasn’t changed at all since I was last here,* he thought, his eyes ghosting over the familiar space.

The hall arched high above their heads, gold and marble engravings of ships and doves following the walls all the way up to the skylight. The hall lead far back through the center of the whole house and connected back with the rest of the palace through two large double doors. An entranceway to the kitchen sat on the left past the foyer, closed off to the rest of the hall by a sliding stained glass wall, and across the hall sat the Austrian's living room through an open archway. Another archway for the room lead back into the aisle a little farther down, and opposite that the hall opened into a more private family and dining space. Medals and trophies sat on shelves enclosed in glass past the foyer and an antique looking vase rested in the middle of an old oak table beside the door. It was filled with a bouquet of Edelweiss arranged along with a smaller white flower that he determined as baby’s breath.

Yep. Not a damned thing had changed.

“Alright, how about I go make us some tea?” Hungary offered with a smile. She sent a stern look to Austria. “And you should go lay back down.”

The musician shook his head, attempting to be cheery. “Not while we have guests. It would be rude.”

She was just about to give him a sharp remark but Liechtenstein interrupted her. “Ms. Hungary, may I help you make the tea?” she asked, her green eyes hopeful.

Hungary stared at her a moment before nodding happily. “Yes of course, dear.” She began to lead the little country towards the kitchen.

As their footsteps faded Austria turned to go into the living room and sit by the fire, when he spotted Switzerland gazing at the bouquet of Edelweiss. Upon seeing the blonde man shiver slightly, he swiftly went into the next room and returned with another blanket. He walked quietly over to the Swiss country, careful not to scare him, and draped the thick material over his shoulders. Switzerland jumped incredibly high anyway, instantly spinning around to face the Austrian.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Switzerland spat out, his eyes glaring. He looked him up and down, just noticing that the aristocrat was wearing an old white cotton shirt with the top buttons open and khaki pants. He snapped his gaze back up quickly, trying not to get distracted. “What’s this blanket for?”

“You looked cold. Come sit by the fire and away from the door where it’s chilly,” Austria murmured.
“I’m not cold,” the blonde man argued, standing a little straighter. “There’s no need to coddle me like a child!”

Austria huffed and turned away to walk towards the living room. He didn’t have the energy to fight with the other country. He sat down next to his piano in a plush violet velvet seat. There was another chair and two couches that were splayed across the room. He very ungentlemanly propped his feet up onto the coffee table in the center of the room and leaned his head back, his gaze following the Swiss as he entered the room cautiously. “Trust me, I’m completely fine. In fact, I feel quite warm for this time of year.”

“Well, that’s not normal, idiot,” Switzerland muttered, stalking over to him. He layed his hand on his forehead before the Austrian could object. His eyebrows furrowed as his concern deepened considerably. He could tell that he was hot, even through his black leather glove. He peeled it off quickly before returning to the man’s forehead. The Swiss gasped, his hand flinching away from him for a second before he layed it back down on the man’s heated skin. It felt like it was on fire, almost too hot to touch. He couldn’t help feeling worried. “My god, Austria! You’re burning up!”

“Mmm. You’re cool.” Austria lifted his hand to cover Switzerland’s, making the man gasp again as it was just as hot. He held it on his head, relishing in the coolness seeping from the other man. Without thinking, he grabbed Switzerland’s other hand and pressed it to his cheek, blissfully tilting his head into his cool gloved palm. This feels nice, he thought lazily, closing his eyes.

Switzerland could feel his blush beginning to return and he swore his heart stopped beating for a moment. He couldn’t help the creepy feeling that ran up his spine at Austria’s behavior. He was definitely acting strange; maybe his fever was messing with his head. At least he hoped so.

Suddenly, Austria’s eyes snapped open and he shoved the man away roughly. Switzerland’s curse was cut off by several massive coughs erupting forcefully from the aristocrat. Though he was covering his mouth, Switzerland didn’t fail to notice the small trickle of blood down his chin. The blonde’s heart jumped and he immediately took out a small handkerchief, beginning to wipe at his face. His hand shook slightly as he tried to repress his nerves and the oncoming surge of memories.

“Why is it I always seem to be taking care of you?” he grumbled, flustered.

Austria quietly let him clean up the blood, still recovering from his coughing spree. He grabbed the cloth from Switzerland and pushed him back lightly, unable to meet his gaze. He cleared his throat nervously. “Vash, I have a favor to ask of you.”

Switzerland didn’t know what pissed him off more—that the Austrian had said his name again or the fact that he had the gall to ask him a favor. The blonde straightened himself, crossing his arms as his eyes twitched in annoyance. “What is it?”

The musician still refused to look at him and instead kept his gaze on the roaring fire behind the Swiss. He took a deep breath to steady the ache in his chest before finally turning to stare up into the man’s luscious green eyes. They clearly radiated some anger and worry—shining brightly in the dim light as the fire reflected in them, making the irises ripple like emerald waves. Finding himself lost in them a moment, the brunette failed to get out what he was going to say before Hungary and Liechtenstein returned with tea.

“Here we go,” Hungary said with a happy lilt, setting the tray down on the coffee table. She gingerly slid Austria’s feet off the surface, a glance signaling to him that he needed to straighten up. He did as he was told, still keeping the handkerchief pressed against his mouth. Hungary smiled, glancing over to Switzerland. “Please sit. Would you like some sugar in your tea?”

“Sure,” Switzerland said, sitting down away from Austria on one of the couches. He nearly fell
back as he sank deeply down into the plushy purple material. He quickly corrected himself, clearing his throat in embarrassment.

Hungary poured the tea while quietly humming, a sweet aroma steaming off of the liquid. She handed a cup to Liechtenstein to hand over to him and he took it gratefully. He breathed in the warm, sweet scent and tasted it. It had a raspberry flavor, the taste heightened slightly by the sugar, but not overpowering. Right when he deemed it good, Hungary said, “So, what did you boys talk about while we were gone?”

Switzerland sputtered, nearly choking on his tea. He felt another blush appear on his cheeks and he could sense Liechtenstein looking at him curiously. “Well, we were, uh,” he stammered.

“We were just talking about the weather,” Austria said faintly, his voice muffled by the handkerchief Switzerland had given him. He set the cloth down on the arm of his chair and kindly accepted the tea Hungary offered him, glancing at the relieved Swiss.

“It looks terribly frightening outside.” Hungary nodded at her statement, walking back over to the table and adding, “It’ll probably storm here soon.”

“Oh, yes,” Austria agreed, taking a sip of his tea. He paused, frowning down into the cup. “It’s cold.”

Hungary smiled somewhat mischievously, continuing to pour Liechtenstein and herself some tea. “I made some ice tea for you to help get your fever down. The last thing you need right now is something hot.”

The musician didn’t object and sipped his tea quietly. Switzerland silently agreed with the woman—he had felt for himself just how high the Austrian’s fever had become. He stared at the man, sipped his tea, and wondered just how he had gotten ill. Despite his pallid skin tone the aristocrat didn’t even look that sick. Unless you seen him cough or felt his skin there was no way you could even tell that something was wrong. Switzerland’s thoughts kept going back to his fever. What was strange was that his hands had been just as hot as his forehead. He wondered if the rest of him was fevered, as well.

Austria caught the blonde staring, raising his eyebrow curiously at him. Switzerland averted his gaze quickly to stare out the window, distracting himself with the gathering dark clouds outside. That was close. His thoughts were about to turn against him and head down a different path entirely than a fever. Or, at least to a different kind of fever. Dammit, stop this! He thought angrily, mentally slapping himself.

“Elizabeta, darling.” The Hungarian looked up at the musician questionably and he beckoned for her to come closer. She bent down so he could whisper something in her ear. Her eyes widened and she tried to pull back, looking like she was going to protest something, but he caught her cheek and held her steady, continuing to whisper. Hungary’s face gradually grew somber and she nodded. He let her go and handed her his tea before pressing the handkerchief back to his mouth.

Liechtenstein witnessed this and she glanced at her brother, looking for a reaction, but he was staring out the window and probably had no idea what just happened. She sighed and finished off her tea, looking to Hungary, wondering if the woman would bring up what they had discussed in the kitchen. As she hoped, the woman looked serious for a moment and opened her mouth to speak, but closed it as Austria gave a small cough.

Thunder explosively erupted outside, making them all jump in surprise. Austria suddenly stood up from his chair, holding a hand to stop the advancing Hungary. He turned and looked over at
Switzerland and his sister, managing a smile. He put a hand over his heart and bowed a little. “I’m terribly sorry, but I must retire for the evening,” he said, rising from the bow. “I’m grateful that you came out of your way to see me today, but please do not worry yourselves further. If you’ll excuse me,” Austria finished, walking swiftly in between the couch and window, flashing through Switzerland’s gaze.

He gave the Swiss a quick glance before disappearing down the hallway behind them, thunder booming as he left.

Switzerland’s eyes widened; the look that the Austrian had given him shocked him to the core. His mind couldn’t wrap itself around it; those burdened violet eyes had bore themselves into him with such a heavy presence, filled with indescribable emotion. The blonde couldn’t figure out was it was, and it froze him in place.

Hungary’s words snapped him back to attention. “I apologize for him leaving so unexpectedly,” she said, trying to keep her smile. She looked wistfully past them to the hallway as rain began to pour heavily outside, tapping loudly on the roof. “Poor Roderich.”

Switzerland nervously stood up and walked over to set his empty cup down on the tray, clearing his throat. “I think it’s about time we left, as well,” he said dutifully, regaining composure. He looked over at his sister. “Come on, Lilli.”

The little blonde glanced at Hungary before quickly stopping him. “Actually, big brother, there’s something we’d like to ask you,” she said.

Switzerland looked confused for a moment and Hungary nodded in agreement. She set down her own tea before standing up and facing him. “I have to leave for a business trip with my boss tomorrow after the world meeting,” she began. “I’m going to be gone for at least a couple weeks and won’t be able to take care of Roderich, defending him from Prussia and whatnot.”

The Swiss’ eyes narrowed suspiciously and his gaze flickered between the two girls. “Yeah, so?”

“So,” Liechtenstein said eagerly. “I offered for us to look after Mr. Austria for Ms. Hungary while she’s gone.”

“You did what?!”

“Please, you do not have to accept right away!” Hungary said quickly, trying to cool his anger. “I’m going to ask the other countries at the meeting tomorrow, so you probably won’t have to do it. All I’m asking is that you please take it into consideration,” she finished desperately, bowing deeply to him.

Switzerland’s mouth hung open like a fish and he was momentarily speechless. When he did speak, his voice was surprisingly quiet. “Why me?”

Hungary straightened herself, tears glinting down her cheeks. “The doctor said that he won’t last long if this sickness keeps up. His health keeps deteriorating—fast,” she paused, her face scrunching in anguish as she sat back down. “Vash... he’s dying.”

“What?” Switzerland’s heart gave a sharp pang at the statement. Anger and disbelief over took him and he rushed forward, kneeling before the woman. He grabbed her shoulders, gripping them tightly as she cried. “What do you mean ‘he’s dying’? That’s impossible! He’s only been sick for a day, how could that human doctor possible know he’s dying?”

“It’s actually been going on for a few weeks now. At first the doctor thought he just had a chest
infection and a cough,” Hungary sniffled out and Switzerland her go. “Then once he’d seen all the
symptoms that he had the doctor said that Roderich is way too weak to push past it. He doesn’t
have that much longer to, to-” The woman's words ended in a stuttering breath, and she waved her
hand at him imploringly. "So please, won't you stay with him? Just in case, to make sure he doesn't
go through the process alone?"

Liechtenstein went to stand beside her brother, resting her hand gently on his head. He didn’t even
acknowledge her presence, too busy trying to come to terms with what Hungary was saying. He
kept shaking his head, refusing to believe what he was hearing. Sure, the countries' bodies could
die, but not like normal humans. Their bodies would just enter a coma-like state for a certain
amount of time before waking back up, and it wasn't like just anything could kill them. It was
almost entirely linked to the state of their people, and not normal injuries or illnesses. Though they
did occasionally get sick from common viruses, and bullets still did damage. But this was still
utterly bizarre.

“There’s no way this could be happening,” he reiterated. "Isn’t there some kind of medicine we can
give him?"

Hungary just shook her head, wiping furiously at her eyes. She looked up at him, her expression
filled with pain. “The doctor put him on antibiotics, but they aren’t doing anything accept making
him more nauseous.” She grabbed his hands, holding them tightly between them. “I wanted to ask
you this now before the meeting so you would have more time to think on it. I’m pretty sure the
reasons any other country would help is because they’d probably want to claim Austria’s land
while he’s weakened, like Prussia,” she growled his name. “Even though you two split apart a long
time ago, Roderich still thinks of you as his friend. That’s why I’d rather you did it.”

He still thinks I'm his friend? Switzerland lowered his gaze, standing up stiffly and letting his mind
race. How on earth could he still believe that? They had both been bitter after their separation and
usually went out of their way to avoid each other. But, when they had met, the aristocrat was
usually very polite to him and his sister, treating them to lunch every now and then. I guess I’m the
bitter one here, he thought. He’d always snapped at the musician for one little thing after another,
criticizing him and calling him an idiot. Blaming him for everything . . . He never realized the
kindness, the politeness, as something else. He never realized how the Austrian had felt.

But he did realize that he didn’t want to see the man die.

The Swiss pulled his hands slowly out of Hungary’s grasp and she looked up at him with wet green
eyes. He nodded solemnly down at her. “You ask tomorrow at the meeting and see if anyone else
will look after him,” he said determinedly. “If no one else can, I will do it.”

…xXx...

Switzerland rubbed his eyes tiredly as he walked into the meeting room the next day with
Liechtenstein. He yawned rather loudly, shuffling over to his seat, not having slept a wink the
previous night. His nerves were completely frayed and he was on edge. Despite his tired mind, he
catched every conversation. Everyone was at it again as they all filed in the room.

France was annoying the hell out of England and America, insulting their “non-stylish” military
uniforms and insisting they’d be better off walking around in the nude instead—America taking
extreme offense to his bomber jacket being called drab and grubby.

Korea kept repeatedly claiming all of China’s ideas were originally his in response to every time
China said something to him, causing the older man to yell and smack at his arm. Japan
desperately tried to ignore the two of them and directed his attention to Greece, whispering quietly
with the sleepy man.

Poland was talking 'hip' again to Lithuania and the other Baltics. First it was about how the northern lights were, “Like, totally more rad than normal,” and then he went on to gush about some dresses he’d recently bought at a sale. Lithuania did his best to keep up with the eccentric blonde’s conversation while Latvia and Estonia threw in some obligatory ooo’s and uhuh’s every once in awhile.

Russia kept trying to pull Canada on his lap again while speaking to him sweetly in Russian. The Swiss could feel the Canadian’s embarrassment radiating beside him and tried to pay no mind to the two larger countries flirting. He did, however, catch how the two men froze with fear as Belarus suddenly appeared beside the Russian and started muttering darkly, clawing at her brother’s shoulders while staring her murderous intentions at Canada. Switzerland scooted his chair just a little bit farther away.

Spain kept poking at Romano’s cheek and Italy was tugging insistently on his brother’s sleeve. The Spaniard seemed to have no idea as to why the southern Italian was getting angry with him, and his northern half was insistent on them skipping the meeting to go fetch some pasta. The brunette’s head made a loud thud as it connected with the table in absolute exasperation.

Denmark was getting on Sweden’s nerves about how he’d become ‘soft,’ lately, and calling him some choice words in Danish. It was only when the obnoxious man began insulting a nearby Finland as well did the Swede react, standing up and slamming the other onto the table. The Swiss could hardly make out the man’s grunted threat, but assumed it must have done the job as Denmark fell into silence. The Finnish man was trying to settle the two down before they came to blows, always the polite one, as a small, blonde boy in a sailor cap—the Swiss recalling his name being Sealand or something—cheered on the Swedish man.

Switzerland sighed and looked around the room. The rest of the countries were being silent or talking quietly to each other.

Hungary sat growling at Prussia as he kept trying to apologize for the night before—actually he kept telling her that she should forgive him because he’s ‘so awesome’. Japan was now fixing Greece’s tie in an effort to help him look decent, but all it earned him was the Greek man slouching on him again even though he was awake. Turkey and Egypt were whispering to each other about the two cat lovers on the other side of Liechtenstein while Australia and Romania were getting involved with Spain and Romano on the other side of Turkey. Across the table, Iceland and Norway were looking uninterested while Finland tried to peel Sweden off of a cursing Denmark. Canada had scooted closer to the Swiss in fear as Belarus glared at him from behind the Russian, Ukraine trying to hold her back from attacking the Canadian. Switzerland’s gaze drifted to the empty seat directly across from him. His heart sank and he dropped his head into his arms on the table, not wanting anybody to see his expression.

There was a slight tap on his shoulder and he raised his head reluctantly to see who it was. His eyes widened as he spotted Taiwan bending down next to him. “Yes?” he asked in surprise.

“Are you alright, Switzerland?” The pink girl asked kindly, blinking at him.

“Why?”

She shrugged her shoulders, giving a nervous laugh. “It’s just that you didn’t look too well sitting over here. I was just curious if maybe you weren’t feeling good or something.”

“Oh,” his gaze dropped for a second, but he soon raised it again, sitting up a little straughtener. “No,
“It’s nothing. Thank you, though.”

“Ok then,” Taiwan said, smiling happily. She walked back to her seat with Hong Kong following silently beside her.

Strange, he thought, turning back to the table just as the meeting started.

“Alright, everybody settle down now,” Germany said, getting everyone’s attention. Sweden stopped pinning Denmark to the table and sat down while Spain and Italy stopped picking on Romano. Belarus settled down but continued to shoot deathly glares at Canada when Russia wasn’t looking. Everyone quieted down and the German continued, “Before we start today, we have some important news requiring Austria.”

The rustling and fidgeting stopped and everyone finally seemed to be paying attention. They were curious as to what happened to the aristocrat. Germany sat down and nodded to Hungary. The woman stood up gracefully and straightened out her dress before smiling slightly to all of them.

“Good morning, everyone,” she said, making sure to be loud enough for them all to hear. “As you all witnessed yesterday, Austria is currently not well. He’s not well at all.” She paused a moment, taking a deep, steadying breath. “In fact, he’s dying,” her voice cracked on the last word.

Everybody gave a collective gasp—not expecting the last bit of her statement at all—and murmurs sprung up all around the room. Even Germany looked surprised; he apparently didn’t know what she was going to say either. The only two who really didn’t react was the Swiss and his sister, both blondes sitting solemnly still.

Hungary barely gave the others enough time to recover before continuing to explain to them all on what he had, the fever and cough, and about how long he had left to live—according to his doctor, of course. She made sure to put emphasis on the fact that none of it was for certain, though, sounding more hopeful for her own sake. There were some sighs of relief when she added that the illness didn’t appear to be contagious—shooting down worries about it being the next plague.

“But,” she added quickly. “I do have a favor to ask of you. Since I have a business trip today and will be gone for a few weeks, I was wondering if one of you wouldn’t mind looking after him until I got back.”

The room grew tense as people whispered to each other. Some just looked up at her and shook their heads. She flat out denied France and Prussia’s offer to do it, giving them a hellish stare. Italy desperately wanted to do it, but Romano wouldn’t let him and he settled for crying into his hands. The German thought about it, but ultimately said he probably couldn’t, though he added that he would keep Prussia away. Canada tried to offer but she didn’t hear him and Russia patted his shoulder comfortingly. The Asians, Baltics and Nordics were all silent, giving her sympathized looks. Most everyone else seemed disinterested at best, impatient to be onto the main topics of the meeting.

That’s when Switzerland huffed out a tired laugh, running his fingers through his hair. He had a feeling this would happen. “I guess that settles it, huh?” He rested his elbows down on the table, setting his head in his hands. He could feel everyone’s confusion bubbling around him. “It seems that I’m the only one left,” he said quietly, sighing in exhaustion. “Fine, I’ll do it.”

He didn’t expect the room to explode into the uproar that it did.

“What do you mean you’ll do it? I thought you were enemies with Austria!” Turkey exclaimed in shock.
“I’m not enemies with anyone, nor am I allies. I’m neutral remember?” He never understood why that concept was so confusing to some of the others.

“Exactly, aru. That’s why it’s so weird for you to decide to help him now,” China argued.

“Nah, it’s not so weird,” Prussia said. He smiled wickedly, kicking his feet up on the table.

Switzerland twitched at the snide silver man, his nerves tightening as he glared curiously at the man. “Oh?”

“Yeah, I mean you always used to be babysitting him anyway, right?” Prussia’s grin widened as he pushed the Swiss towards his breaking point. “You always rush to Austria’s side whenever he’s in trouble or hurt, am I right? After all, he’s your heimliche geliebte, yes?”

The room grew incredibly silent once more and everyone turned to look at Switzerland. The intensity of their stares didn’t help his growing irritation and he fought to reel himself in.

“Be quiet,” he said angrily. He’d managed to keep his cool, but he didn’t know what he’d do if the damn German kept talking. If he was smart then he would stop, but apparently Prussia was intent on being an idiot.

“Aww! You didn’t deny it. I guess that means it’s true then.”

“Shut your mouth, Gilbert.”

“Getting embarrassed now, are we?” The German kept getting more and more resolute in his teasing, and the other countries around the room were at a loss of how to stop the obviously impending fight. “I thought you’d be relieved now that the cat’s out of the bag.”

“Shut up.”

“So, is it just Freundschaft Plus, or something more?”

“Shut up!”

“Why else would you be helping him out? Probably doing it because of the sex, huh, Switzey?”

Switzerland snapped, launching himself at Prussia. His chair was kicked out from under him as he flew across the table and grabbed the other’s collar so forcefully that it knocked them both away from the table, making the silver haired man yelp in surprise. The German’s chair tipped back and Switzerland landed heavily on the man’s stomach, pinning him to the floor. Prussia stared down the barrel of the other’s rare Mauser C96 as Switzerland flipped the safety off. The blonde’s glare combined with the looming threat of being shot nearly wiped the smile from his face, but he kept it plastered there just to taunt the Swiss even more.

“Shut your goddamned mouth!” Switzerland snarled, pressing the gun harder to Prussia’s forehead. “Give me one good reason not to shoot you right here, right now.”

“Hah, you can’t kill the awesome me,” Prussia mocked. Pushing his head against barrel further boldly, he added, “If you could you would have pulled the trigger already.”

“You wanna bet your life on that?” Switzerland clicked it back, his finger itching on the trigger. He couldn’t care less about the scene he was causing nor the thought of how he was very nearly prepared to kill the other man—he was too tired and frustrated.
England stood up from his seat irritably and began to walk over to them. “Hey, there’s no weapons allowed in here!”

“That means I have to leave my pipe outside, da?” Russia said cheerfully.

“Yes—wait what?!”

“Be quiet, England,” Switzerland snapped, whipping out another handgun from beneath his coat and pointing it at the Englishman. He never took his eyes off the Prussian. “Stay out of this.”

“Are you trying to start something here, Switzerland?”

“No, just back off,” he growled. He wanted to wipe that damn smirk off of Prussia’s face so bad and England was just interfering.

“Like bloody hell I will,” the English country said in determination, walking closer to them.

Without looking, Switzerland fired off a warning shot, making everyone in the room jump, including Prussia beneath him. The bullet whizzed by the Englishman’s head, missing by a mere inch. Germany quickly got up and began to walk over.

“You shot at me!” England shouted, charging at him. America appeared behind him suddenly and hooked his arms under the man’s own arms, holding him back. “Let me go, America!”

“Calm down, dude.”

“He bloody shot at me! And he wasn’t even looking!!”

Switzerland ignored them and instead slid his gun down from Prussia’s forehead to tilt up his chin. “You want to know why I’m going to help?”

The silver man was silent, his smile completely gone, red eyes hard.

“I’m helping because no one else will and it’s the right thing to do. We all should help someone when they’re in need,” Switzerland said, letting himself finally be pulled off of Prussia by Germany and Hungary. Prussia stood up and brushed himself off, a glare slipping into his features. Germany sighed and began to lead his brother away towards the end of the table where he sat. Prussia grumbled something.

Switzerland turned to the angry Englishman. “Sorry, but I knew I wouldn’t hit you.”

England muttered some unintelligible profanities and America let him go. He huffed and turned on his heel, heading back to his seat.

“Hey.” Switzerland looked over to his right at Hungary. Her green eyes glowed somewhat and she smiled warmly at him, touching his shoulder lightly. “Thank you,” she murmured before moving to sit down.

“Why is it I’m always the one who gets blamed for everything? He’s the one with the gun!” Switzerland heard Prussia say to Germany, rounding the corner at the end of the table.

The younger German sighed, motioning for Italy to go sit by Hungary. “Because you just don’t know when to quit talking, Gilbert.”

“Hey! That’s totally unfair, man! Switzerland was being more of an ass than me, defending his boyfriend—”
Hungary’s ears rang and the back of her head grew hot as she felt the side of a gun pressed to her hair. Italy jumped as something whooshed by his ear and Germany felt air rush by the tip of his nose. Prussia’s eyes widened and his hand flew up to his left cheek where the bullet had grazed his skin, leaving a welting scratch. He stared incredulously across the room at Switzerland’s stoic form, the pistol aimed directly for him. His anger boiled up and Germany had to hold him back from running at the blonde man. “Hey, Arschloch! You missed!”

Switzerland began walking back around the table, stopping next to England’s seat, and looked back with a deadly serious expression. “I never miss.” Prussia’s eyes narrowed, but he stopped struggling. Switzerland turned to England and set his two guns down on the table in front of the Englishman. “I want these back after the meeting,” he said quietly, not meeting the man’s surprised gaze before walking the rest of the way around the table. He sat down in his seat, resting his head in his arms again as he ignored all of the heated stares and murmurs around him.

Liechtenstein petted the back of her brother’s head gently, watching as a shaken Italy sat down in Prussia’s seat across from them. Hungary patted his back with a smile and he leaned on her for comfort. Germany finally got Prussia to sit down and be quiet before he struggled to get the meeting back on track. Switzerland tried his best to ignore all the conversations about him and Austria, but that was a nearly impossible feat.

He felt another hand beginning to rub his back, joining his sister’s. He peeked over his elbow to see Canada smiling softly at him. Switzerland buried his head back into his arms and closed his eyes, allowing the two countries to soothe him. He gradually began to relax as the meeting went on and the voices seemed to fade around him. He just desperately wanted some sleep, needing time to calm down and control himself. Sighing again, he let slumber overtake him—no one would notice him napping, anyway.

When it came around time to speak, Liechtenstein calmly passed for both her and her brother. She could tell he was asleep and she didn’t have the nerve to wake him. She just sat back into her seat calmly, continuing to pet his hair. She looked around the room, noticing that the usual people who slept were, indeed, snoozing like Switzerland. It didn’t seem that Japan minded anymore that Greece leaned on him, considering he was dozing, too. Spain and Australia were both sprawled out in their seats and even Sweden managed a little nap, only waking to speak when Finland shook him. She could feel everybody’s eyes glance at her brother in between speakers and she fidgeted nervously, not used to this kind of attention. Prussia’s eyes, however, never left Switzerland except to glance at her every few minutes. She shrunk in her seat as the ridiculing red gaze slid over her, lingering for a moment before returning to her brother.

“He’s kind of a sore loser, da?”

Liechtenstein turned to the large country off to her left, surprised that the Russian had spoken to her. The man was smiling down at her, his eyes showing a rare kindness.

“It’s ok, Liechtenstein,” Canada said quietly, moving his hand to pat her shoulder before returning it to Switzerland’s back. “Just ignore him.”

She looked at them for a moment, her eyes drifting between them before she closed them in a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

They both nodded at her before turning back to the meeting. It didn’t last for too much longer after that, only a couple more people needing to speak. Most of them passed and the last finished up quickly. Everyone gathered themselves as Germany closed the conference and they all began to file out of the room. Some migrated into couples or small groups and others just kept to themselves.
Liechtenstein watched as Italy met up with his brother and Spain, leaving after giving a goodbye hug to Germany, and Hungary followed to go talk to the blonde and Prussia about something. Several countries came over to offer kind words to her and some, like Sealand, told her to call if she needed help with anything while taking care of Austria.

“Seriously, if that bloody Prussia is giving you trouble you just call and I’ll come over and-and . . .” Sealand was waving his fists around madly in the air, pretending to punch Prussia. Liechtenstein giggled and nodded. Finland smiled at her and Sweden set his hand down on Sealand’s head, ruffling his hair playfully. “Hey!” the boy said happily as the large Nordic lifted him onto his shoulders and began to walk out of the room behind Turkey. He waved excitedly at her with a goofy grin. “Bye, Lilli!”

“Bye, Peter,” she laughed again, waving back.

She sighed comfortably, looking over to Canada. He was gripping Russia’s arm nervously, waving farewell to her also. Belarus had a vice grip on the man’s other arm and was staring daggers at the Canadian as Russia lead them both out of the room. Ukraine hung back with the Baltics as they scurried after the Russian—Latvia calling out a small goodbye to her before Estonia ushered him out. Poland hung lazily off Lithuania’s neck, practically letting the man drag him out of the room.

America spotted his brother’s distress and claimed something hero-ish about how he was going to beat the crap out of “that commie bastard” and raced out the door. England shot out after him, yelling for him to stop being stupid and France followed, quietly laughing. She saw the Asians stand up and begin to leave the room. Korea grinned mischievously before grabbing China and Hong Kong around the waist and slinging them over his shoulders.

“Hey, put me down this instant, aru!” China shouted, his feet kicking wildly as Korea skipped towards the door. Hong Kong beat at the man’s back with his fists, trying to squirm out of his grasp.

“You guys are so fun to mess with!” Korea cheered, running out the doorway.

“No we are not!”

Liechtenstein tried not to laugh at the older countries, not wanting to appear rude. As she stifled her giggles she watched as an annoyed looking Japan slowly stalked after them, Greece following tiredly behind him. Taiwan paused at the end of the table before turning and walking down towards her, smiling.

“Hello, Liechtenstein,” the woman said cheerfully.

“Hello.”

“England gave these to me to give back to your brother.” She reached behind her to pull out Switzerland’s two handguns before handing them to the smaller country.

Liechtenstein smiled as she took them from her, the weapons heavy in her small hands. “Thank you, Miss Taiwan.”

“No problem,” she said happily. Her brown eyes became serious for a moment and she bent over Switzerland’s sleeping form to whisper so Hungary and the others wouldn’t hear her. “Don’t tell anyone else this, but I know how to cure Austria.”

Liechtenstein’s eyes widened in shock and she quickly set the guns down on the table. “Y-You do?”
Taiwan nodded, her smile never fading. “I’ve heard of this fever before when I traveled around Africa. I had to get a vaccine to prevent it, so I’m immune to the virus. But, while I was down there I seen a lot of people who were sick with it get better within a few weeks, so they must have a cure down there.”

Liechtenstein’s heart soared with hope. Mr. Austria wouldn’t have to die after all! She cleared her throat, trying not to sound too eager. “Could you get us the medicine?”

Taiwan patted her head kindly before straightening up. She began to walk to the door, saying, “I’m not sure, but I’ll see what I can do. You just do your best to take care of Austria—and remember . . .” The pink girl stopped in the doorway and turned back to her, pressing a finger to her lips. “It’s our little secret.”

Liechtenstein shook her head vigorously. “I won’t tell anyone, I swear,” she said sincerely. She quickly got up and ran over to hug the Asian country. Taiwan froze in shock for a moment before melting and hugging her back tightly. “Oh, thank you, thank you so much, Miss Taiwan!”

“Please, just Taiwan is fine,” the woman chuckled before letting the tiny country go. She winked at her before walking out of the room.

Liechtenstein thought her smile would never end. She was so happy. She ran back to Switzerland to wake him so she could tell him the news, but stopped herself. Right, she had to keep it to herself until she knew for sure that the woman could really help. She desperately wanted to tell him, though, so he would stop being sad. She shook her head. No she would wait for Taiwan. If all I have to do is keep a secret to save Mr. Austria’s life and brother’s happiness, then there’s no way I’m blowing this, she thought in determination.

“What are you so happy about?”

Liechtenstein froze in fear and a chill ran through her veins. She turned her head slowly to meet Prussia’s murderous gaze. The red eyes burned themselves into green ones and the tiny country gulped nervously. Her smile immediately evaporated and she backed herself up against the table as he stepped closer. “Well?” he growled. “What are you so damn happy about?”

“N-Nothing,” she stammered. She reached behind her back to grip one of the handles of her brother’s guns, their presence comforting her. “What does it matter to you?”

“Just that there’s nothing to be happy about,” the man said, his eyes flicking to her hand. He shot forward, pressing her flat onto the table and smacked the gun out of her hands. She tried to shout for help, but the noise was quickly muffled by his hand. The air got knocked out of her as the man layed his full weight on top of her, his face snarling just inches from hers.

He leaned down and she closed her eyes tightly. “Dummer esel mädchen,” he whispered maliciously into her ear. “Are you really this naïve? Did you seriously think you would be able to shoot the awesome me?” He raised his head up to glare in her face again.

“She can’t, but I can.”

Prussia paused as the cool barrel of a gun pressed to the back of his head. Liechtenstein’s eyes flew open and the stared behind the German at her brother. She hadn’t even seen him move, let alone grab one of his guns. Switzerland looked incredibly tired and pissed off as he held the gun up to Prussia’s head.

“Let go of my sister right now,” her brother said menacingly. “Before I really do end you.”
Prussia rolled his eyes, giving a bark of sharp laughter. He was getting fed up with the blonde’s tactics. Slowly, he lifted himself off of the tiny country, releasing her mouth and letting her gasp for air. He raised his hands into the air and backed away from the table to give her room, the smaller blonde dashing away to the side. He turned his head to the side and smiled at Switzerland. He spun around and lashed out with his hand, knocking the gun from the blonde. He didn’t give him time to recover before tackling him to the ground, easily pinning the smaller man.

“Brother!”

Hungary and Germany finally noticed the ruckus going on and rushed over to try and break up the battling countries. Prussia and Switzerland were rolling around on the ground in a furious whirlwind of punching, kicking and biting. Germany hooked his arm around his brother’s neck and pulled him off before he could land another punch. Switzerland kicked out and managed to nail Prussia under the chin before Hungary pulled him back. Both of them were bruised and bloodied and cursing at each other in various dialects of German.

“Hey!” Germany gave Prussia a harsh squeeze to try and get him to settle down. “What the hell has gotten into you today?!”

“You too, Switzerland!” Hungary roared behind him, struggling to hold back the smaller country. “It’s so unlike you to be this violent! What’s wrong?”

“You know what’s wrong!” Switzerland cried out. He gritted his teeth and shut his eyes, trying to stop the sudden oncoming tears. “Prussia, you bastard . . . How could you not even try to care that he’s dying?! He’s your friend! Friends look out for one another! He’s always so nice to you and you just treat him like dirt!” Switzerland’s strength sapped away from him and he went limp in Hungary’s arms, his hands remaining clenched. A single tear escaped him, sliding mockingly down his cheek and he opened his eyes to stare at the silver haired man.

Prussia had long since gone still, stunned at the blonde’s ferocity. He hadn’t expected Switzerland to react like that, let alone cry. His pride caught up with him and he turned his face away. “Tch. You don’t know anything about me or that pompous Arschloch. Who gives you the right to judge our relationship when you don’t even give him the time of day?”

“I’m done listening to your voice,” Switzerland said tiredly, supporting himself on the back of his chair as Hungary let him go. Prussia’s eyes widened slightly at the statement. Liechtenstein moved to help her brother, but he just shook her off and turned one last time to stare hard at the silver man. “Leave.”

Germany sighed, releasing Prussia as well. “I think it’s about time we went home, Gilbert.” Prussia stared at the floor, silently rubbing a bite mark on his arm as he let his brother lead him towards the door. “I’ll call you if he does anything,” Germany said, glancing back at them before pushing the other man out the door. Hungary gave a relieved huff and straightened out her ruffled skirt, turning towards the two blondes.

Liechtenstein’s attention immediately went back to Switzerland and she moved to help him sit down. He shook her off again, rubbing his shoulder painfully. She saw the skin around his left eye beginning to darken and his lip was split open. He watched as she wiped away the blood dripping down from the corner of his mouth and eyes with a small handkerchief, wincing slightly as she stroked his bruised cheek and murmured, “Thank you for rescuing me, big brother.”

“Yeah, yeah . . . You’re welcome.”
Heimliche geliebte – Secret lover
Freundschaft Plus – Friends with benefits
Arschloch! - Asshole
Dummer esel mädchen – Stupid ass girl.

Things are starting to come together and you guys get to know more about Austria’s illness.

EDIT: Went back and added a little more description to Austria's home to add a bit more feel to the whole thing.
Pain & Pleasure

Chapter Summary

Austria allows his new guests to settle in, and Switzerland lets off some steam.

Chapter Notes

A bit of sexual content makes an appearance! Again, this story will be explicit, though admittedly not until much later in the story.

He knew of the pain before he even felt it; a dull, throbbing feeling rushing through his body, spreading like wild fire from the center of his chest. Austria stared at himself in the bathroom mirror, seconds dragging themselves out like hours, while he tried to comprehend the expression reflected back at him. It was filled with impatience, anger, and most of all terror as he waited for his coughing to come. He struggled to keep it down, bury it somewhere inside him, but it erupted from his throat anyway without consideration, taking his blood with it.

He gripped the counter tightly to keep himself standing, hovering over the sink so the blood could drip down onto the marble. His vision went blurry, almost faded, and he eventually squeezed his eyes shut. The pain in his gut . . . the blood in his mouth . . . he could barely breathe. He felt his legs shake, beginning to go numb again for the fifth time that day.

Why was this happening? How had he even gotten this sick? He's had flu's before, but never one like this. This one was more than physically harming him; it was messing with his mind, too. He was starting to have trouble remembering things from when he was born and from his childhood. That worried him more than his present condition. He didn't want to forget, or be forgotten.

Austria calmed finally—his throat aching terribly—and he stood with a vice grip on the edge of his sink, riding out the aftershocks of the massive attack. They were getting worse every time. He turned on the sink and watched in misery as his blood flowed in neat little ribbons around the marble bowl before disappearing entirely down the drain. What worried him the most was his bloodloss; more and more people were dying every day—his people. It upset him to watch them suffer because of him.

The pain was ebbing away from him and he released his hold on the counter. He grabbed a few tissues and wiped at his mouth, removing any traces of left over blood before throwing them away and opening the door. He walked, somewhat unsteadily, out into the dark, cool hallway. He headed for the living room, desperately needing to sit down. As he entered, he glanced at the dying fire and sighed. He quickly went and bent over the flames, putting more wood on them, poking and prodding, and waited until it got going again. Once the fire was at a reasonable size, he straightened up and strode over to his couch.

Before he could finally plop down into the cushy material, a small knock came to his door. He tilted his head in confusion in the direction of the door before walking calmly over to it. Peaking
through the peephole, he frowned. Not seeing anything, he turned around and was just about to head back to the living room when another knock sounded. He faced the door for a moment before hesitantly reaching for the knob and opened the door slowly.

Austria looked down and realized why he didn't see anyone before. A small country toting a red suitcase stood before him, soaked to the bone from the pouring rain past the porch, but her face lit up nonetheless when she saw him. "Good evening, Mr. Austria," she chirped happily, bowing deeply to him.

He stared at her, shocked at her presence. "Oh, hello, Liechtenstein," he said slowly. His eyes caught movement and they flickered behind her to the blonde strolling up the walkway. "Hello, Switzerland."

The country nodded curtly at him in greeting and proceeded to pull his luggage up the porch stairs. Austria's eyes widened when he stopped in front of him. Not only was Switzerland as drenched as his sister but his uniform was ripped in several places along his arms and he was sporting a pretty good sized black eye. His bottom lip was split down the middle and he had several bruises along both of his cheeks and on his neck. The stunned musician raised his hand to touch one of his bruised cheeks, but he thought better of it and let his hand drop back down to his side.

"You look awful," he whispered faintly.

Switzerland gave a small smirk and rolled his good eye. "Like you should be the one to talk," he retorted, gesturing to the open door. "Are you gonna invite us in?"

Austria seemed to snap back to normal. He nodded and stepped out of the way so they could enter. "Of course, of course." He shooed them quickly inside and shut the door against the cold rain. He looked at both of their disheveled appearances and started to lead them over to the staircase. "You both go and change out of those wet clothes of yours and take a hot bath. By your bags I take it you're staying here?"

Liechtenstein smiled down at him as she walked up the staircase behind her brother. "Ms. Hungary told us to look after you while she's gone."

Austria stiffened for a brief second before collapsing into a huge sigh, brushing his hair back away from his face. "She worries way too much . . ." he mumbled quietly to himself. "Fine. You can pick any of the rooms on the right of the hall. There's a bathroom at the end of the hall on the left that one of you can use and the other can use the main bath down here," he instructed as they walked the rest of the way up the stairs. Switzerland waved his hand in acknowledgement and disappeared from view, Liechtenstein on his heels.

Austria sighed again and made his way slowly through the living room. He strode across the grand hall over to the kitchen and began searching the cupboards. He grabbed out a stack of towels with one arm and the first aid kit with the other. The aristocrat then proceeded to make his way back across the house and up the flight of stairs.

Switzerland threw his suitcase up on the king sized bed and opened it. He grabbed out a pair of pajama pants and a white cotton shirt—completely avoiding the pink one Liechtenstein had made him for obvious reasons. He then exited his new room with clothes in hand towards the stairs. He chose to have his room right across from Austria's that way he could keep an eye on him. His sister had snagged the one next to his and as he walked by he heard her talking. Slowing his pace, he listened as Austria was apparently talking to her about something. Not wanting to be caught eavesdropping he sped up again, trotted down the stairs and turned down the hall towards the main bathroom.
Switzerland's eyes widened slightly when he entered the white tiled room. *Austria's had some renovations,* he thought. The room was bigger than he last remembered and the ceiling was higher, too. The floor was a silver speckled white marble with a fuzzy dark purple rug in the middle. The marble sink counter took up half of the wall to his right and the toilet was in the back corner. To his left was a giant bathtub that took up the rest of the space, most of the back and left wall. It was as tall as his hip and was smooth porcelain and tile with silver engraved faucets like the sink.

He set his clothes down on the counter and began to strip down. Switzerland unbuttoned his uniform jacket, tossing the green garment off to the side, and slid his T-shirt over his head. Switzerland caught himself in the mirror and snuck a glance over the sink. He frowned. A trail of bruises flowed down all the way from his cheeks to his waist, accompanied by small scratches and cuts. He turned to glare at his back—it hadn't fared any better.

Catching something else in the mirror, he nearly jumped to the ceiling and he whipped his head around to face the door. A figure stood there holding two towels and a small white box of some sort. "What the hell, Austria?!" he snapped at him, struggling to pull his shirt back down. "Haven't you ever heard of knocking?"

"I brought you some towels," the man said softly. Austria set them down beside the sink and strode over to him. He caught the blonde's elbow, making a blush appear on the Swiss man's face against his will. Switzerland soon found himself pressed up against the musician's chest with his arms wrapped lightly around him, the brunette's chin resting on his head.

Switzerland stood stock still, completely overwhelmed to do anything else. The man definitely still had a fever, he could feel the warmth seeping through his shirt and his hands felt hot as they roamed over his back. Though he was confused, Switzerland began to relax bit by bit as Austria kneaded his aching muscles. He hadn't even noticed that he was in pain until then and he was a little grateful for the relief. The blonde's blush grew and he couldn't stop the shiver that ran through him as the aristocrat's finger's ghosted over his skin. He had to admit, it was making him feel better. He winced slightly though when he felt the hands touch a cut and they stopped. "What are you doing?" he finally mumbled against Austria's turtleneck.

The musician pulled back slowly and rested his heated hands on Switzerland's shoulders. Confusing the blonde even further, he had the same look in his eyes as he had the previous day before he'd left to retire for the night. "Thank you," Austria murmured, lifting a hand to brush delicately against the blackened area around his left eye.

"What?" Switzerland breathed, surprised at the statement.

"Thank you," he repeated, dropping his gaze and his hands to his sides. "For defending me against Prussia earlier. Liechtenstein told me," he added quickly when he saw the look Switzerland gave him. Before the blonde could defend his actions he continued. "And for being here. It truly means a lot to me. Though, I'd rather you . . ." Austria just shook his head at himself and offered the country a small smile. "Never mind."

"Uh, it was no problem, really," Switzerland sputtered out, finally regaining some control. He crossed his arms and looked away. "He deserved what he got for saying those things."

Austria chuckled and tucked a strand of the blonde's hair behind his ear, making his blush return. "Oh, and what sort of things did he say?"

Switzerland's face reddened significantly and he refused to even make eye contact with the brunette. "N-Nothing." *Damn stuttering!* He cursed himself, hating that he was so easy to read. He couldn't get his heart to slow down or his nerves to unwind. *There's no way I can tell him that*
Prussia called us lovers. Hell no!

Austria smirked down at the flustered country. He already knew what Prussia had said—Liechtenstein had told him everything. He just liked seeing the blonde get self-conscious. The cute bit of pink that tinted his pale cheeks and the way his green eyes brightened made the Austrian smile. He didn't know why, but he loved it when Switzerland was embarrassed.

"Alright then, call me when you're done," Austria said as he turned away from the awkward moment. He paused in the doorway, glancing back at Switzerland with a playful look in his eyes. "Have a nice bath . . . Switzey," he hummed sweetly before shutting the door behind him.

...xXx...

Damn pianist . . .

Switzerland was stretched out on the porcelain—easily fitting in the huge tub. He sighed, letting the steamy water relieve the pain from his skin and throbbing joints. He sunk down until the bubbles were at his chin.

How the hell did he just know to call me that at that moment? He thought for the twentieth time. He couldn't figure it out. It's like he's a mind reader! Maybe . . . nah. Liechtenstein wouldn't of repeated those things to him, she's too much of a lady. It was just a coincidence.

Switzerland, now having convinced himself it was just bad timing, began to wash himself carefully with the washcloth Austria had brought him. His thoughts flickered to earlier when the musician had hugged him and he felt a small tingle run up his back. It's not like they hadn't hugged before, but they hadn't really ever touched since they split apart so it was a little weird.

But . . . it felt good, the blonde thought reluctantly. He closed his eyes, knowing full well that he was blushing again and his heart was racing. He slowed his scrubbing and let the cloth trail sluggishly down his stomach. The feel of Austria touching him, his fingers gliding over his skin, his hot breath on his cheek. The blonde's hand dipped in between his legs.

Switzerland's eyes flew open and he snatched his hand back up quickly. No! I can't think of him like that!, he scolded himself.

He couldn't pull his thoughts away from the man, though; no matter how hard he tried. Everything around the Swiss reminded him of the musician. The walls and tile like his smooth, creamy skin. The dark towels like his soft, chocolate hair that was always swept back. The plush carpet like his deep purple eyes. God, those eyes. So warm and inviting, calm and teasing—sometimes he just found himself lost in those milky violet depths. Like earlier, when he'd given him that look again.

The emotion he had seen in Austria's eyes was indescribable. They had held such a sadness, one he had never witnessed before. Not only that, but they'd had a wisdom—no, an understanding about them that he wasn't even going to try to comprehend. Just the way Austria looked at him in general made his heart race and stop at the same time, if that was possible. Sometimes it was in annoyance, and other times . . . Other times it was like this.

The blonde could feel the tingling sensation tun down his spine again, and his cock began to harden as he thought more and more about that feeling.

What would it hurt? He thought grudgingly, sliding his hand back down to his naval. He really hadn't done this in a while—what with being a workaholic and all—but everyone had needs. It wouldn't take him that long and then he would be done with it. He'd nearly forgotten what it was
like to just stop stressing for awhile and enjoy something. Sure, he really didn't want to think of the Austrian like—well, like *this*—but he didn't know what else to do. He was already extremely hard as he wrapped his fingers around his shaft, huffing quietly. He would make this quick.

Switzerland closed his eyes and began to stroke himself, gasping as shivers of pleasure shot through him. He let his mind take over.

*Austria hovered above him, watching as a sweating and panting Switzerland wriggled beneath him.* "Roderich," he moaned. "Please, just—"

"What's this? Excited already? We haven't even done anything yet." The brunette smirked, letting his hand continue to trail up and down the other's hard cock.

"Let's change that then."

Switzerland's hand trembled nervously across the other man's cheek before he reached up to pull Austria into a passionate kiss. Their lips brushed against each other's hotly for a moment, the Swiss wrapping his arms tightly around the brunette's neck. He moaned and opened his mouth, waiting for the other to join him. Austria didn't hesitate and let his tongue slip eagerly into the other's mouth. Their tongues collided, twisting together feverishly in a way the body never could do. Austria lifted his hand and twined his fingers through blonde soft hair, the other still palming his throbbing cock.

The Swiss moaned into his mouth and bucked his hips up into the other's hand, hoping to get him to speed up. He broke away from their kiss, gulping in much needed air as Austria nibbled down his jaw. "Roderich, ah, move your hand faster!" His harsh whisper was followed by another buck to make his point.

He felt Austria's breath blow lightly over his neck as the man chuckled. The musician brought his head up, turned his heated purple gaze on him as he kissed the blonde's nose. "I got a better idea," he murmured hotly and removed his hand from the others' member, much to Switzerland's dismay. Taking his sweet time, the brunette kissed his way down the blonde's chest and stomach. He nibbled on the man's hipbone and kissed his way down the smooth inside of his thighs, making a slow trip to the blonde's weeping cock. He glanced mischievously up at the Swiss before sliding his mouth onto the hot flesh.

The Swiss gave a low keen as Austria sank himself onto him. "Oh . . !"

*He shivered every time the aristocrat's teeth scraped against his sensitive skin and he moaned loudly as the skilled tongue swirled around him. Austria brought his mouth up to the head and lowered it again quickly, retaking the eager blonde again and again. Impatiently, Switzerland grabbed the back of Austria's head with both of his hands, weaving his fingers tightly through his silky hair. He couldn't stop the moans or any of the other embarrassing noises erupting from him as he felt himself being brought to the edge. Heat began to pool in his stomach and he gripped Austria's head tighter as he quickened his pace. He was close now. So close . . *

"Roderich!" Switzerland came forcefully into his hand, throwing his head back as he uttered a long groan. He went limp, sliding down the wall of the tub as he rode out the waves of pleasure running through him. He removed his hand shakily and tried to calm his heart.

The water had long since gone cold, the bubbles gone and all that was left was silence. Switzerland shivered as the water chilled his heated skin and he stood up slowly. His legs nearly gave out and he had to grip the edge of the tub as he stepped out onto the rug. He grabbed one of the towels and wrapped it around his dripping body, beginning to dry himself off.
The blonde paused—the weight of what he had just done finally started to sink in. He sat down on the edge of the draining tub, hugging the towel tightly around himself. Had he really just . . . ? Oh god—

Switzerland buried his face shamefully in the towel.

...xXx...

Roderich . . .

Austria looked up from the boiling pot in front of him. He thought he heard Switzerland call his name. He waited for a second and when he didn't hear anything else he set down the soup ladle he was holding on the counter and walked out of the kitchen. *I hope he had a relaxing bath; he was in there awhile. He probably just fell asleep,* he thought as he strode down the hall towards the bathroom. He stopped at the door and raised his hand to knock.

The door swung open before his fist could make contact, revealing a very wet and a very naked—aside from a towel—Switzerland. The blonde jumped in surprise, clutching the giant coffee-colored cloth closer around his thin body. "Dammit, Austria! Stop scaring me!" he barked, his face reddening again.

"I thought I heard you call me," the musician muttered, more than a little distracted from Switzerland's appearance. The towel was wrapped around his neck and shoulders and hung down nearly to his ankles. His face was an attractive shade of pink again and his green eyes shone in the light along with his dripping blonde hair. Austria's eyes roamed over him for a moment before meeting the blonde's gaze as he dropped his hand back to his side.

Switzerland's eyes widened greatly for a split second and he turned his head away from the musician. His face went beet red and he shook his head, his fair-hair swishing slightly. "N-No, I didn't call you . . . I w-was about to though," he stammered, opening the door wider to let Austria step into the bathroom. He peeked shyly through his hair up at him. "What did you want me to call you for?"

He's stuttering—he only does that when he's embarrassed, Austria thought in confusion. And he's not looking at me. I wonder why he's acting so odd. The aristocrat shrugged off the thoughts for the moment and shut the door behind him.

"What are you doing?!" Switzerland squeaked, watching the brunette walk over to the sink and pick up that little white box from earlier. His eyes flickered to the door, his heart racing, and back to the country that was now behind him peeling his towel off.

Austria stopped, glancing into his emerald eyes for a second before giving a small pull on the back of his towel. "I'm going to put some antiseptic on your wounds," he said, holding up the white box. "But in order for me to do that . . . " he gave a tug on the towel again, making the motion obvious.

"Oh." Switzerland turned his face forward so Austria couldn't see his expression. He cautiously loosened the towel from around him and slid it down to about his waist before tying it tightly. Austria thanked him and opened up the box, taking out a small cream bottle and some stick-strips before setting the box back down on the sink. Carefully, so as not to hurt the Swiss, he began to apply the antibacterial to the country's many cuts and scrapes.

Switzerland tried not to wince when he felt cool goo being spread on a long scratch on his right shoulder blade. He hissed quietly as Austria placed a couple of the strips on the cut before moving on to another. He would apologize every time the blonde twitched or voiced his discomfort and
was trying his best to be gentle. He finished quickly with Switzerland’s back and grabbed some more stick-strips as he moved to work on his chest and arms.

Austria sighed at the sight of all of his wounds and he applied some more cream. Switzerland noticed and immediately became defensive. "What?"

"It's just . . ." Austria sighed again, glancing up at him as he tended to a cut on his side. "Nevermind."

"No, what is it?" The blonde was starting to get irritated.

Austria finished fixing him and stood up, walking over to place the bottle and leftover stick-strips in the box. He stood in front of the mirror for a moment before turning back to the Swiss, his face serious. "I don't like seeing you get hurt because of me. I never have," he whispered, running his fingers through his hair. Without waiting for a reply, he opened up the bathroom door and left with the box in hand. He needed to get back to cooking before the food burned.

Walking into the living room, Austria spotted a bob of blonde tresses bouncing down the stairs. Liechtenstein appeared beside him with wet hair like her brother and wearing a cute, rose-colored cotton nightgown, smiling sweetly. "Hello, Mr. Austria," she chirped happily.

"Hello." He smiled back at her politely. "Did you have a nice bath?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you very much," she said, nodding. She tilted her chin up, sniffing the air. It smelled of simmering beef and tomatoes, rising bread and various spices. "Mmm. What smells so good?"

Realizing his mission from a moment ago, he led the small country into the kitchen and went to stir his boiling pot. "It's Gulasch with dumplings," Austria said, setting down the ladle and reaching up into the cupboard to grab out some plates.

"Oh, here let me help." Liechtenstein helped him set the plates down and went over to grab some napkins off a neighboring counter. After Austria pointed out which drawer the silverware was in, she gathered up all the stuff into her tiny arms and left the kitchen to set the table. It was the least she could do—he was making dinner after all.

Straightening the napkins, Liechtenstein glanced up to see her brother walk into the room. Switzerland was wearing a white nightshirt with pajama bottoms and smoothing down his hair as he walked towards the kitchen. With a nod at her, he went to stand slightly behind Austria as the brunette bent over to grab a tray of rolls out of the oven.

"Gulasch?" the Swiss asked.

Austria smiled a little, setting the tray down on a hot pad. "Your favorite."

"With rolls and dumplings?"

"Of course."

Switzerland crossed his arms. "Please don't feel like you need to make all of this just because of us. Don't strain yourself, idiot."

"Well," Austria paused momentarily as he reached up for a serving bowl. "I don't get to make dinner for guests every day, you know. It's usually just me here, though Hungary does try to visit every now and then. Plus, I like leftovers for breakfast."
Switzerland let a small chuckle escape him, smiling. "You still like doing that? You haven't changed much."

"Nope, and my cooking skills are still impeccable."

Liechtenstein leaned against the back of a chair as she watched quietly from the dining room. Seeing her brother acting like that made her feel happy. He was smiling and joking with the Austrian as they both helped getting dinner ready. She'd rarely ever seen Switzerland laugh and only had been able to make him smile a few times since she'd become his little sister. He's usually always so uptight and busy with work, it was good to see him loosen up some.

"Liechtenstein, do you think you could get the butter and powidl from the refrigerator, please?" Austria called over to her kindly.

She immediately skipped over to the fridge and opened the door. "Sure. Where . . ?"

"The plum jam on the door there," he said, handing the basket of rolls to Switzerland to place on the table. She grabbed out the jam and butter and followed her brother. Austria turned the stove off before carefully picking up the bowl of Gulasch by the pad underneath and ambling over to the dining table.

"Dinner is served."

---xXx---

2:37 am.

Liechtenstein blinked wide awake at the clock sitting on the bedside table. Thunder boomed outside of the shaded window, rolling ominously throughout the room and shaking her bed a little. She flipped onto her back and sat up, staring as a flash of light appeared around the velvet drapes, thunder sounding not a second later. She shivered as rain pounded loudly on the roof.

Throwing her feet off the edge of the bed, Liechtenstein hopped down off the huge mattress and onto the cold wooden floor. Crossing over to the door, she opened it and slipped as quietly as she could out into the hallway. Creeping towards the staircase, she spotted a light downstairs. Stepping down the stairs, she peaked over the railing and into the living room.

Austria was laying down on one of the couches, leaned up against a pillow with a lamp turned on behind him. A piece of green fabric, which Liechtenstein instantly realized was her brother's uniform, was in his hands and he was sewing up rips in the cloth along the arms. She glided down the rest of the stairs as his head tilted up and he adjusted his glasses, pausing in his work. He looked at her curiously.

"What are you doing up so late?" he asked softly. It looked like she was about to answer but a huge burst of thunder erupted throughout the house, making her jump in fright. The aristocrat glanced out the window before turning his understanding gaze back to her. "Did the storm wake you up?"

"Yes, sir," she said quietly, still standing by the staircase.

"Would you like some warm cream?" He set down the patched uniform over the back of the couch and stood up.

"Oh!" The little country padded quickly over to his side as he headed for the kitchen. "I can get it myself, Mr. Austria, you don't need to," she added as they stepped through the doorway. The
kitchen was dark, the lamp from the other room providing just enough light for them to maneuver.

Austria laughed quietly as he opened up the fridge, bending to grab a carton of fresh cream. "It's no trouble, Liechtenstein. As I said earlier, I like to treat my guests well."

Standing on her tippy toes, the small blonde reached up into the cupboard above the stove for a glass. "I know, but big brother and I are here to take care of you. So you needn't strain yourself on our behalf," she murmured, setting the glass down as more thunder rumbled.

"You sound just like him," the musician muttered, releasing another small chuckle. He stuck the glass into the microwave and patted her head softly. "He's raised you well, hasn't he?"

"Oh, yes. Brother has always been so kind to me, teaching me new things and taking care of me. He is the best brother anyone could ever have."

Austria silently agreed with her, taking the warm glass of cream out of the microwave and handing it to the tiny country. He gestured back to the living room. "Alright, how about I play for you until you fall asleep?" he offered, going over to sit in front of his grand antique piano.

Liechtenstein sat down on the couch, eagerly sipping at her thick drink. The lukewarm liquid tasted sweet and milky and it instantly made her sleepy. "I've never heard you play before, Mr. Austria."

He smiled, his violet eyes shining in the dim light. "Well, I think you'll like it," he said, lifting the key cover up. "Just turn off the light and lay back on the couch when you're done, okay?"

"Okay." The blonde drank happily for a few moments as the musician prepped himself. He tenderly ran his hand over the ivory keys, as if dusting them off, before pressing his fingertips to them.

One soft key, then another, and another and before long a wonderful melody of quiet sounds floated through the air, seemingly swirling around them as the piano filled the room with *Timeless*. Breathtaking notes drifted from the instrument, caressing the walls, roaming across the floor and resonating in the high ceiling above.

Liechtenstein's eyes widened as the brilliant music continued. She'd heard a lot of piano, but none that sounded this . . . effortless. Setting down her empty glass, she pulled up a blanket at the end of the couch and flipped the light off. The room was immediately bathed in darkness aside from the occasional lightning flashing through the window. The music didn't falter in the slightest and just continued with its magnificent mirage of splendor.

Whether the storm was dying down or the piano was getting louder, soon Liechtenstein found that all she could hear were the notes that Austria was playing. Her eyes drooped as exhaustion overtook her and she nestled deeper under the blanket. She barely detected that the song had switched over to another song—*Music of the Night*. She yawned and closed her eyes, letting sleep overtake her.

Austria hummed the words quietly to himself as he continued to play one of his favorite songs. It was empowering to play and he loved the way the chords echoed delicately throughout the room. It calmed him, distracting him from the aching pain in his chest. His mind was clear, not a single thought going through it. He felt detached, his sole purpose was only to play. He became the music.

His thoughts returned slowly as he ended the song. Austria's fingers hovered above the keys hesitantly and he glanced behind him to see that Liechtenstein had fallen soundly asleep. He smiled
in the darkness, sighing as he closed the cover back over the keys. Even briefly, it felt good to play again since he'd gone without for the past few days. The storm had quieted down, the thunder and lightning had stopped and the rain tapped evenly on the roof above.

Austria stood up and turned around to face the sleeping girl. His eyes, now adjusted to the dark, spotted the tiny country curled up on the plushy couch, completely oblivious that the music had long since stopped. He strode quietly over to her and bent down. The aristocrat slid his arms carefully under her legs and around her shoulders before lifting her swiftly in his arms.

She's so lightweight, he thought in surprise. Making sure the blanket was snug and wouldn't fall off of her, he made his way around the couch and chairs and over to the staircase where he spotted another sleeping blonde.

Switzerland was sitting up against the railing, snoring softly as he slept. Austria stared incredulously for a moment before a huge smile broke out on his face. The Swiss had always loved to hear him play—though he would almost never admit it aloud—and apparently that's what he had been doing before he had also been lulled to sleep by the musician. Cautiously stepping past him, the brunette glided up the rest of the stairs and into Liechtenstein's room. After laying her back into her bed and tucking her in, he returned silently and stepped down towards the man asleep on the steps.

He reached out a grabbed his shoulder, shaking it slightly. When nothing happened, he tried it again, this time saying, "Vash?" Nothing. "Vash, you have to get into bed, it's not healthy to doze off on the stairs." Nothing again. He sighed, shaking his head before wrapping his arms around the blonde. "I'm getting too old for this. You're getting too old for this, Vash. Having to be carried to bed should be out of the question for you by now. For Liechtenstein, though, it's a different matter because she's still just a kid. You, well, you're not much younger than me."

Austria just continued to babble to himself quietly as he carried the country into his bedroom. The blonde didn't even stir as the musician adjusted him in his arms in order to pull back the sheets. He set Switzerland down into the mattress and sighed in content, pulling the sheets back over his thin form. Remembering that the house got cold at night, he pulled up the comforter, too, and bent over to tuck it around the Swiss man. He paused, brushing a stray piece of hair out of the blonde's face. He was always a pretty deep sleeper, and his face softened to look so peaceful.

Austria gently pressed his lips to Switzerland's forehead before straightening up. He looked down at the blonde in sadness. I only have maybe a few weeks to spend with them, I want to make the most of it. Especially with him, and Liechtenstein, while they're here. Austria turned in determination and walked over to the door. He would make sure not to waste a single minute of his time. Convinced of his mission, he left the room without further delay.

He didn't even notice the green eyes watching his back as the door clicked behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Things were a little saucy in this one~
Crying & Flying

Chapter Summary

Prussia pouts at his brother, Hong Kong gets dragged along by Taiwan, and Hungary makes a phone call.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Dammit, bruder! Why can't I go outside?"

"Because, you'll run off the first chance you get, Gilbert!"

"That's not fair! You can't keep me in here forever, ya know!"

Italy stood off near the wall, watching with wide eyes as Germany and Prussia went at it again for maybe the tenth time that morning. Prussia was insistent on not being held captive by his own brother while Germany was just trying to keep him from causing trouble for Austria. "Hey, you guys. Can you stop fighting now?" the Italian tried to butt in, but his words were ignored by the two Germans.

"I don't intend on keeping you here forever, but I can keep you in here for as long as I need to until Hungary says otherwise," Germany barked at Prussia, holding his ground against his much older brother.

The silver-haired man rolled his eyes. "Hungary this, Hungary that! Since when do you take orders from her?"

"Since it clearly deals with you and Switzerland nearly ripping each other apart at the meeting yesterday," the blonde retorted, gesturing to Prussia's wounds. He had a long cut from his right cheekbone to his chin and one of his hands was heavily bandaged. His face and neck were bruised and cut also, along with the rest of his body. "Austria doesn't need you bothering him trying to get his land and whatnot now, especially when he's not going to live much longer."

Italy lowered his gaze to the floor, clenching his hands around the bottom of his shirt. The thought that he would no longer be able to see his former caretaker anymore overwhelmed him again and he felt tears beginning to bud in his eyes. The sound of the fighting dulled down until he couldn't make out the words anymore and it was just a low hum in his ears. The hum got annoying and he shook his head, trying to choke back a sob that was prepared to erupt from his throat.

"S-Si prega di smettere . . ."

"I don't care if he doesn't want to give up his land even after he's dead! I'm sick of being this tiny, bruder!" Prussia snarled, taking a step closer to the blonde.

"Fermarlo . . ."

"I'm not letting you out of my sight and you're not leaving this house! That's final, Prussia!"
"Fermarlo . . . p-per favore . . ."

"The hell you're the boss of the awesome me!"

"Fermarlo!"

Germany and Prussia both turned their heads to the Italian, glaring. Italy broke down and sunk to his knees, hiding his face in his hands as tears overran him. "Si prega di smettere! Fermarlo . . . fermarlo . . . fermarlo . . . fermarlo . . ." he kept repeating it over and over again as sobs shook his shoulders.

Germany's face instantly softened and he went over to kneel down beside Italy. Prussia tensed in shock and pointed at him. "Why the hell are you crying?" The Italian ignored the question and launched himself at Germany, burying his wet face into the man's chest. He gripped the German's T-shirt tightly in his hands as he sobbed into the white fabric, still repeating himself.

Germany froze for a moment, unsure of what to do. Italy had cried many times before but never like this—never this hard. Plus, he was speaking in Italian, which he usually only resorted to when he was extremely excited or upset. The German decided to wrap his arms around the smaller man, pulling him into his lap. "Why are you crying, Veneziano?" the blonde asked, much nicer than his brother.

"Per favore solo . . . smettere di combattere . . . va bene?" Italy sniffled quietly, looking up at the blonde with wet brown eyes.

"What is he saying, bruder?" Prussia waved at the brunette insistently. "I don't speak goddamn Italian!"

"He wants us to stop fighting," Germany mumbled, sighing. He grabbed Italy and stood up, setting the smaller man on his feet. The blonde helped wipe at the tears still flowing down his cheeks.

Prussia turned away, plopping down on the couch in exhasperation. "Well, it's not like I want to fight with you," he grumbled, stretching out. He tilted his head back against a pillow and slung his arm over his face. "I'm just really tired of being told what to do and not having a say in anything anymore."

Germany rolled his blue eyes. "What are you talking about, Gilbert? You're always talking and voicing your opinions on everything."

Italy smacked at the blonde's chest lightly. "Stop it," he said normally, sniffling. He rubbed the rest of his tears away on his sleeve. Sliding his hand up his chest and grabbing his collar, Italy stood on his tiptoes and pulled the surprised German down into a soft kiss.

Prussia peeked out from under his arm. He smiled as his younger brother's face turned pink in embarrassment as the Italian broke the kiss, only to find the German leaning in for another one. "About damn time," the silver-haired man whispered to himself before closing his red eyes to give them some privacy.

...xXx...

"Why did you drag me along with you, Mei?"

"Oh, stop whining—you know I don't like to travel alone! Now come on or we'll miss our plane!"

Hong Kong sighed and resorted back to his usual silence. He picked up his bags and the pink girl's
who was currently trotting towards the airline terminal in front of them and raced after her. Taiwan had always seemed to find a way to get him to come with her on her little adventures around the world. After their last one—a trip to the taiga where he'd fell out of a 100ft tree and they'd nearly froze to death before Russia had found and rescued (temporarily kidnapped) them—the small Chinese peninsula kinda hoped they'd quit for awhile. His back was still sore from that fall. But no, the black-haired woman had insisted that they must keep on exploring the world while there is a world left to explore.

So that's why they were running after a plane ready to take them from the Hong Kong International Airport all the way to South Africa. Taiwan quickly checked them through the ticket desk and lead them down into the loading bay. Trying not to bump into anyone, Hong Kong set down their bags and struggled to catch his breath. He stared into her brown eyes with his.

"Won't at least tell me why we are going to bloody Africa?" he asked breathlessly, a little of his English side showing in his annoyance.

Taiwan grinned and patted the taller man's head. "What? You don't like surprises now?"

"Everytime you say something's a surprise it gives me a stomach ache."

"Aww~! You're such a stick in the mud!" The pink girl pouted her lip and a crossed her arms.

"Soooo . . ." Hong Kong picked up their bags again as the crowd began to file outside to board the plane. "Does that mean you're not going to tell me?"

Taiwan thought about it, taking her bag from him as they followed the line of streaming people. She turned back and smiled at him. "How about I tell you when we land?"

Hong Kong nodded and followed her over to where first class was loading and up the stairs into the plane. Finally sitting down next to Taiwan in the plush reclining seats, he sighed in relief. Even though it's nearly killed him several times, there was one perk to traveling a lot:

They'd finally racked up enough points to upgrade to more comfortable seats.

...xXx...

Hungary tapped her pen impatiently on the desk in front of her. She glared out the window of the air conditioned room at the falling rain. She was currently sitting through a meeting with her and Japan's boss as they discussed . . . well, she didn't quite know. The brunette was finding it incredibly hard to stay focused on what they were talking about because her mind was completely focused on her dying friend.

"The fact of the matter is that if we change our shipping routes to here, here and here, we would save a lot more fuel and deliver the products to your warehouses in half the time. How does that sound, Mr. Japan?"

"Mmm . . . that idea sounds like it could work. We shall see."

"Good. How about you, are you okay with it, Hungary?"

I wonder if they're up yet, the woman thought, running her hand through her hair nervously. She watched as a desperate bird flew to the windowsil in search of shelter from the cold rain. She glanced at her watch: 3:24pm. It would be early morning about now at Austria's house but Liechtenstein would have to be up—she was an early riser according to her brother.
"Hungary? Are you even listening?"

Maybe she would give the house a call to see how Austria's doing. *I hope Switzerland remembered to give him his medicine,* Hungary thought worriedly. The aristocrat had never liked taking anything to help him when he was sick. Wishing she had a phone with her, the woman continued tapping her pen rhythmically on the cherry wooden desk. She should really call after the meeting. Wait . . . the meeting . . .

"Hungary-san, look! Yaoi!" Japan shouted.

"What? Where?" The brunette snapped her head from her thoughts to stare in surprise around the room. Seeing nothing and disappointed somewhat, she returned her gaze to the three men sitting around the table in front of her. A light blush tinged her cheeks as she realized that she had been played.

Her boss leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Now that we've got your attention, what to you think of the new trade routes?"

Hungary's blush deepened and she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "W-What trade routes?"

Her boss sighed and Japan's looked at her distastefully. Glancing down at her hands in embarrassment. "Sorry, Mr. Prime Minister . . . and Japan."

The Prime Minister just waved his hand dismissively before turning to her boss. "How about we go discuss these matters elsewhere?" he offered, standing up. Her boss nodded and followed the other man out into the sitting room. He gave her a glance before shutting the door behind him.

Hungary filled with shame, leaning back in her chair. Her green eyes drifted up to look at the smaller country sitting next to her. "I'm really sorry, Japan, it's just . . ."

The country turned his sympathetic black eyes on her. "It's because of Austria-san, isn't it? You're worried about him, right?" She avoided his gaze for a moment, looking out at the rain again, before giving tiny nod. Japan shifted in his seat, pulling a cell phone out from his pants pocket and handing it to her. "Here, Hungary-san. You can check on him if you want."

Her green eyes brightened as she took the phone from him. "Really?"

"Yes. But may I ask you to turn it on speaker?" She looked at him oddly and a light pink dusted his pale cheeks. "I would like to know how he is doing, also."

"Okay." Hungary smiled as she flipped open Japan's phone, quickly dialing the familiar number. She pressed the speaker button and set the phone on the table between them. Mechanical ringing sounded from the device, echoes resounding throughout the room. It rang a couple times before there was a soft click and a tiny voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Liechtenstein?" Hungary said calmly, smiling a little. "It's me, Hungary, and Japan is here, too."

"Kon'nichiwa," Japan greeted.

"Oh, hello," Liechtenstein said happily. "What's going on?"

"I just called to see how yesterday went and how Austria is doing."
They heard a shuffling noise on the other line and then silence for a second before the little girl's voice whispered, "Well, right now Mr. Austria is arguing with big brother about his medicine in the kitchen, but I think brother is winning." Hungary laughed a little and Japan smiled. "Yesterday went . . . ok, I guess."

"Ok?" Japan questioned.

Liechtenstein was silent again and there was more shuffling. The atmosphere became somewhat uncomfortable and Hungary's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. She shared a glance with the Asian country. There was more silence before they heard the girl speak again. "Austria was very nice to us yesterday, even though us staying here surprised him quite a bit. But . . . Switzey was acting weird the whole time. During my bath I kept hearing strange noises coming from downstairs, like a moaning or whining or something, but when I went down there Mr. Austria was cooking and brother was still in the bath."

"Maybe it was a ghost," Japan offered, joking slightly.

"Maybe . . . but when Switzey got out of the bath he barely even looked at me," Liechtenstein's voice grew concerned. "He spent most of last night kind of spaced out."

Both of the countries sitting around the phone blushed and looked at each other, understanding passing between them. Japan blinked, his eyes shining. "Could it be that they . . ?" he began, whispering.

"I don't know—hold on," Hungary replied quietly, turning back to the phone. "Hey, Liechtenstein?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think you could do me a favor?" Hungary asked, a devious plan forming in her mind.

The girl paused and they could hear voices in the background. "Um, sure. What is it, Ms. Hungary?"

"Alright, first I want you to go upstairs and look into . . ."
Chapter Summary

Austria helps Switzerland cope with his fear of trains, and some valuable information is revealed about his illness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Austria groaned, leaning back in the corner of the kitchen counter. He was tired and grumpy and was in the middle of a pointless argument. An angry blonde stood in front of him, holding a glass of water in one hand with two pills in the other. His blackeye was faded and most of his scratches and bruises were healed, too. Green eyes glared at him in annoyance as he took a step closer to the musician. "Austria . . ." he began.

"I'm not taking them, Switzerland," he retorted, crossing his arms. He narrowed his lavender eyes as the blonde took another step, only his outstretched hands separating them.

"What's your problem with medicine?" the Swiss growled, setting the water down to his right.

"I don't trust it."

"Why not?" Goddamn, the man was frustrating!

Austria lifted his hand to straighten his pajama shirt collar, looking up at the ceiling. "You wouldn't understand," he murmured, returning to stare at the pissed off Swiss. "Plus, I have important plans for today and I don't feel like spending the entire time in bed sick."

"Dammit! How the hell am I supposed to get him to take this now?" Switzerland thought angrily, glancing at the pills in his hand. Hungary told him to make sure that he takes this or else his time left will be cut even shorter. Maybe while he's speaking he could just toss the pills in. No—that wouldn't work. He needed to figure out how to get the damn Austrian to open his mouth long enough so that he could . . .

As the aristocrat rubbed his eyes tiredly, Switzerland's gaze traveled up to his messy morning hair. He noticed an equally sleepy curl bobbing low above the brown locks. An idea popped in his head momentarily. That's Mariazell, I think. If I'm correct, that should work—

Austria gasped, his eyes flying open as the Swiss gripped his curl tightly between two fingers. A stream of pleasure shot down his neck and spine, instantly bursting in his groin so fervently that he became hard in seconds. He bit his lip to hold back a moan erupting low in his throat as the shorter man started to pull and stroke the erect hair. His legs began to buckle and he had to support himself on the counter behind his shaking body. "S-Swizzzzzzzeeeeyyyy . . ." he murmured breathlessly, glancing up at the blonde through heavy lashes as he slid down the counter. "Ssss-Stop it . . ."

Switzerland's face grew red as he watched the writhing man twitch and groan below him. His mind fogged at the sound of his nickname and he kept a firm grip on the hair as he knealed down between the Austrian's spread legs. He felt himself getting hot at the erotic sight before him—the
musician bucking and moaning as he continued to play with his curl, muttering obscenities in German. After giving an overly harsh tug, Austria's mouth fell open in a small scream, his hips flying upward to brush against the blonde's stomach. Not missing his opportunity, Switzerland ignored the feelings pooling deep inside him and quickly placed the two pills in the brunette's mouth. Austria snapped his jaw shut just in time to catch one of the blonde's fingers.

"Hey!" Letting a surprised yelp escape him, the Swiss let go of the man's curl as he tried to free his captured finger.

As the waves of pleasure stopped and his shaking died down, he slumped against the counter, letting go of Switzerland's finger. He half-glared through lusty hazed violet eyes as the blonde stood up, scowling at the teeth marks on his skin. "Warum haben Sie sich . . . " Austria started, still a little breathless. "Wie kannst du es wagen . . . "

"It's your own fault," the blonde grumbled, rubbing his sore appendage. "If you would of just taken the damn pills then we could of avoided this, idiot."

"You didn't have to pull my curl," the musician mumbled normally. He held out a shaky hand to the Swiss after several failed attempts at standing up. The blonde stared down at him for a moment, his blush beginning to fade as he grabbed his trembling hand and helped him stand up. Once back on his feet, Austria immediately grabbed the glass of water that Switzerland had set down and downed it in one gulp. He gasped, letting a shiver pass over him as he still tasted the medicine in his mouth. He set the glass down into the sink and turned back to the blonde. "I . . . apologize for my actions when you, um, did that," he said in embarrassment, gesturing to his now crooked curl.

Switzerland turned away, heading for the pantry on the other side of the kitchen—away from the aristocrat. _It was his own damn fault_, he repeated internally. _I mean, I knew what it would do to him, but I definitely wasn't expecting that_. "I'm going to make some coffee," he said aloud, rummaging around in the cupboard. He glanced over at the flushed Austrian as he nodded, beginning to walk out of the kitchen.

Austria stepped out into the grand hall, crossing over into the living room as he headed for the staircase. He spotted a bob of blonde hair bouncing down the stairs and he stopped. Liechtenstein was carrying a cardboard box of some sort while she had the house phone squeezed between her shoulder and ear, listening to someone on the other line. She looked up from the landing to see the musician standing in front of her. "Oh, there you are, Mr. Austria! Ms. Hungary wants to talk to you," she said, shifting the box so she could hand him the phone. Before he answered, she asked, "Where is your computer?"

He looked at her in confusion for a moment before pointing in the general direction of the dining room. "It's in the family room," he said. She thanked him and trotted off, box in hand. He watched her disappear as he put the phone to his ear, saying, "Good morning, Ms. Hungary."

He heard a small chuckle on the other line. "Hello, Roderich."

"Good afternoon, Austria."

His purple eyes widened slightly as he continued his journey up the staircase. "Hello, Japan. How are you today?"

"I'm good," the quiet nation answered. "How about you?"

"Did Switzerland make you take your pills?"
Austria felt his cheeks warm up as he walked down the upstairs hallway to his bedroom. "You do know that I'm quite old enough to look after myself, right?"

Hungary sighed. "I'll take that as a 'no' then."

"No." The musician was silent for a moment as his blush grew. "He made me take them, don't worry."

It was quiet for a minute on the other line and he thought he heard whispering as he opened up his room door. He shut it behind him and set the phone down on the table, flipping the speaker on before he walked over towards his dresser.

Hungary's voice eventually sounded again, ringing across the room so he could hear. "Well, I'm glad you took them. What are you doing now?"

"Getting dressed," he said calmly, pulling out a shirt. "I have to go to Salzburg today, but you already know that."

He could practically tell she was nodding. "Just don't strain yourself, ok? I'd much prefer it if you stayed home so I know that you're safe," she whined slightly.

"I'll be fine." He sighed, unbuttoning his pajamas. "It's not like I haven't been there before."

"Are Liechtenstein and Switzerland coming with you?"

"I'd expect so, though I've yet to tell them. Switzerland's making coffee right now," He paused, slipping off his shirt as he thought back to the tiny girl downstairs. "Liechtenstein had a box and she was looking for the computer a few moments ago. What were you talking to her about?"

"Nothing important," Hungary answered a little too quickly, instantly making him suspicious.

"What is it?" he pressed, slipping off his pants.

"Nothing, I just wanted her to do something for me, that's all. Anyway, have a nice time in Salzburg."

"I will."

"Don't be a stranger now, Austria. Please call me later to check in and tell me how it went, ok?"

"Ja, Mutter," the man chuckled warmly. He buttoned up his dress shirt and walked over to the phone, picking it up and turning the speaker off. "Take care, Elizabeta, Japan."

"You, too," they both said before the call ended with a click.

...xXx...

"I want both of you to pack an overnight bag," Austria announced to the two blondes as he entered the living room. He was dressed neatly in his usually blue outfit and white frilly necktie. His brown hair was smoothed back and Maraizell was standing tall in a perfect curl, apparently recovered from a few minutes ago.

Switzerland sipped his coffee cautiously, peering over the rim at the excited Austrian. "Oh?" he questioned softly. "And why is that?"

"We," the musician gestured to all of them, "are going to a concert in Salzburg tonight."
"W-What?" Switzerland sputtered, nearly dropping the hot liquid on himself. He set it down carefully on a coaster before returning to the conversation with a baffled look. "Why the hell are we going to a concert?"

"Well, I am performing throughout a good portion of it. I even have a song with Seychelles. Do you know that she has a quite a lovely voice?"

"Why are we just hearing about it now?"

"Maybe because you don't talk to her as often as you should? She really is a sweet girl."

"No—" Switzerland sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "No, you idiot. The concert. Why didn't you mention it earlier?"

Austria tilted his head, raising an eyebrow. "Did you not get the invitations? I simply thought you may have forgotten the date."

The blonde narrowed his eyes up at the man, clearly annoyed. "Invitations?"

"I sent them out months ago. And before you ask, yes, I did send you one, as well. I'm expecting almost everyone to show up, if they can. I've confirmed many of the reservations."

The Swiss was about to protest even more, his face falling at the suggestion that the musician had indeed invited nearly the whole world to come and see some silly concert in Salzburg—the complete absurdity of that thought having trouble sticking in his mind—but his sister decided to speak up them.

"I think it sounds fun, big brother," Liechtenstein voiced, clearly intrigued. She stood up from her spot on the couch. "I'll go pack," she said, heading past Austria and up the stairs.

The aristocrat gave a small smile and turned back to the shocked blonde man. "Oh, lighten up, Vash." The Swiss looked seething as he said his name again and the brunette just shook his head. He came and sat next to him on the couch. "When was the last time you got to do something fun?"

"I never placed concerts as 'fun'," Switzerland snapped, clearly lying as he looked away from those piercing lilac eyes. "Besides, Hungary said to make sure you get plenty of bed rest, and considering your late night last night you shouldn't even be up right now."

"I just talked to Hungary and she said to have fun," Austria smirked at the blonde's expression. "Come on, it's Salzburger Kulturtage. Plus, I've already reserved you and Liechtenstein seats on the train, rooms in the hotel, and seats in the theatre. So there's nothing to worry about, everything's paid for."

Switzerland glanced up at him, looking torn. He reached out slowly and grabbed his coffee, hovering over the steam. "Well, since everything's paid for . . ." he mumbled grumpily, taking a sip of his drink before sighing in defeat. "What time does the train leave?"

"9:05—Half an hour, and it takes twenty minutes to get to the station. You'll have to pack quickly," Austria answered, clearly pleased.

"Do we have to take the train?" the Swiss found himself asking as a side note, his voice quieter than he intended it to be. The Austrian's face turned a bit more serious and he glanced to the side, nodding.

He watched the blonde stand up and walk to the kitchen with his coffee, returning empty handed
and heading to the stairs. Idiotic musician, the Swiss thought. What does he think he's doing? It's probably costing him a fortune to pay for Liechtenstein and I, since we weren't able to RSVP. Plus, I didn't bring anything to wear to a stupid concert. All I have are my uniforms and sleepwear. No offense, but there's no way in hell am I showing up in that frilly pink shirt Liechtenstein made me!

"Oh, and Switzerland?"

Austria's voice caught him from the bottom of the staircase and he glanced down at the aristocrat. He sighed again. "What?"

"I'm going to go start up the car, but . . . Just bring your overnight stuff and an outfit for tomorrow. You don't need to worry about what to wear tonight, I have that all sorted out already."

"Oh, you do, do you?" the blonde muttered to himself. That aristocrat has impeccably weird timing. He turned back around and continued up the stairs, his hand raising in acknowledgement. "Whatever."

Austria smiled again at his reaction and returned to the living room. He walked out into the grand hall and grabbed a warm coat off of the rack next to the door. He slipped on his shoes and gloves before stepping outside into the crisp October air. Walking down towards the front gate, the aristocrat looked up at the sky as a cold breeze blew across him. Through the waving willows he could see a bleak sky covered in gray fluffy clouds, looking as if it was about to snow. Autumn still had another couple months to go, but sometimes the winter season would start early in Austria—much to the delight of skiers, snowboarders and other winter sportsman. He adored the snow; it was cold and refreshing, and he loved to go to Innsbruck for the entire season and experience all of the annual activities there. Hungary loved to go with him, too, and spend a few weeks with him. Perhaps I could get Vash to come with me this year, too. Like he used to.

Then a dark, nagging feeling chilled its way up his spine. A small voice clawing at the back of his mind. If you're alive, that is.

Austria shook his head, clearing his thoughts, and walked across to the other side of his driveway to where a small garage sat.

...xXx...

"What the hell kind of car is that?"

Austria looked up to see Switzerland and Liechtenstein coming down the walkway towards him, both toting small shoulder bags and wearing heavy coats. He saw Switzerland's flustered face as the blonde stared at his car and chuckled. "What do you mean?"

"Well, just look at it!" Switzerland huffed, waving insistently at the object. The roof of the car came up to Austria's waist like a sports car, but it was a four door and big enough to fit a family. It was long and sleek, shining with a deep iridescent violet that flashed between that and a magnificent navy blue with a chrome finish and black tinted windows. The running engine was nearly silent, purring quietly like a content pussycat waiting to pounce. "It just looks very . . . expensive."

Austria stopped leaning on the side of the car and collected their bags to put in the trunk. "It's a custom made Audi R8," the aristocrat explained, setting their bags with his. He closed the trunk and watched as both of the blondes were looking at the vehicle like it was made of gold. "It was an early birthday present from Germany. He gave it to me about a week ago."
Switzerland seemed to calm a bit and cleared his throat. "Oh." Well, I guess it's alright, considering he didn't buy it, he thought grudgingly. He shouldn't of assumed the musician had bought it in the first place. I mean, he's probably more frugal than I am. But if that were true, then he wouldn't be taking Liechtenstein and I on this trip. He shook his head, still confused, and held the back door open for his sister. "What happened to your Beetle, the one that you've been driving for practically a lifetime?"

Austria scratched the back of his head and gave a nervous chuckle. "Um, let's just say it's lifetime ended . . . explosively, shall we?" He stepped around the blonde and opened the drivers side door.

The Swiss rolled his eyes and got in on the passengers side, sinking himself down into the smooth leather seat a little reluctantly. "So, you finally crashed that old bug, huh?" he said, clicking his seatbelt.

"No, not exactly," the aristocrat admitted, putting the car into gear and driving down his long, curvy driveway. "Since it's so old, I brought it over to Ludwig's house about a month ago for some special repairs—the gas line was broken or something, I don't know. Gilbert was being an idiot and tossed a cigarette inside the garage and, well—"

"He blew it up?"

"That's an understatement. There was practically nothing left of it except the tires." Austria expertly maneuvered his way down the country road, heading towards the bustling metropolis of early morning Vienna. Stopping at a red light, he momentarily rested his forehead on the steering wheel, his shoulders slumping sadly. "I really liked that car, too."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Austria," Liechtenstein comforted, leaning from the backseat to pat his shoulder lightly.

"Thank you."

The musician turned onto the main paved streets, revving up the engine to try and get smoothly into traffic. The rest of the ride to the train station was silent, none of them seeming to find anything to talk about nor brave enough to break the stiff atmosphere—that's what the radio was for. Liechtenstein watched from the backseat as her brother twitched nervously, his head frequently turning to look out the door window at passing cars as he balled his hands into tight fists in his lap. Austria glanced over to him, turning onto an exit ramp.

"Are you going to be alright?" the musician murmured.

The blonde whipped his head around towards him. "Of course! I'm going to be fine, idiot!" he snapped, immediately putting on the defensive.

Liechtenstein leaned forward curiously. "Why wouldn't you be okay?"

Switzerland barely managed to hide his angry flush as he turned back toward the window quickly. Stopping at another light, Austria glanced back at her in the rearview mirror. "You don't know?" he asked, slightly surprised when she shook her head. Pressing down on the gas again, he said, "He is deathly afraid of trains. Always has been ever since they were invented."

"Really?" The little blonde girl's eyes widened in shock. She never knew that about him. But, I guess it does explain why he always wants to drive or fly everywhere, she thought.

"You don't need to go off telling everybody now," Switzerland grumbled, glaring at the brunette man. "It's none of your damn business so just drop it!"
Austria raised his hands of the wheel in surrender at the next light. "I already know why anyway," he muttered. When he saw the blonde's expression he sighed. "Fine, fine. Not another word."

"Good." Switzerland crossed his arms and leaned back into his seat. He felt his chest freeze up when Austria turned into the entranceway of the Wien Westbahnhof station parking lot, his stomach churning uncomfortably as he pulled into a parking space and turned the car off.

The musician opened the door and glanced back at the frozen Swiss. He patted his shoulder, getting the blonde's attention. "Come on, we're late," Austria said, a touch of kindness in his voice. He gave one last look to his former ally before getting out of the car.

Liechtenstein followed him quickly. She reached into the now open trunk and grabbed her small overnight bag. She looked up at the Austrian as he reached in and grabbed both her brother's and his own bags before shutting the trunk. "How long will the train ride be?" she asked.

"Oh, about 2 and a half hours," he said, handing Switzerland's bag to the man as he got out of the car. He pushed the Swiss quickly, but gently, through the parking lot and up to the entrance. "The train leaves in 5 minutes so we have to hurry."

"Well, you didn't exactly give us much warning," Switzerland mumbled as they stepped inside. He fleetingly stared up at the incredibly high ceiling and the small food shops around them as Austria continued to usher him and his sister, heading for the escalators. Panic finally began to set in as he spotted the loading dock. "Um, m-maybe since we're running so late, we could just get a later train —" the Swiss babbled in a fury, starting to walk backwards back up the moving escalator. He jumped in surprise when he ran into Austria's chest.

The aristocrat bent down and whispered into the blonde's ear, "Calm yourself, Switzey."

Green eyes widened at the words and his cheeks were dusted with a light rose color. "Why'd he have to call me that again? As the blonde struggled to control his inner emotions yet again as memories from the previous night flooded back to him, he felt a tiny hand snake through his. Looking down in shock, Liechtenstein smiled at him and hepled Austria pull him off the escalator. She felt his grip tighten on her hand when the musician slid their ticket cards through the booth and rushed them through the train car doors just as they were closing.

Austria breathed a heavy sigh of relief as the ICE train started moving, placing his bag off to the side. "We just made it."

Liechtenstein's eyes traveled over the train car that they were in. Apparently Austria had reserved them a private car at the back of the train, just behind the restaurant car. A small bed sat off to the right of the door and directly opposite them were several chairs and a couch facing a TV to their left. She walked over to one of the plushy leather chairs and set her bag on it. Only vaguely noticing that there weren't any windows and that farther down to the left was a bathroom, her attention was captured by a tap on the shoulder.

"Liechtenstein, would you mind going to get us something to drink?" Austria asked quietly, glancing over to the door separating their car from the restaurant one before looking back at her. He smiled slightly. "It might help your brother calm down."

She peaked around the Austrian to see her brother standing completely stiff in front of the door, staring away from them out the only tiny window. The little blonde country nodded and trotted across the car before disappearing through the connecting doors.

"Why did I let him bring me on this retched thing? The Swiss watched out the small door window as
buildings and trees flew by in a blur of colors, getting increasingly faster. "Get me off this thing, Austria," he whispered hoarsely, backing away from the window quickly. For the second time he ran into the man as the musician caught him in his terror-stricken state.

"It's alright, nothing's going to happen," Austria's comforting words went unnoticed and he sighed again. Resting his hands on the man's shoulders, he gently began to guide Switzerland away from the only window in the car and over to the leather couch. Sitting him down in front of the TV and out of sight of the window, Austria sat beside him and grabbed the remote. "Come on, let's watch some television. It'll get your mind off of the fact that we're going about 300kph right now."

Switzerland nearly slapped him.

"Ok, ok! I apologize," Austria laughed, leaning back and dodging out of the way of the Swiss man's gloved hand.

Switzerland huffed, crossing his arms. Even though it annoyed him incredibly that the man was purposely pushing his buttons, he had to admit that it calmed him down a little bit. Especially when the Austrian laughed—a light, cheerful sound that, if the Swiss was being truthful, he hadn't heard for a long time. Sure, he would let a small chuckle escape him every once in awhile, but he hadn't laughed like he was now, a sweet, lilting laugh, in decades.

Despite the light pink creeping across his cheeks, Switzerland grabbed for the remote. He grumbled to himself while he turned on the flatscreen TV, forcing his mind to focus on the brightening screen and not the Austrian's dying laughter.

The door to the left of them leading to the restaurant car opened slowly and a tall figure walked in carrying a tray with steaming drinks on them. The thin gentleman had neat black hair and was wearing a telltale waiter uniform, all of it looking pressed and clean, complimenting his kind smile as he set down the drinks next to them on a side table. Liechtenstein appeared out from behind him, giving the man a small nod and a shy, "Danke schön!"

"Bitte schön," he replied politely, giving a small bow before exiting the car.

Liechtenstein turned back around to serve the guys their drinks when she was met with two curious expressions. Embarrassment flushed her cheeks and she shrugged. "What? He wouldn't let me carry them back on my own."

Austria hummed, shifting his gaze to the steaming white mugs beside him on the table. "Hot chocolate?" he said, raising an eyebrow as he handed the man next to him a heated glass. The petite girl nodded, grabbing the last mug for herself as Austria took one. The cups were filled with the thick liquid and tiny marshmallows, a little bit of whipped cream spun on the surface.

"I thought it seemed a good choice," she murmured, blowing into the cup. She gave Austria a glance which he met with a barely noticeable nod. "Also because it's beginning to get cold outside. Winter will be coming soon this year, won't it, big brother?"

Switzerland took a careful sip of the sugary drink, sighing appreciatively as the warm liquid loosened his muscles somewhat—even though it kinda burned his tongue. "Yes. It'll probably be a harsh winter this year, too, with plenty of snow."

Austria hummed again, hovering over his steaming mug. He sent a sneaky half-glare to his right, pouting slightly. "It's really too bad that I won't be well enough to beat you at skiing again this year," he said slowly, lightly mocking him.
"What?" Switzerland sent a full on glare right into those mauve orbs. "The only reason you beat me last year is because you cheated!"

The Austrian shrugged, sipping his hot chocolate. "You'll probably be glad I'm gone, anyway. At least this'll give you a chance to do your best and lose to Finland or Poland."

"Why, you—!" The Swiss, who was by now overly irritated for a multiple of reasons—the hot chocolate's soothing powers erased completely—and was just about to go off on the aristocrat, stopped after hearing a small sniffle from the other side of the Austrian. Scowling, he craned his neck and peered around the man. Upon the instant of spotting his sisters' wet cheeks, his face immediately softened, along with his voice. "Lilli, what's wrong?"

Instead of answering him, she looked up at the Austrian with her big, shining green eyes. "Mr. Austria, you shouldn't joke about dying like that," she chided quietly, her drink set aside so she could rub away her tears furiously. "You're just a bit sick, but you'll be fine. Please don't think otherwise. Of course we wouldn't be glad if you . . ."

Equally green eyes along with lavender were wide with surprise as the small girl's statement trailed off. Austria's head lowered for a moment as he took in her words carefully. Sighing, he thought, _She's right. I shouldn't say such things, no matter how I feel._ Glancing over at the still teary country, he wrapped an arm around her slender shoulders, pulling her in tightly. _I don't want to make her cry for me._ "Lilli," he spoke her name softly into her ear. A little surprised at the hearing her name being spoken by him, she managed to hold in her tears for a moment, sniffling as her head rested against his chest. He continued once she quieted. "I apologize for my actions. I promise not to do it again, okay?"

Always so formal, Switzerland thought, exhaling the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

Liechtenstein shook her head, pressing on as new tears formed on her lashes. "That's fine, but . . . please don't give up hope just yet, sir," she whispered, Taiwan coming to mind and how she wanted to tell them. Her hand fiddled with the bottom of his necktie. "The minute you give up hope is the moment you have no reason left to live."

Austria and Switzerland both shared a glance. Liechtenstein didn't know how right she was. They both knew from past experiences, like in battle, that if you ever gave up or doubted what you were doing it would be the last thing you ever did—you would be crushed immediately. They both looked back at the fretting girl, deciding this was probably a similar situation. _Gilbert has been pretty vexing about this whole situation, what with his constant teasing and pranks. Not to mention he probably would try to pull something if it weren't for Liz and Ludwig keeping him in check._

"I won't give up hope then."

Liechtenstein's wet eyes widened and she pulled back a bit to stare at his face. He was sincere as far as she could tell, his purple gaze smiling down at her. "R-Really?"

He nodded solemnly, pulling her back into the embrace as he set his hot chocolate down behind her. "Yes, I'm quite sure I'll be alright." He hoped for her sake she couldn't see through his false bravado. "Though I do have one condition on your part."

"What is it?"

"Please don't call me 'sir' again—'mister' I can take, but 'sir' just makes me feel old," Austria whined half-heartedly.
"That's because you are old, idiot," Switzerland said, casually sipping his chocolate. He nearly spilt it all over himself when Austria wrapped his other arm tightly around his shoulders, pulling him close and into the hug. He almost poured the hot liquid all over both of them, too, and he tried to steady it while the musician ruffled his hair. "Hey!"

Liechtenstein couldn't help but giggle at her brother's expression, the last of her tears evaporating.

"Well, if I'm old then that doesn't make you much younger, **Switzey**," Austria cooed hotly, blowing out a sigh into the man's blushing face.

"Well, I'm still younger than you, and so is Lilli, especially," Switzerland huffed, resorting to setting the warm mug on the Austrian's knee, half-hoping it would burn him. "She's incredibly young compared to you."

"I am aware of that."

"Good to know that you understand you're ancient."

Both of the blondes could feel the man's arms stiffen around their shoulders. After a moment of tense silence, Switzerland started to feel a little guilty about the comment, but was too proud to admit it. He was just about to say something when the aristocrat all of a sudden burst into laughter. The Swiss sat shocked as he was pulled closer to the man, his laughing sending tremors throughout the blonde's body. Once again he managed not to spill his mug all over them—how, he didn't know—and before he could even form words, his sister had joined in the amusement.

Embarrassed and uncomfortable, Switzerland tried to ignore what was happening as much as possible. He was pressed flush up against the Austrian's neck, his tie tickling his nose a bit. The musician's fingers lingered in his still messed up hair, brushing his locks absently as he calmed down, his throat reverberating contentedly. Also, he had called him 'Switzey' yet again. Not to mention he was laughing that wonderful laugh for the second time in less than five minutes. The blonde's cheeks were on fire and his skin was tingling from the contact, his chest feeling tight. He wanted nothing more than to pull away from the brunette, curl up on the couch, sip his chocolate and watch the damn TV. But, as the ruckus died down, he found some unknown force had him latching onto the man's chest pocket, unwilling to pull away just yet, to say the least. Despite himself, the blonde ended up closing his green eyes, nuzzling into the crook of the aristocrat's collar and inhaling his deep smell of coffee, piano wax and pomegranate shampoo.

"Um, Schweiz?"

"What?" he grumbled.

"Your hot chocolate's tipping."

The blonde's eyes snapped open, flicking down just in time to see the tilted cup. Righting it quickly before it dropped into the aristocrat's lap, he vaguely noticed that Liechtenstein was no longer sitting on the other side of the brunette. Austria's arm was still wrapped firmly around his shoulders, his fingers still in his blonde hair. Amethyst eyes glittered down at him through his clear spectacles, a smirk on his lips.

"What?" Switzerland muttered, his eyes narrowing up at the man in suspicion.

"Nothing," Austria whispered, his voice lowering secretively. "It's just that we haven't sat like this in awhile."

Switzerland's glare was halted in surprise as he finally realized the situation. He was currently
pressed into the Austrian's side, his head resting against a broad shoulder. He was angled towards the musician, the blonde's right leg crossed over to hook around the man's right knee. The hot chocolate sat neatly between them, held firmly now in Switzerland's hands. If anyone else saw them they would probably seem like just some good friends hanging out. But the blonde thought otherwise. To him, it felt like they were a couple, young lovers—who weren't so young—snuggling on a couch enjoying a drink together on a cold day.

And was that so bad?

Yes. Yes it was. Or, at least, according to Switzerland.

Austria, on the other hand, was enjoying the contact immensely, knowing full well what the Swiss was thinking. I'm just glad he hasn't smacked me yet. Or worse . . . He eyed the steaming chocolate.

"Where'd Lilli go?" the blonde muttered, trying to get his mind off their positions.

"You didn't notice her move? She's taking a little nap." Austria gestured over to the bed where a small lump in the quilts was already snoring softly.

"Hmm." Switzerland leaned across the Austrian to set down his drink, pulling back quickly so as to limit even more touching. Austria's free arm, however, wrapped itself tightly around the man's shoulders, replacing his other arm and pulling the Swiss against his chest. "What on earth are you doing?" the blonde hissed, blushing furiously. "My sister is right there.

"I know," Austria said quietly. His voice was hard and distracted as he reached for the TV remote swiftly. He pressed the 'mute' button so the girl over in the bed wouldn't be woken up by hearing the reporter and he flipped the subtitles on. The brunette's face darkened as images flashed by on the screen and words at the bottom described the gruesome scenes. Austria blanched.

In the aristocrat's distraction, Switzerland managed to wriggle out of his grip and lean back against the couch beside him. Huffing in frustration, he noticed that the man was paler than usual, his violet eyes glued to the TV. "What's wrong?" the blonde asked, turning to follow the brunette's gaze. Emerald eyes froze as a mirage of pictures scooted across the screen.

Dead bodies.

You couldn't see most of them personally—like hair or faces—but there was one picture that lingered on the television, showing a long line of body bags outside of a hospital. There were a few EMT's in the background that were wheeling another bag out to join the others, sporting grim expressions. The German subtitles below coldly stated:

". . . personnel removing the deceased in order to clear out beds for more people who are in need of treatment. Doctors are scrambling in order to help all of those diagnosed with this mysterious illness. Nearly 3 million people have been infected by this massive outbreak since it started nearly 6 months ago, with the death toll now rising into the thousands. Experts are scrambling to find out what's caused the outbreak and how the virus is spreading so quickly across the country. But many believe the question on everyone's mind is why hasn't this virus spread to any other country yet, and how do we cure it before it does?"

There was a long pause in the subtitles as more pictures were shown—this time of people who were still alive but were quite sick and in need of medical attention. Austria kept his head down, unwilling to look at the screen any longer, nor was he willing to meet the gaze of the man next to him. He could feel his stomach churning, a tight feeling building up in his throat. The air was tense.
around the Swiss and him, the blonde man sitting stiffly in front of the television. Austria
straightened himself and went to take a sip of his hot chocolate, hoping to calm his nausea. The
Swiss turned his head to look at him slowly but he avoided that deadly green gaze, preparing to
be scolded.

"Roderich."

Austria snapped his head up, surprised to hear his name being spoken by the man. The blonde
officially had his attention—even if he didn't quite want to hear what he had to say.

Switzerland cleared his throat in a failed attempt to keep his voice from cracking. "6 months?"
There was a pause and more throat clearing before the Swiss continued carefully. "You've had this
illness for 6 . . . months? But Hungary said you've only been sick for a week or so!" The blonde
was having a hard time keeping his voice under control, though Austria did not sense any anger—
just shock. There was something else, too, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Not to mention, how on earth you managed to keep this from everyone for so long," Switzerland
griped, still careful not to wake his sister.

Being equally curious, Austria murmured, "Believe me, it was no small task."

"And?"

A sigh. "It took awhile in order to regulate any news of the situation spreading across Europe. In
truth, it was probably most difficult to hide it from England and Hungary," the brunette said. He
allowed himself a small smile. "And you, of course."

"But, why didn't you just tell me?"

Pain. Hurt. Betrayal. All of these things Austria sensed coming from the Swiss. The musician's
brows furrowed in confusion—he'd rarely heard those things from the man, if ever. Staring into
those emerald eyes only confirmed what he thought he heard. The green orbs were hard and
unblinking—to anyone else it would have looked like he was furious, but the Austrian had known
him long enough to see past it. He inhaled slowly, hoping the tight pain in his chest was just from
his sickness. The brunette began to get irritated, from the pain and because Switzerland didn't
understand how hard it was for him. Mauve eyes narrowed slightly. "If you were in my position,
would I had been the first you'd tell?"

The Swiss flushed, his eyes widening. "Th-That's not the point!"

"That's exactly the point." Austria tilted his head to one side curiously, deciding to push the subject
further. "Seriously, though, put yourself in my shoes. What would you do? Go around asking every
country to help you out? Or keep it to yourself until you've found a cure for your people?"

The blonde's mouth opened as if he were going to answer, but was at a loss for words. He just sat
there, gaping, racking his mind for an answer that wouldn't have him agree with the Austrian.

The aristocrat sipped his hot chocolate, staring over the rims of his glasses at the Swiss
triumphantly. The shorter man may win most of the time on the battlefield, but when it came to
disputes Austria was the verbal king. He could twist words in such a way that eventually anyone
who was arguing with him would just quit and give in. He used to banter with Prussia and France a
lot just for fun. Even though he was getting increasingly annoyed, he had the blonde in a corner
now and was eager to see how he'd continue.

"But still," Switzerland went on slowly. "You make make it sound like you don't trust me."
"The only people I have ever trusted are no longer close to me or they've resented me for the last couple centuries. So I apologize for not running into your arms at the sign of a cough."

"You know that's not what I meant! Austria, I—!"

A hand shot out and covered the blonde's mouth. Before he knew it, the Austrian was right in his face, their noses almost touching. Violet eyes bore into his intensely.

"Shh . . . that's not the name I want to hear coming from your lips," the brunette whispered, his expression softening. His hand uncovered Switzerland's mouth slowly, fingers gently tracing over his pink lips.

What is he doing? The Swiss had no idea how the musician could go from being angry at him to acting . . . strange. His bottom lip trembled against his will, a deep red seeping into his cheeks. "Um. Aus—"

"No." The man poked his nose with a small grimace.

"Roderich?"

Austria hummed happily and pulled away, leaning back against the couch. "Good. You'll be sure to call me that while we're in Salzburg. It would be a little difficult to explain why you're running around calling me 'Austria'."

Switzerland nodded shakily. Obviously. He wasn't a dunce. He inwardly cursed himself for following the brunette's order without so much as a protest, though, staring down at his hands in his lap. They were currently strangling each other out of frustration—at the man sitting next to him and at his damn emotions. Fucking blush . . .

"Plus, I get to call you Vash while we're there and you can't complain," the Austrian taunted.

He gave him a blinding smile, handing the blonde his hot chocolate—which was now cooled to a much more tolerable temperature. Switzerland took the warm drink from the musician, suddenly feeling really tired. It was an understatement to say that he wasn't looking forward to the rest of the day. Not only did he feel incredibly uncomfortable around Austria now more than ever, but his mind was reeling from all the new information he'd found about the country. His head hurt, his cheeks still burned, his stomach was beginning to go topsy-turvy, his chest was constricted . . .

He just wanted off the damn train.

Chapter End Notes

Warum haben Sie sich – Why did you
Wie kannst du es wagen - How dare you
Ja, Mutter - Yes, mother
Danke schön! – Thank you!
Bitte schön – You're welcome
Schweiz - Switzerland

300kph is about 186mph, which is super fast!

To address an issue here, there is a reason I made Switzerland afraid of trains that may
or may not be explained later. I've gotten several concerns that it wouldn't make sense since train travel is very common in Europe, which...yes, it is. However there is a reason for his trepidation, and a bit of an implication of something else.

Anyhoo, everyone's afraid of something and this is just my little design, so don't pay it too much mind!
Greetings & Feathers

Chapter Summary

The trio arrive in Salzburg and meet up with some of Austria's close friends as they prepare for the concert, and Austria gets into some trouble.

Chapter Notes

Reference to death/suicide warning for those of you who are sensitive to that sort of thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Salzburg was a quaint place settled comfortably in between two mountains, the Kapuzinerberg and the Mönchsberg. Old fashioned shops lined cobblestone streets; and colorful townhouses, castles, and palaces in the distance reflected a bright menagerie of colors in the morning light. The river Salzach majestically curved its way through the center of town, glittering the sunlight off of bridges, painted windows, and iron signs hanging on storefronts. People busied themselves up and down the sidewalks and markets, quite a crowd despite the chilly weather.

Liechtenstein padded along the sidewalk in a daze, trying to take it all in. She hadn't been to Salzburg very often—on account of living with Switzerland, who almost never went anywhere unless he had to—so she hadn't had much chance to explore the large, musically inclined city. She wasn't going to forget this small chance of freedom.

"Oh, isn't it wonderful, big brother?" she said happily, spinning around under an apple blossom tree as it shed the last of its flowers and leaves. She gazed down the street hill at the Salzach's banks, her eyes glittering. "This place is so beautiful!"

"It's just a city," Switzerland said, stuffing his gloved hands into his coat pockets. Despite his brush off, he couldn't help the appreciative feeling filling him as the familiarity from the worn cobblestone seeped into him. He'd visited this city many times, even lived there at one point, and knew it as well as one of his own.

Liechtenstein heard the Austrian man chuckle quietly behind her. "Well, I'm glad you seem to like it, Lilli. It actually hasn't changed too much over the past centuries, except maybe for the fact that it got a bit bigger," he teased.

"Really? When was it founded?" Liechtenstein asked, slowing her pace so they could catch up to her. She couldn't quite recall the date, as it had been ages before her birth, and Salzburg still had a beautifully rustic air to it despite all of the modern additions.

Austria paused for a moment, looking thoughtful. After a few minutes of silence, both blondes looked up at him curiously. "Ah." The brunette rubbed at his arm sheepishly, staring up at the apple blossoms. "I believe it was 935."
"696." Switzerland corrected, his eyes narrowing up at the man in concern.

"Well, ja. Close enough." Austria waved his hand dismissively and walked past the two quickly so they couldn't see his expression of terror. *It's happening again,* he thought, panicked. *I can't believe it. I should have known that instantly!* He smoothed out his gray scarf nervously, feeling a cough building up in his chest.

Somehow managing to contain it, he felt something grip his hand and yank him to a halt. A gust of wind hit him as a white van zoomed through the crosswalk.

"Look both ways, idiot!" Switzerland hissed at him, swiftly pulling him to the other side of the street. "That van nearly creamed you!"

"I'm fine." His tone made the Swiss look up at him. Austria's eyes were wide and his other hand had a hold of his collar tightly. Switzerland could feel the man trembling in his palm. Those violet irises lowered to look somewhat wistfully down at the cool gray sidewalk. "Ja, klar. I'm fine."

The blonde man's gaze softened as he felt his sister saunter up next to him, a small hand resting on his arm. He glanced down at her before pulling the Austrian along the sidewalk again. "Well, just be more careful next time," he chastised quietly. "Now, where's this shop you were talking about?"

"Just up ahead a little ways," Austria said, regaining a bit of composure. He realized that he was being steadily pulled along by his hand as they started walking again, and looked down at the blonde man beside him. He let a small smile slip. "Aww, Switzey."

A light pink filled the blonde's cheeks and he stared up at him in annoyance. "What?"

Austria leaned down close to his ear, whispering like he was telling a secret. "You're holding my hand."

Hot breath trickled across his skin, sending a jolt through him along with the words. Switzerland immediately withdrew his hand from the Austrian's, completely mortified. The brunette caught it again before it could escape back to a pocket and twined his fingers with the blonde's, causing his blush to increase. He smiled wider as the Swiss man tried to hide his face under his scarf, chuckling. "Don't worry, I don't mind."

"I didn't mean to hold your hand, you twit," Switzerland mumbled begrudgingly from behind the green wool fabric, his eyes staring intently at his boots.

"May I hold your hand, too, big brother?" Liechtenstein asked sweetly, holding onto his arm still. He glanced over at her. Her eyes were wide and sparkling expectantly with their usual jade shine, her cheeks tinged with a light rose color from the cold.

*Holding hands is so wimpy, but . . . Dammit, she's really cute!* Switzerland quickly looked back down at his feet, slowly holding his other hand open. "Fine," he muttered, his blush increasing under his scarf. *And it's not like we haven't done it before.*

"Danke," she said cheerfully, her small hand snaking into his right one. Her other hand still rested on his arm as she leaned her head against it in contentment.

The Swiss man heard Austria chuckle again and his grip tightened slightly on both of their hands, completely worn out already from the overstimulation of emotions running through him. *What am I going to do with you two . . .*"

"I'm curious to that as well," Austria hummed, smiling down at him. Switzerland froze as he
realized he'd spoken aloud. He ducked his head in embarrassment as his sister giggled with the Austrian.

They walked a little ways more down the street, coming to the edge of the Salzach before turning and crossing the street to their left. Passing a couple more shops and homes, Austria slowed their pace, catching the blondes' attention and they turned to him from staring at the river. He gestured to a shop as they came to a stop in front of it. "Ah, here we are," he said, letting go of the relieved man to open the door for them as he ushered the two inside.

The shop looked much larger on the inside than it did out, extending from the door at least a good 40ft or so. Several mahogany chairs with plush blue designed cushions sat off to their left and a matching carved wooden desk sat to the right. Directly in front of them was a large, black pedestal with two mannequins on it. The clothes on them were a matching pair of a navy silk suit with a white tie and a white, sweetheart dress with dark blue lace. A full sized mirror was placed next to it, strategically reflecting the morning light coming through the windows onto the sequined clothes.

"Willkommen auf der Silber-Spule!"

A joyful voice made the Swiss and his sister look up as a woman stepped out from behind the mirror, a hearty smile planted on her round face. She had light brown hair that was done up in a messy bun, odd silver rods stuck through it, and her hazel eyes gleamed at them from behind small half-lensed glasses, the dark frames hooked to beads going around her neck. She had a long red skirt on with a belt and a white pillow blouse, with a leather corset that helped show off her chest. The woman looked to be a few centuries out of time, contrasting to her modern displayed fashion. Austria gave a genuine smile, easily slipping into German to greet her. "Hello, Gretta. Always nice to see you."

The woman gasped and ran at him. Switzerland tensed as she reached for something on her belt, prepared to defend the aristocrat from whatever she was about to do, but just stared dumbly as she whipped out a measuring tape and quickly wrapped it around the Austrian's waist. She tsked softly after a moment, shaking her head, and pulling away. She glared up at the man with her hands on her hips. "Roderich, you've gotten skinnier. This messes up my whole day!"

"Ah, yes . . ." Austria coughed nervously, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "Well, I haven't been feeling well for awhile now."

Her hazel eyes weighed heavy for a moment, and a look of understanding passed through them. Her gaze never lost its impatience, though. "Still, that means that I'll have to hem your pants faster than lightning if you're to make it to your concert." Her eyes flicked down to the pair of blondes standing silently beside him, widening slightly. "So this is Switzerland and Liechtenstein."

The Swiss blinked in surprise, snapping his gaze up to glare at the Austrian. "How does she know about us?" he hissed.

"She's a familiar," the brunette replied calmly. "She knows what we are and is sworn to secrecy, so there's no need to worry."

"Wow, he does have a quick temper," Gretta murmured.

Switzerland stiffened, gritting his teeth together in agitation. He sighed in defeat and glanced over as his sister stepped from beside him towards the woman.

"It's so nice to meet you, Miss Gretta," the tiny country said in German, bowing lightly to the
Gretta managed a blush at being called 'miss'—calmly correcting the girl to *Frau*—and was just about to return the greeting when she was cut off by an airy squeal.

"She's so cute!"

Liechtenstein squeaked in surprise as a girl flew out of the darkness of the shop at her, crushing her with a massive hug as she simply picked the little blonde up and spun her around.

Switzerland stared, gaping like a fish at the woman. She was a bit shorter than Gretta and had much smaller breasts—which she was currently smushing his sister against—but was wearing the same outfit as her except the skirt was purple. Her hair was tied back into a tight ponytail, bright blonde curls sprouting from the back of her head, and her blue eyes were about as innocent as Liechtenstein's.

"She's so cute, Roddy, just like you said!" the eccentric woman purred, continuing to spin with the girl. "I call working on her!"

"Lettie," Gretta warned. "You're smothering the poor lady."

"Oh, sorry," the woman said, instantly setting the girl down. Liechtenstein tottered for a second, but sent a dizzy smile up at the blonde.

Switzerland grimaced and laid a hand on his sister's shoulder to help steady her. 'Roddy'? he thought. He glanced over to the woman, catching her attention.

"And him! He's just as a-dor-a-ble! Are you two twins?" Lettie declared in a sing-song manner.

"Oof!" Switzerland gasped, unable to remove himself from her grip. He felt her stop grip loosen as strong hands settled on his shoulders, easily freeing him from the girl's grasp. His face burned from his distress and it didn't help when he turned around and saw Austria's eyes twinkling at him mischievously as the man set him down. "Idiot!" he said in English, smacking the brunette's hands away from him. "Is this how all of your familiars act?"

"No," Austria said, patting the blonde's disheveled hair—much to the discomfort of the Swiss. "Lettie is not a familiar so you'll have to use your real name . . . Vash."

Switzerland turned away from him, smoothing down his hair as he glanced at Liechtenstein. She covered her mouth quickly to hide her smile and looked away.

"Sorry, big brother," she mumbled, struggling to stifle her giggles.

"It's fine." He sighed and turned to the two women in front of them, particularly Lettie. "You may call me Vash, and this is my little sister, Lilli."

Austria cleared his throat and turned to Gretta, giving her a small smile. "Well, I'll leave you to it then," he said, bowing slightly before heading for the door.

"Where the hell are you going?" Switzerland called to him, annoyed and confused.

The Austrian opened the door and grinned back at him. "Oh don't worry, I'll be back in a few
hours."

"What?"

"Bye." Austria did a little wave before disappearing outside.

Switzerland growled, his fists clenching as he stalked towards the door. "That ass—"

His insult and pursuit were cut off when Gretta caught his wrist tightly, beginning to drag him farther into the tailor shop. She glanced down at the watch she wore as she pulled on the protesting Swiss, tsking again. "It's already noon," she said distastefully, pulling him through a hidden door in the back of the room. "We'll have to get working quickly if you two are to look respectable tonight. You'll need to undress quickly."

"Wait, what?" Switzerland's eyes narrowed at the woman as she practically lifted him up onto another black pedestal, noticing the mirrors lining the back and side walls. He spotted his sister being taken in by the other woman and set upon a pedestal next to his. His face paled and he whipped around to face the busty woman. "I'm not getting undressed in front of my sister!"

"Why not? You two are related, aren't you?" Lettie piped up, oblivious to the harsh glare he sent her way.

"Ah, could you please put up a curtain, Miss Lettie?" Liechtenstein asked, her green eyes staring level at the woman since they were now about the same height thanks to the pedestal. A blush tinted her fair cheeks.

The blonde woman's eyes widened and she ran to the back of the room where a standing divider sat. "Of course, little one!" she cooed happily, pulling the curtain between the girl and her brother.

"Thank you!" Liechtenstein said gratefully, beginning to unbutton her coat while glad that all her brother could see of her was a silhouette—and vice versa.

Switzerland sighed, pleased that his sister used her cuteness to convince the woman. He began taking off his outer wear quickly, handing them to Gretta—who went and sat them on a nearby chair—before unbuttoning the top of his uniform.

"So that's what the Swiss soldiers are wearing these days." Gretta sniffed, taking the green fabric from him.

Switzerland frowned, his face heating up against his will as he stripped off his pants. "No, there are many different uniforms," he said slowly. "Just my sister and I wear these." He handed the pants to her, leaving his underwear on.

Lettie poked her head around the divider, her eyes widened with horror. "I can't believe you make your cute little sister wear such ghastly clothes!"

"Hey! What are you calling 'ghastly'?" the Swiss snapped, quite offended by the comment.

"She should be wearing things more appropriate for her age and GENDER," the woman explained gruffly, disappearing back on the other side. "She should be wearing things like pretty dresses and jewelry, not a military uniform."

"She wears dresses all the time at home! It's not like I don't know she's a girl."

"That still doesn't excuse the fact that she's wearing this thing!"
"I don't mind," Liechtenstein commented quietly. Lettie turned back to her, relieving the uniform from the girls' arms. She rubbed her arms as she felt the room chill her exposed skin. "I like dressing up with big brother. Plus, he bought me this ribbon so people wouldn't mistake me for a boy." She twirled the purple string in her fingers. "Isn't it pretty?"

Lettie's lips puckered and she squeezed her eyes shut, spinning around in glee. "Oh, mother I can't take it anymore! I just want to EAT. HER. UP!"

"Please refrain from eating my sister, thank you," Switzerland muttered. His eyebrows raised a bit as he stretched out his arms, allowing the brunette woman behind him to use her measuring tape. "Mother?"

Gretta walked around in front of him, lining up his torso with the tape. Her hazel eyes glanced up at him above her glasses. "Ja, I'm Lettie's mother. What about it?"

"It's just..." The blonde's brow furrowed in speculation. "You don't look it at all."

Gretta flashed him an award winning smile before ducking and tying her tape around his waist. "Why thank you, Vash. How sweet of you. Hmm... maybe you're not as bad as I thought."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He heard Liechtenstein giggle from the other side of the curtain, making him blush again.

"Well..." The Austrian woman thought carefully for a moment, trying to find a nice way to word what she wanted to say. "Everytime I worked on Roderich, he always told me these stories about you and from them I just figured—" She caught his shocked and slightly hurt look and hurried to finish speaking, lifting her hands defensively. "Don't worry, deary, he always spoke highly of you. It's when he talked about how you guys are nowadays that made me think you were kind of, well, you know..."

Switzerland was speechless, lost among his thoughts. He talked about me? he wondered inwardly. But... why? His chest gave a small squeeze involuntarily and he couldn't think of anything to say back to the woman.

Lettie poked her head around again, spotting the man's sullen look. She cleared her throat rather loudly, snapping the Swiss back to reality before going back behind the divider. "By the way," she called out to him, sounding unusually upbeat for the moment. "I've been wondering, Vash. Are you and Roddy dating?"

Switzerland's mouth dropped open, his eyes nearly flying out of his skull. His heart was acting painful again, fluttering like hummingbird wings against his ribcage. His arms waved about in a panic as he sputtered. "W-What? W-Why on Earth would you s-say such a thing?"

Gretta grabbed his arms and made him stand still again as she measured his wrists, smirking at his flustered expression. "Because of how you two were acting earlier, and you guys were kind of holding hands. So... you're not dating?" Lettie asked, sounding like she was pouting.

"No!"

"Then what is your relationship with him?"

Switzerland froze in his discomfort, trying to come up with a logical answer. Were they friends? Or was it something different? Hungary said that the Austrian still thought of him as a friend, but... They weren't enemies—both of them are neutral for pity's sake—but he didn't feel that they were
quite at that 'friend' stage. Yet again . . . The blonde's hand drifted up to clutch at his chest. It was still aching from earlier and his heart began to ping again as he thought of Austria holding his hand. And of how he acted on the train, this morning in the kitchen, last night in the bathroom and when he carried him to bed . . . Switzerland's cheeks reddened as he remembered the brunette's arms around him and . . . kissing his forehead . . .

"Big brother, are you alright?" Liechtenstein questioned softly, switching to their native Swiss-German.

"I'm fine, Lilli," he replied in the same language. He managed to calm himself down and clear his thoughts. He removed his hand from his chest as he tried to ignore Gretta's curious stare as she pulled her tape from around his neck. He cast his gaze at the ground before he went back to German to finally answer Lettie's question. "Our relationship is pretty . . . complicated."

Lettie hummed in acknowledgement. "How so?" she mused.

"About as complicated as our country's relationship with Switzerland, dear," Gretta said calmly. She gave the Swiss man a wink.

"Yeah, just like that," he murmured, giving her a shaky smile.

Lettie grinned happily, twirling her measuring tape in her fingers as she skipped around Liechtenstein. "Well, in that case you two need to work on being closer because Switzerland secretly loves Austria and everyone knows it!"

"I do not!" Switzerland stopped himself, quickly realizing what he said. "I-I mean that, um, we do NOT need to work on our relationship. Everything's just fine. Be-Besides, I think that Switzerland's relationship with A-Austria is pretty stable at the moment and-and shouldn't change!"

"Brother . . ."

"Ah, but that's where you, my poor Vash, are wrong," Lettie sang. She hooked her tape back on her belt and walked back to a closet door off to the side. She opened it and pulled out some folded clothes before walking it past the divider towards her mother. Handing the garment to the woman, she smiled innocently at the man on the pedestal. For some reason, he felt like he was being judged.

"And how am I wrong?" he asked slowly, not sure if he really wanted to know. The conversation already seemed to be taking a turn for the worst, in his opinion.

Lettie tapped her chin playfully, pretending to think it over. "Well, don't most Swiss come vacation here, especially in the winter? Also, the Swiss tend to marry mostly either within themselves or an Austrian." The blonde woman headed back over to the closet and pulled out a long, thin white silk dress, handing it to Liechtenstein to put on. "Not to mention that recent statistics say that Austria is number one on the Swiss popularity list, beating out it's beloved Liechtenstein."

"Is that true?" The little blonde country in question peeped around the curtain, her green eyes big and shining from the lights above them.

"Of course it's not true!" Switzerland swiftly put on the robe Gretta handed him before stepping off the pedestal. "Look, Lilli, I—!"

"It's ok, big brother," Liechtenstein said. She moved forward to give her stunned brother a small hug. "As long as you're happy, I'm happy." She hid her knowing grin in his chest.
"Ah, sibling love is so sweet!" Gretta had to hold Lettie back from running and joining in on the hug. "They're too cute!"

Switzerland let a tiny smile cross his lips and gave his sister a squeeze before letting her go. He was incredibly thankful that she wasn't too inquisitive and she knew when he needed comforting. Ready to drop the previous subject and continue on with the tailors, he sighed and turned to Gretta expectantly.

"So, what's next?"

...xXx...

A cool feather brushed against the side of his hand and the man looked down, smiling at the inquisitive stare of a pigeon. Austria blinked at the black, beady eyes and was met with a small hooo . . . The bird settles down next to his arm—completely unafraid of the personified country—and gazed out at the sparkling water beneath them.

"Thank you for keeping me company," the Austrian murmured, turning back to the scenery as well.

He never got to spend much time around animals anymore. Domesticated pets or wildlife held little fear of them, unlike normal humans, but that's not to say they weren't wary. The countries and the animals within them held respect for each other and whenever they came in contact the two usually coincide or go their separate ways. A couple more pigeons began to gather at his feet as he leaned against the bridge railing.

Austria inhaled deeply, relieved that the ache within him had subsided. He observed passersby in silence, the only sound around him the noises of the city and small hooos. He felt a certain sadness grip him as he returned his gaze to the Salzach.

I'm going to miss this place, he mused. So many memories have occurred here. Thoughts flooded him of battles, parties, music, dancing, deaths . . .

Austria shook himself in an attempt to stop his mind from going down that road but the river seemed to mock him. The tranquil waves lulled him in reluctantly and images began to flash across his vision.

Why is it no one could see how hard he was working? He barely slept anymore, struggling to get this city—and this country—standing on its own. No one appreciated the things he did. No one noticed his contributions.

He stared down at the black river, ominous and deadly looking. The night was new—not even the moon wanted to look upon him. His violets weighed heavy. He couldn't take it anymore.

Lifting his foot up, he pushed off of the railing. Purple orbs closed slowly as he broke through the waves. The cold water seeped into his thick clothes and instantly chilled his skin. The weight of the soaked material dragged him down deeper into the darkness and he felt suspended.

His body began to thrash violently but he refused to return to the surface. His hands grasped at his neck and his lungs heaved desperately for air, a mirage of bubbles escaped explosively out of his mouth. Chest squeezing, lungs spasming, throat constricting . . . everything suddenly stopped. The instinctive fear that passed through him faded quickly and an immense calm washed over him along with a wicked sense of glee.

He was thankful for the release.
Even if it was only for a little while.

Another brush of a feather made Austria lift his head up from his arms. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes, removing the painful images from sight. He remembered that a woman had seen him jump and reported it to the authorities. They'd managed to fish him out but pronounced him dead and sent him to the morgue. And, oh, how he'd scared the living hell out of the mortician when he'd woken up. He still chuckled sometimes to this day at the man's baffled expression.

Well, he didn't want to think about that dark time anymore. Hungary had nearly killed him again, to say the least.

Smiling down at the bird beside him, he reached out a tentative finger and petted the top of its head. He enjoyed the little hooos and the soft down, amazed the pigeon was actually letting him do this.

Austria whipped his head around at a small scream. The pigeon let out a squawk of surprise and flapped its wings before taking off from the railing, the ones around his feet doing the same. He didn't spot anything at first but stepped away from the rail in search of the source. Oddly enough there wasn't anybody that close to him that could have made the noise.

Another shriek sent him running through a nearby alley, his heart speeding up. It sounded like a child yelling for help, making the man glance around desperately for the kid. He rounded a corner into another alleyway and stopped short.

A little boy about the age of 5 with brown locks of hair and blue eyes struggled in the grip of a hooded man. The man was a bit taller than the Austrian and much more muscular. A red bandana of sorts covered most of his face so all the musician could see were piercing gray irises. He was trying to drag the frightened child with him.

Austria gritted his teeth in annoyance—it seems not even this city was without crime. He shot forward with superhuman speed and latched onto the hoodlum's arm, who yelped in shock when the aristocrat yanked him backwards. The Austrian twisted his arm around and slammed him face-first into the alley wall, holding onto to him tightly and digging the man's own wrist into his back. "What the fu—!" The crook cut off his words in a long, guttural noise as the Austrian gripped his thumb and wrenched in unnaturally to the side—not quite to the breaking point, though.

"What do you think you were doing?" Austrian asked coolly, pushing up his glasses. His mauve eyes met silver and he felt the man flinch.

"Let me go, I didn't do anything!" the man shouted.

"You were about to."

"And so what if I was, huh?" Gray orbs rolled angrily and he gave another sharp tug to get free. "What business is it of yours, dammit?"

"It's my business because that's my son." The man's eyes widened. Technically it wasn't a lie—all of his people were considered his children, even this man—but he thought it was the best approach. Tightening his hold on the trapped man, Austria pulled out his cell phone. "Now, you're going to listen very carefully," he stated, keeping eye contact with the struggling hoodlum. "I'm going to let you go and we can forget all about this. Although, if you try anything, not only will I break your arm but I will pin you against this wall again until the cops come. Your choice." He released the crook's arm slowly, stepping back to block the boy from him. He began to dial on his phone, glancing up at the man as he put it to his ear. "I would go now if I were you."
The man stopped rubbing his shoulder and took off down the alleyway, cradling his wrist. He glared back for a split-second with those fierce silver eyes. "You haven't seen the last of me!" he shouted before he spun back and disappeared around a corner.

Austria sighed and put away his phone—the device had been a bluff because it was actually off throughout the entire confrontation. He turned and crouched down to face the frightened child. "Are you alright?" he asked gently. The boy kept his blue eyes on him, tears still in them. The Austrian reached out his hand. "It's ok, I won't hurt you."

"Th-Thanks, mister," the boy said in a small, shaky voice. His little hands were balled tightly against his chest.

The musician gave the kid a reassuring smile, hoping to calm him down. "You're quite welcome. What is your name?"

"H-Henry . . ."

"Henry, where is your mother?"

The brown haired boy buried his face in his hands as he began to wail, tears gushing out. "The b-bad man hit ma-mama really hard! She fell a-and didn't get back up!"

Austria's eyes narrowed, seldom felt anger beginning to rise in him. He was going to help the child find his mother. Standing up swiftly, he reached down and patted the soft brown hair comfortingly. Blue eyes peeked out up at him. "Don't worry, Henry. We'll find her."

"R-Really?" the 5-year old choked out, drying his eyes quickly.

The Austrian held out his gloved hand, another smile reaching him. "Yes, but you have to be brave, okay?"

Henry grabbed onto the aristocrat's hand with both of his as the man began to lead him out of the alley. "Okay."

"Do you remember where you were when the bad man took you?" he asked tentatively, hoping the little one might know.

"Um . . ." Henry looked around for a moment as they stopped on the sidewalk. He glanced up at him with those wide blue eyes. "We were playing in the Hans park."

"The Hans-Donnerberg?" The boy nodded and the Austrian sighed with relief. At least the park was within walking distance from here. From the river, he had ran all the way to Nonnberg-Gasse and they were very close to the famous abbey. It actually surprised him how on earth he had heard the boy at all from where he'd been. He would ponder over that later, though. He began to walk towards the park, keeping the child close to him.

It took them about ten minutes to get to the corner of the next street, Brunnhaus-Gasse, and they turned right. Coming up to the Nonntaler Main Street, they turned right again and walked for another 10-15 minutes. The two passed the time as the boy told him about his mother. She had blue eyes just like him and shoulder length black hair, wearing a brown coat and hat. The street changed to the Fürstenallee and he could start to see the park up ahead. Finally reaching it after couple more minutes, Henry began squirming impatiently beside him as they walked into the park.

"We were over there," the boy squeaked, pointing directly across from them toward a patch of trees.
Austria looked around for a moment and spotted an older woman sitting on a bench nearby. The child's grip tightened on him as the musician walked over to the patron. He greeted her politely and asked if she'd seen Henry's mother, giving her description. The woman thought for a moment before telling him that she'd seen an ambulance come and pick up a woman that looked like that. He grinned pleasantly and thanked her before walking back out to the street and hailing a cab, preferring not to walk again.

After he got Henry and himself situated, he told the driver to go to the nearest hospital, the Gert Pierer. That was more than likely where the boy's mother was being held.

"We're almost there," he said to the boy.

A happy smile broke out on Henry's face and he bounced in his seat. He couldn't sit still for the rest of the ride and as the cab stopped outside the hospital his nubbly fingers rushed to undo his seatbelt. "Wait for us here," Austria told the cabby as he followed the eager boy out of the car. He had to jog a little in order to catch up to him as the child reached the door.

The aristocrat opened to door and stepped in after Henry, walking right up to the nurses desk. "Excuse me, miss?" A girl with bright green eyes and brown hair wrapped tightly in a bun turned to look at him, her name tag reading 'Emily'. "Do you know where I can find a Gabriele Degnar?"

She looked at him for a moment, slowly comprehending what he said. Emily turned over to the computer and quickly typed on it for a moment before speaking. "Ms. Degnar was . . . just discharged but you may . . . still be able to catch her," she said carefully, overly pronouncing the German words and sounding a bit too formal.

Austria gave her the once over again, seeing a familiar spark in those green eyes. A curious smile crossed his lips and he gestured to her slightly. "You wouldn't happen to be English, would you?"

Emily blinked at him for a second. "Yes! Apologies, I'm still learning German," she said, a sheepish smile forming on her pink lips. "I'm just an intern here for a few months while I school nearby."

"Thought so."

"Ms. Degnar would be in room 308," she chirped, seeming happy that he spoke English.

"Thank you, Emily." He gave a little wave and a smile and pulled Henry away from the desk.

Checking the room numbers, they continued down the hallway, turning a couple corners. 304, 305, 306 . . . They arrived at 308 to see a woman standing next to a hospital bed, gathering up her coat and purse. She turned around when they entered, her sapphire eyes widening.

"MAMA!" Henry let go of Austria's hand and flung himself at the woman.

"Henry, my dear!" The woman's face melted into relief. She wrapped her arms around the boy, picking him up in a tight embrace. Her eyes glanced over at the aristocrat. "Thank you. Thank you so much from bringing him back to me."

The musician nodded. "It was no problem. I'm just glad we could find you."

Gabriele balanced Henry on her hip, kissing his forehead and brushing a piece of hair out of his face. "How did you find my baby?" she asked, walking over to the door where he was standing.

"I saw a man trying to drag him away, so I stopped it." Her eyes widened again and he looked at
her kindly. "And it was actually Henry who helped me find you, Ms. Degnar."

"Oh, please call me Gabriele." The woman grinned and stuck out her free hand to shake his. He motioned for her to move past him and they began walking down towards the exit. She tucked a strand of black hair behind her ear, glancing up at him shyly. "I don't know how I can ever repay you, um . . . ?"

"You don't have to repay me." Austria smirked at her as they came up to the lobby. He stopped and searched around for his wallet. "In fact, here, take this. There's a cab waiting outside to take you home."

"I can't possibly except this," Gabriele gasped as he handed her some euros.

Austria laughed a little as Henry grabbed onto the money. "I insist," he murmured, walking them outside to the car. He opened the door for them and the little boy let his mother place him inside the car. Gabriele turned back to him, looking apprehensive. He raised a hand to stop her oncoming words. "If you really want to make it up to me, then go home and relax. Rest that head of yours."

The brunette handed her a card with his number on it before turning and strolling back towards the hospital entrance. "And please, if anything else happens, or if you're ever in trouble again, just call."

Gabrielle tore her eyes away from the card, calling out to him desperately. "Wait! I don't even know your name!"

The Austrian glanced over his shoulder, allowing a small smile. He gave a final wave and vanished through the double doors.

Chapter End Notes

Ja - Yes
Ja, klar - Yes, of course
Danke - Thanks
Die Silberne Spule - The Silver Spool
Willkommen auf der Silber-Spule! - Welcome to the Silver Spool!
Frau - Woman, basically a married woman

Gretta and Lettie are so much fun to write, but I feel like I was picking on Switzey a bit too much. He can take it, though.

All OCs belong to me.
Music & Lace

Chapter Summary

The time for the concert has arrived! Austria confides in France, Liechtenstein is sweet on Iceland, and Switzerland can't catch a break.

Chapter Notes

There's lots of translations this chapter, mostly from French, and they will be posted below!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gretta looked up at the sound of a soft sound of a bell ringing from the front of the store and a heavy shuffle of feet. She looked over at the Swiss all suited up on the pedestal. "That must be Roderich," she said, walking over to the door. "Now don't you move."

Switzerland stayed put as she left the backroom. He snuck a glance at himself in the mirror for what seemed like the hundredth time, his eyes skeptical. He ran his hand over the front of himself consciously, down the various fabrics he adorned.

The three piece suit was made with fine craftsmanship, no doubt about that. Soft white, double pleated dress pants cut right to the tops of his feet. Plus, they fit perfectly so he didn't even need a belt. The bright green silk tie, cut out and sewn together by hand, tucked neatly into a fine form-fitting colorless vest, tawny buttons lining down the front on either side. The white under shirt he had on ended in crisp cufflinks with golden buttons on them, fitting his wrists just right. Yes, Gretta had done a beautiful job—and he hadn't even gotten to see his jacket yet. And yet . . .

I look silly, he thought, a frown pulling at the corner of his lips. No matter how often he'd dressed up he never felt like he deserved such expensive trifles. He stuffed a hand into one of his vest pockets and stepped down, deciding to sit on the pedestal instead. His legs and feet relaxed in relief, sore from standing so long. The clock on the wall said that it was about 7 o'clock which means he's been standing for around 6 hours, only taking breaks at lunch and a few others periodically. He stretched his arms above his head to straighten out his spine, a small moan escaping him as his bones popped.

Gretta came back suddenly, bursting through the door. "Lettie!" she called, racing around and grabbing her sewing kit.

"What is it?" the girl asked, walking around the divider.

"Do you think you could finish getting him ready? I have to—" Hazel eyes flicked down to his confused expression. "—tend to Roderich."

"What's going on?" Greta ignored his question and disappeared back out of the room. He stood up quickly to follow, concern starting to fill him, but stopped when he felt a hand on his shoulder.
"Don't worry," Lettie said, a cheerful smile on her lips. "Mother always gets frantic when she has to do things last minute. Now come on, let's see if your jacket fits."

Switzerland nodded reluctantly and tore his gaze away from the door. He decided to ignore his feelings, taking Lettie's explanation. His instincts told him otherwise. Something wasn't right.

"Here we go." Lettie appeared next to him again—he hadn't even noticed she'd left—holding a folded piece of white clothing.

Switzerland took the piece from her carefully, holding it by the shoulders and letting it drop open. His eyes widened. The jacket was exceptional; the skillful stitching barely noticeable against the pale fabric, which was so soft and smooth he couldn't even begin to guess the material. The collar traveled a ways down the front, lying perfectly flat and respectable. One side had two sets of gold buttons going down it and the other side held two sets of holes. It was a little longer than most suit jackets, cut and sewn a little tighter at the waist with an elastic band in the back. It had squared shoulders and well-placed vents. What caught his eye, though, were all of the ornate, black swirls curling up from the bottom and wrists of the jacket, never quite reaching the top or touching the collar. Reaching out, he brushed one of the lines gently, feeling fuzzy velvet beneath his fingertips.

It was exquisite.

And probably cost a small fortune.

"Come on, let's see if it fits," Lettie said eagerly, taking and holding out the jacket.

He turned his back to her and slid each of his arms in the silk interior, shrugging the rest of it on easily. The sleeves ended just short of where the buttons were on his cuffs and he adjusted the collar. Lettie walked around in front of him and began to close both sets of buttons. The feature reminded him of the comforts of the uniform he always wore.

Lettie was nodding happily to herself, checking the fit of the garment on him. "It looks great!" she cheered, clapping her hands together. She ushered him over to a chair nearby, pushing him down in it. She practically skipped back around the barrier and a loud rustling was heard.

Switzerland's eyes squinted in suspicion when the woman walked back over to him with her arms full. In one arm she held a pair of fancy leather ankle boots, a cloth, and a bottle of shoe shine. In the other was a thin comb and a mysterious looking orange spray can—the German words for 'fluff' and 'shine' catching his eye.

"What is that?" he asked cautiously, pointing at the foreboding object.

Lettie smiled, sweet and not-so-innocent. "Oh, don't worry. Here, put these on," she said, handing him the shoes.

He did as he was told, not bothering to argue. He'd found out pretty quickly throughout the hours of being poked and prodded at that it was pointless to try and banter with Lettie. Bending down and slipping on the smooth black heels, he laced them both up neatly and began to apply the polish.

"Alright, here we go." Switzerland paused at the comment, cautious of the woman for a moment before going back to polishing.

Shuuurrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr . . .

There was a quick, hushed giggle beside him—then all of a sudden there were fingers in his hair
and a cold, wet substance on his scalp. The Swiss sat up in surprise, his hands flying up to his hair to stop the invasion.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Putting mousse in your hair to smooth it back," Lettie cheered, smacking his hands away. "Now hold still. And don't wipe it on your pants!"

Switzerland groaned and stared at the sticky stuff on his hands as he let the woman have her way yet again. The sharp scent of the goo irritated his nose, smelling slightly of pomegranates. Pomegranates . . . The blonde's face flushed as he recalled his bath. Oh, the mousse—

"Do you have a towel?" he asked briskly, suddenly conscious of his blush.

"Yep, right over there." Lettie pointed with a wet finger to their right, pausing in her work.

He sighed, walking over to where a cloth sat on a table beside the door. Lettie moved to stand by the mirror, beckoning him over. He grabbed the towel and reluctantly went to stand in front of her again, the woman going back to rubbing the mousse in before combing through his locks meticulously. The Swiss stared at himself in the reflection as he dried his hands of the evil cream.

Why was she gelling his hair back? At least she wasn't using the mousse for the 'fluff' part, but smoothing it back very much in the same way Germany kept his hair? Not to mention that he really didn't feel at ease in the incredibly expensive looking suit and shoes.

He felt embarrassed.

"Ok, all done!" Lettie announced, flicking a few small hairs down in the front to give it some more style. She finished and relieved the towel from him for herself.

Switzerland reached up, tentatively touching his new hairdo. He was surprised to feel that it was completely dry, thinking that it would've been slick to the bone after all that she put in it. "How the —?"

"Ah, the miracle of haircare products," the happy woman stated. Lettie set down the cloth nearby and suddenly became serious, hands on her wide hips. Bright baby blues assessed him thoroughly for a moment. She must of spotted his worried expression because she was smiling again, patting his breast pocket gently. "Don't fret so much, you look great."

"I feel weird, though," he murmured, adjusting his jacket in the mirror.

She smiled again wholeheartedly, walking with him to the door. "You just wait out here for a bit while I finish getting your sister ready. Hopefully she hasn't fallen asleep standing up."

"Alright."

She giggled and opened the door, ushering him out into the front of the store. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, Roddy will love it."

The Swiss sputtered and turned his gaze away from her, hiding his burning cheeks. "Don't say such things!"

Lettie gave him a sly wink before closing the door and leaving him alone.

Switzerland stood there for a brief minute before wandering over towards a blue cushioned chair and sat down. He smoothed down his suit and settled back into the comfortable mahogany seat,
giving his legs a rest once more. He closed his tired eyes and allowed his anxious body to relax.

The lobby wasn't as warm as the dressing room, cool air seeping from the windows and under the door. He relished in it, feeling a sort of calmness washing over him. He was grateful for the momentary peace—considering ever since he'd woken this morning it had been nothing but utter chaos from the pills to the train ride to the fitting and measurements. Plus, as soon as his sister and Austria finished getting ready they would be bustling over to the theatre for the concert, pushing through the crowds and chatting with other countries. Then they'd have to go back to the hotel and wake up early the next morning, only to get on another train . . .

Well, there went his relaxing atmosphere.

Huffing in frustration, Vash forced his thoughts away and collected himself. He focused on the sounds outside of the windows instead. Motorists driving by and the relative hum of the city soothed him down again. Since countries' hearing were a bit more acute than normal humans, he heard several people chatting as they walked past the shop. He could tell by there higher pitched voices that they were girls, exclaiming about some movie they'd just seen. Another vehicle drove by after they left. The rumbling should of only lasted a moment, but instead the engine seemed to idle right outside the shop door.

Green eyes opened slowly as he turned to stare towards the colored glass. Yep, there were definitely headlights outside. Curious, he stood up and moved over to get a better look. Maybe someone was getting picked up, or dropped off. But it didn't seem that way; it seemed as if it was just sitting there. The vehicle was a strange white, windowless van. He couldn't see into the driver's side due to the tinted glass—wait.

A white van. Similar to the one from earlier that had nearly hit Austria in the crosswalk.

Suspicion immediately rose up in him and he went to the door, the van speeding away as soon as he swung it open. The frigid wind hit him as he rushed out onto the sidewalk, only able to catch a fleeting glimpse of tail lights disappearing around a corner.

Cursing under his breath, Switzerland hurried back into the tailors before the door shut on him. He closed it quickly and shook himself off in a desperate attempt to rid him of the chilled air. *I wonder who those people were*, he thought.

"What are you doing?"

The Swiss froze again, but not from the cold. Green irises skirted across the floor and stopped at a shoe. He closed his eyes with a sigh and adjusted his jacket collar. "I was just checking to see how cold it is outside." _No sense in telling him about the van._

"Oh. Well, it is pretty wintry out. Despite it being a bit early in the season."

"You don't say," the blonde muttered. It was silent for a while before a reply came.

"Vash."

Switzerland finally lifted his gaze to the man, eyes widening. For some reason he let out a breath of relief—the way Gretta had acted earlier made him think something was wrong.

But no, Austria was completely fine. Dressed up in black single pleated pants, dress shoes, and a three piece suit, they looked similar. Instead of having double columns of buttons going down the vest, though, he just had a single one with golden buttons with matching cufflinks. A violet tie sat neatly tucked into the vest; not too dark, not too bright and gaudy either—a regular tie, if you can
believe it. Even as the brunette leaned up against the reception counter next to a bag, resting his head in his hand, everything looked crisp and pressed with equal astounding craftsmanship used on the blonde's own suit.

It was the color of the clothing that caught his attention, though. Obsidian. So bleak and pure, like ink. His entire suit was the kind of black that makes you envious. The color definitely stood out against his pale skin, making it seem as if he was glowing slightly.

Yes. The Austrian looked completely fine.

Fine indeed.

Switzerland smacked his cheek at the thought. What the hell was that? He was just about to hit himself again but was stopped by the Austrian.

The aristocrat held his hand firmly. "So you think I'm 'fine', do you?" he purred, giving him a foxy grin.

"W-What? No I don't!" The Swiss couldn't help his blush. "I can't believe I actually said that aloud!"

"Mmm."

"Don't 'mmm' me, idiot!"

The musician kept smiling, his glasses flashing as he tilted his head to the side. "Well, if you ask me," he murmured, "I think that out of the two of us you look the best. You look . . ." He reached out to smooth down a soft blonde hair. "Absolutely lovely."

"Men aren't supposed to look lovely!" the blonde hissed, cheeks flaming from the compliment. Lettie was right! "And nobody asked you, y-you twit!"

The Austrian pushed off the counter and released his hand, still smirking.

Gretta appeared not a second later from a door behind him, brandishing another piece of ebony clothing. Her hazel eyes flicked to him for a moment, appraising him. She pointed at his hair, smiling. "Lettie had a bit of fun, didn't she?"

"You have no idea," he grumbled, forcing himself to calm down.

She gave a hearty chuckle. "You look handsome, Vash," she said kindly before turning to the musician. The woman held out the bundle of cloth. "You forgot your jacket."

"Oh, thank you," Austria murmured, taking it from her carefully.

He let it drop open, swinging the jacket around behind him with a flourish and slipping his arms through. The jacket was about as long as his usual blue one, maybe a little longer considering the back of it hung around his ankles. The interior was a bright white, looking to be made of silk. The outside, however, was the same black as the rest of the outfit—save for one part. Elegant white swirls curled up from the bottom and at the ends of the sleeves, the blonde guessing they were made of velvet by their fuzzy appearance. The Austrian easily did up the golden column of buttons, making sure everything fit snugly.

He caught the Swiss staring and quirked an eyebrow, asking, "What's the matter?"

"We match, you idiot," Switzerland replied. He waved an arm at him, huffing in exasperation. "Did
"Of course," the brunette said, pushing up his glasses. He handed the neutral country a pair of black gloves from the bag on the counter, taking a white pair for himself. Slipping them on, he glanced to his right, his eyes lighting up. Switzerland followed his gaze. "Though, it isn't just the two of us that match."

Liechtenstein stepped out of the dressing room and walked towards them.

The dress she wore was stunning. Shimmering pale fabric draped itself around her thin frame in a wide skirt, hooking upwards in several spots like a curtain. White satin ran up her torso to a lavish, jade colored ribbon sleeves in a shoulder-less fashion. A plum colored bow tied itself tightly around her waist, matching the headband pushing back her blonde bangs. The ribbon that the Swiss had bought her was tied to the band on the same side she always kept it. And, like the men standing before her, soft swirls made their way up from the bottom of her dress. The lines started off as violet before fading into a grassy green and then back again, twisting fancily up to her waist. Glossy pearls dangled from her earlobes and around her graceful neck. Strawberry balm painted her lips, accompanied by a cool gray eye shadow. Elbow-length, colorless silk gloves adorned her delicate hands—which were gripping each other nervously.

Her small white heels stopped clicking as she stood a few feet away from them. She spun around a bit, swishing her skirt anxiously. "Well?" she asked quietly. "How do I look?"

"You look marvelous," Austria said happily, walking over to her. "Positively radiant—the dress suits you perfectly!"

"Really?" Liechtenstein's eyes brightened and her cheeks were rosy. "Thank you, Mr. Austria."

"Don't just stand there gaping like a fish!" Lettie appeared next to the Swiss, squeezing his shoulder. She gestured towards the smaller blonde. "Give the girl a compliment!"

Switzerland cleared his throat, not used to this kind of thing. He really couldn't think of anything adequate to say, flustered. He cast his gaze downward. "You . . . You look lovely."

His little sister gasped, a sentimental smile crossing her berry lips. "Thank you, big brother," she said gratefully, bowing slightly. "Thank you both so much."

"Yeah, you're welcome," the Swiss said, rubbing his arm awkwardly. He glanced up to meet the smiling Austrian's eyes.

The brunette chuckled as he walked back over to the blonde. Violets looked him up and down knowingly. "Lovely indeed." He turned away from the blushing blonde to face Gretta. He reached out to grab a hold of her hands gratefully. "Thank you for doing this, Gretta. I'm sorry it was such last minute."

"Of course, dear."

"Vash." The blonde perked up, catching the set of keys thrown at him reflexively. "I want you to go start up the car outside, ok?"

"Oh, okay," the Swiss said. He gestured for his sister to follow him, glancing at the Austrian again. "Alright, Lilli, put on your coat."

"Okay."
"Lettie," Gretta called, catching the girl's attention. She tilted her head towards the back room. The girl got the signal immediately and walked into the other room. The two blonde countries bundled themselves up carefully and headed out into the chilled city. Only the two of them were left now.

Austria let go of the woman's hand to get something out of his pocket. He pulled out a piece of colored paper and a pen, leaning on the counter to write. "Here, I want you to take this," he said, continuing to scribble quickly. When he finished, he handed it to her quickly, putting his pen away.

"What is this for?" Gretta's eyes widened as she stared at the check in her hands. She looked back up at him in surprise. "Roderich—!

"Please, take it." He smiled.

"But, this is way more than what I've charged you!" she protested, staring down at the number scrawled on the paper.

"I want you to take—"

"But—!"

"Listen." He placed his hands on her shoulders, staring into her green-brown eyes sincerely. "Something serious is happening, trust me on that. My government is holding out as best they can, but people are going to end up in a panic soon enough. I want you to take the money, take Lettie, and leave."

Gretta gasped. "What?"

"I'm serious," he said quietly.

Her eyes began to water, something the Austrian had never seen before from the strong woman. "I- I can't just leave the shop. Lettie still has to finish her classes and . . . and Vladimir . . ."

"Don't worry about that. I'll handle it all."

"Where would we go?" she asked desperately.

The brunette smiled ruefully. "I guess you could got to Switzerland. You'll be safe there."

Gretta allowed herself a strained chuckle, not a single tear falling. "So the country really is in the middle of a crisis. I guess there's no helping it, huh?" She sighed, gripping the check tightly. She hugged the musician tightly, cautious of the man's back. "I'll leave as soon as I can."

"Thank you," he whispered, returning the hug before pulling back. He kissed her cheek tenderly before turning away and heading for the door. "Be sure to call me once you get settled in."

"Take care of yourself, Roderich."

Austria took a steadying breath of cool air as the door to The Silver Spool closed behind him with a ding. He was never good at saying goodbyes—especially since he has known Gretta since her early teens, when she had first taken over the tailor shop. He collected himself as he walked a bit up the street towards a car parked there. He didn't want to worry the Swiss or Liechtenstein. Tonight was going to be a good night.

No matter what.

..xXx...
Liechtenstein handed the man her coat, thanking him. She stepped forward into the lobby, her green eyes looking around in wonder. *This place is huge*, she thought.

The high, gothic arch ceiling held up by several marble pillars had golden painted murals on it. Antique cherry wood furniture lined the sides of the room with benches and lamp tables. There were several crystal chandeliers lighting up the room, illuminating the crowds of people and countries alike that were mingling. Everyone was wearing their best formal attire. This concert was a big event of the year and many had bought their tickets well in advance so they could get good seats. She spotted Poland a little ways away in a flashy pink 'suit', if you could call it that—it had a mini skirt—and he was clinging giddily to Lithuania's side, who was wearing a more appropriate chocolate suit. South Korea was doing the same sort of clinging to China, except it was more to his chest. There were a few other countries there as well, like the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, Niger, and Swaziland—not to mention all the others she couldn't see.

Liechtenstein turned to her left at an obscene shout, staring at a group of the Nordics. Iceland was currently yelling at a drunken Dane while his brother, Norway, kept whacking the tall blonde upside the head with a blank expression. Denmark was spouting nonsense involving kittens and how 'Norge's hands are cold'. Sweden, who was standing a few feet away from the fray, caught her eye and began to walk over. He was wearing a very traditional black suit and tie, with gloves and loafers. His stern face looked somewhat relieved to get away from the others.

"Hello, Mr. Sweden," the blonde girl said politely, smiling up at the tall country.

For a second she thought he tried to smile back. "Hello."

Liechtenstein peered around him over at the others for a second as Denmark gave another shout. She looked back up at the Swede, asking, "Where's Mr. Finland and Peter? Did they not come?"

Sweden shook his head. "Fin stayed home 'cause he wasn't feelin' t' good, and Peter's over at Latvia's house."

"Oh, okay." She smiled. "Tell Mr. Finland that I hope he feels better soon."

"'K."

"Oi, Lilli!"

Liechtenstein looked around the tall Nordic again to see Iceland trotting over to her, leaving the Norwegian to fend for himself against the drunk Dane. Sweden got pulled to the side to chat with China for the moment, leaving the two of them alone. Iceland was wearing a dark blue suit and ribbon tie with a long jacket on much like Austria's, with shiny white shoes, gloves and dress shirt. His silver-white hair was combed neatly and his indigo eyes shone brightly at her.

"Emil," she gasped in surprise as he immediately hugged her. He quickly pulled away, matching her blush as he looked around at the crowds of people and countries.

"Where's your brother?" he asked nervously. "Cripes, he'd kill me if he saw that."

Liechtenstein tried to ignore the fact that the boy was still holding her arms. "Um, he got pulled away with Mr. Austria as soon as we got here," she said. Jade eyes peeked shyly up at him.

Iceland let out a sigh of relief, finally releasing her from his hold and stepping back. He looked her up and down for the first time, his eyes widening. "Lilli, you . . ." A faint blush tinted his cheeks again as he rubbed his arm in embarrassment, glancing at his shoes. "You look really, really cute."
Liechtenstein giggled, smiling at him. "Thank you, and you look very handsome," she said and both of their blushes deepened. At least he tried—'cute' was more like something you called a puppy, despite having Lettie call her that all day. Still, it made her feel warm inside. The two countries had become quite close during world meetings. Iceland had preferred to spend his time around her and Sealand more than around his boisterous family, like he was now. The two had come to like each other quite a lot, despite the ever present threat of Switzerland's wrath hanging over their heads should the boy do anything 'inappropriate' to his darling little sister.

"The show's about to start soon." Iceland stepped to stand next to her, holding out his hand. "Shall I escort you to your seat, my lady?" he asked in a fake British accent, drawing another giggle from the girl.

Liechtenstein slid her hand modestly into his and he began to lead her into the main part of the theatre.

"I swear, one more touch, boy, and I'll kill you."

"I'm more concerned about Denmark. The party's barely begun and he's already hammered."

"So? He's always—wait! Are they holding hands?"

Austria sighed, wrapping his arm around the blonde's shoulders to keep him from dashing across the room and beating poor Iceland to a pulp. Thankfully, the couple disappeared quickly through the entrance, though that did nothing to calm the Swiss. The Austrian spun the blonde around to face him—cutting off his series of 'let me at 'em!'—and flicked his nose.

"H-Hey!" Switzerland sputtered, his face reddening in anger and self-consciousness.

"Calm yourself, Vash," the musician said sternly. "Lilli deserves to have a bit of fun tonight, too, you know. It's not like they're dating, though those are the rumors."

"What—!"

"Roderich, ma chère!"

Austria lost his hold on the Swiss and nearly lost his footing as he was attacked by a passionate Frenchman. The blonde was wearing a silky, flashy lilac suit with matching snakeskin heels and gloves. He wasn't wearing a tie, and instead the collar of his dress shirt was open down two buttons, his blonde locks tied back loosely with a ribbon. The Austrian hissed as the man's arms tightened around him, sending pulses of pain up his spine.

"Oh, mon ami!" France squealed, close to tears. "I was so afraid that you would not be able to make it tonight! I am so glad you are here!"

Austria coughed. "Can't... breathe..."

"Get off, you oaf!" Switzerland growled, pulling the Frenchman away from the brunette by the collar.

France just whined. "Aw, Suisse, why are you so cruel? Do not hog him all for yourself!"

"I'm not!"

Austria ignored the bickering pair for the moment, struggling to catch his breath. His chest felt like it was going to collapse in on itself at any moment. He teetered over to a nearby empty bench,
slumping down into it just as his legs gave out. No, not now, he thought desperately as he hunched over in pain. He'd wanted to have gotten through the whole night without having one of his attacks. He couldn't even find the strength to breathe in or out. I guess it was too much to ask.

A familiar face slid into his view, emerald eyes filled with worry. A hand reached up to touch his cheek. "Roderich?"

He squeezed his eyes shut, a hand coming to cover another cough. He felt the Swiss push him into a better sitting position as the brunette sucked in a lungful of air finally, relief flooding him.

"Here." The Swiss grabbed his free hand and dropped two pills into his palm. The Austrian's weak protest was cut off by the blonde's glare. "You didn't take them at lunch time, so no complaints. I'll go get you a glass of something," he said determinedly before stalking through the crowd.

The aristocrat took a shaky breath, staring down at the dreaded medicine. He took off his glasses momentarily, setting them in his lap as he rubbed his eyes tiredly. He was putting them back on just as France sat down next to him.

"Je suis désolé," the blonde whimpered, looking at him ashamed.

Austria just waved off his apology, slightly impatient as he popped the pills into his mouth and swallowed. "It wasn't your fault, Francis. This has been happening for quite awhile now."

"Still." The Frenchman eyed him carefully, resting a hand on the musician's shoulder. "Pain, no matter how temporary, is never pleasant."

"Amen to that, I suppose." The brunette bit back the bitter taste of the medicine on his tongue.

France gave his shoulder a firm squeeze. "Any idea how long it's going to last this time?"

"It's anyone's guess at this point." Austria took a deep breath, reveling in the ache that caused through his rib cage. He leaned into the man's touch ever so slightly and lowered his voice, allowing himself a soft moment of sentiment with his old friend. "Preferably it will wait until after the concert. Then I do wish all this would just end already so I can go back to normal."

"Normal shall return soon, I'm sure, just . . . Rappelez-vous que vous devez mourir, mon ami," France whispered.

The two countries quieted a moment as they spotted their companion on the far side of the room. The Swiss was currently helping Norway keep Denmark away from grabbing any more drinks at the serving table, scolding the drunkard thoroughly. The Frenchman didn't miss the way Austria's eyes followed the man intently, the way they always had. The sight was nothing of a surprise to anyone who knew him and France's heart couldn't help but swell at his friend's lovestruck nature.

He leaned over to whisper to him again, this time more playful, "Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion to death, non? You should offer your cheek to him already."

Austria spared him a narrow glance. France never missed an opportunity to tease him about his love life—even during their more serious conversations. "Don't be foolish. As if he would kiss it."

France just flashed a grin and shrugged sheepishly. "You'll never know if you keep acting like une petite souris."

"Ich könnte eine Maus sein, aber ich bin mehr catty als du."
"C'est vrai."

Switzerland pushed his way back through the crowd gently, careful not to spill whatever clear liquid was in the cordial glass he was holding. He bent down, handing it to the Austrian as he stared at the giggling Frenchman curiously. The brunette pointed at it hopefully. "Please tell me that is some godly form of alcohol that'll get this horrid taste out of my mouth."

Switzerland slipped the small glass into his hand. "Water."

The musician frowned, taking a drink anyway. "How cruel."

The Swiss stared at him in slight annoyance. *I was worried about you, though,* he thought slowly—making sure he didn't say that one aloud by mistake. He shook his head, standing straight.

France snickered, pointing at the blonde's hair and suit. "Oh hon hon, Suisse! I didn't know you could spruce up like this. Sexy—" the Frenchman cooed at him, licking his lips.

Switzerland's cheeks flamed and his hands fist. "How dare you—you pervy old man!"

"Non, I'm not old!"

"You are to me—hands off!"

"Oh hon hon!"

"Monsieur l'Autriche!"

The three men turned to stare as a girl bounded up to them happily, France letting go of the Swiss' pantleg. Austria instantly recognized her as Seychelles as she stopped in front of them beside Switzerland. She had her hair in her usual pigtails except that they were curled with blue ribbons. Her dress was also a bright baby blue that was short in the front and long in the back, the edges ruffled. She wore blue, knee-high stockings with white slippers and shoulder length gloves. A simple string of pearls hung around her neck and two smaller pearls studded her ears. She nodded happily at the aristocrat.

"Is it that time already?" he asked, beginning to feel his chest relax a bit from the painkillers. She nodded again as he stood up.

Switzerland looked at him in confusion. "Time for what?"

"I didn't tell you?" The Swiss shook his head and he continued, gesturing to Seychelles. "Angelique and I are the opening act."

"Oh." Switzerland blinked at him for a minute before staring at the entrance to the theatre, avoiding the man's gaze. "I guess I'll go take my seat now," he muttered, turning and blending back into the mass of people. Austria's eyes narrowed.

France sent a sad smile towards the aristocrat, standing from the bench. "Arrêtez d'être une telle souris.," he murmured. "Je vous verrai bientôt, Roderich."

"Ich weiss," Austria huffed as the blonde patted his hip.

"Good luck, mes chers," the Frenchman cheered, ignoring him, and he jogged after the Swiss. "Slow down, Suisse!"

Seychelles tugged at the musician's sleeve and she smiled at him in eagerness. She hooked her arm
through his as he lead them to a door that would wrap around backstage.

...xXx...

The theatre was buzzing with excitement, filled to the brim with people. All the visiting countries seemed to have reserved seating along the right side. Switzerland spotted his sister and went to take his seat by the aisle, which was about eight rows back from the front. Pretty good seats with a nice view of the stage considering the short amount of time Austria had to arrange for them to come in the first place. France squeezed past him and Liechtenstein to sit two seats away from the girl, an empty one in between them. The Swiss was quite grateful for that.

He glanced over to his sister and caught her twisted around in her seat, chatting with the Icelandic boy seated behind them with Sweden. Thankfully, Norway and Denmark were seated a few rows farther back. The blonde man turned around, slinging an arm over the back of his seat to stare at the silver haired boy, catching his attention straight away.

Iceland gulped, forcing a smile at the Swiss. "Hello, Mr. Switzerland."

"Good evening," he said nonchalantly. He loved the bit of fear that seeped from the small country, laughing inwardly at his expression. On the outside he kept it cool, raising an eyebrow. "Is anything the matter?"

"N-No, sir." Iceland began to tremble.

"Good, because if there was . . ." Switzerland allowed himself to give a menacing smile, posing after a certain Russian. He motioned for the Icelandic to lean down, which he did reluctantly. His voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "If there was then I'd have to warn you that I have two glocks in my coat pockets and a thirteen inch hunting knife strapped to my leg. So, now if we understand each other," he waited for the boy to agree before flashing a dangerous smile and continuing, "Enjoy the show."

Iceland nodded shakily as he leaned back into his seat, pale as a ghost. He shrank somewhat into the large Swede's side as well, the taller man coughing into his hand to stop from laughing. Satisfied for the moment, Switzerland turned back around and was met with a scowl from his sister, though it ended up looking like more of a pout. "Vash."

"What? Can't I act brotherly and scare away your potential suitors?" he asked somewhat innocently, hearing the Frenchman down the row chuckle.

That brought an unexpected blush from the girl. His eyes widened greatly when she punched his arm playfully. She laughed at his reaction, bold from the hilarity of it all. She would of never dared otherwise. With one last smile at the ocean-violet eyed boy behind them, she turned around to face the stage.

"Dude, this is gonna be like The Holiday Pops, right?"

Switzerland looked down and spotted the loud American a few rows in front of them sitting next to England.

The Brit turned to him. "I don't even know what that is."

America gaped at him and proceeded to go on some sort of rant at the man for not knowing about every single little thing that went on in the States.

"There's no way I could know such things!" England growled, looking as irritated as ever. "The
only reason I came tonight was because The Phil is going to be here."

"What does a dude named Phil have to do with the concert?" America questioned.

England huffed. "I meant The Philharmonic Orchestra!"

"Mmm, never heard of them."

"Bloody hell!"

The Swiss caught his sister giggling again, this time at the two in front of them. Besides the fact that the pair looked ready to tear each other to smithereens, they didn't pull away from their close proximity to the other nor did America remove his arm from around the Brit's shoulders. If anything, his grip had tightened in intensity.

The lights began to dim and all the speaking in the room died down as it became pitch black. There was a rustling sound which Switzerland guessed was the red curtain being lifted and then a washed out light began to slowly illuminate the middle of the stage. He spotted Seychelles sitting with her legs crossed strategically and her dress draping upon a grand black piano. Austria, who was sitting at the bench with his fingers poised, had a calm look across his face. Anticipation grew throughout the spectators, Switzerland finding himself caught up in it as well, as every held their breath.

Then he began to play. The notes echoed wonderfully around the theatre, a familiar yet unnameable tune that the Swiss could swear he knew. Then Seychelles began to sing.

"Assise au bord de mon grand Coeur . . ."

Her words were soft and sweet, hanging in the air like honey from a spoon. The delicate French words rolled off her tongue easily and she did well to carry her end of the performance. The name of the tune came to the Swiss about halfway through the first verse, Imaginer. A simple song with a beautiful melody, made ever moreso by the Austrian's graceful playing. The air became tense as she paused with the piano keys, easing into the chorus. "Imaginer un monde solaire . . ." Seychelles began to speed up her words in order to match the pace of the aristocrat. "Ouvre les yeux, et lance toi du haut de ton reve le plus fou . . . Le secret c'est d'y croire encore, et malgre tout." She belted out, "Ouvre les yeux . . ."

She paused as Austria began the instrumental solo. He started off strong from the point where she ended, the notes he hit ringing out across the room powerfully. It then began to die down; stopping for a mid second, and then his fingers flew from the low end all the way to high, hitting the last key, before traveling back down into the low notes, hitting the final few hard. Seychelles began with the chorus again, her strong voice sending out chills through the crowd. She finished off the rest of the song firmly, her voice dying away with the tempo. With a final flick of the keys, Austria closed out the song as the audience rose up in applause. Seychelles grinned at the fellow brunette as he reached up to kiss one of her hands, getting a few waves in for the crowd before the curtain closed again.

Switzerland found himself clapping with everyone else. *I had no idea she could sing like that,* he thought in surprise. He glanced over at the cheering Frenchman, smugness written all over his bearded face. At a tug on his sleeve, he looked to his sister as she smiled up at him.

"Wasn't that just wonderful, big brother?" she asked as the applause came to a close. He nodded.

Everyone in the theatre was officially energetic now and eager for the next act to come on. The Bläserphilharmonie, an orchestra from the Mozarteum University right there in Salzburg, was on
next. From there on out the rest of the concert sailed smoothly through the night, in Switzerland's opinion. Many of the orchestras, violinists, and pianists that played were simply spectacular. There were a few other singers as well; about two were German, one English, and another French. Orchestras got the people pumped up and cellists calmed them down, the pianists played with them and the singers pulled on heart strings.

The audience was sure fired up for the second half when the intermission came around. Seychelles tried to sneak over to them, getting many enthusiastic compliments along the way before she was able to scoot into the seat between France and Liechtenstein. The Swiss asked her where Austria was and the girl replied that he had to get ready for more performances. The group of countries all chatted with each other and the Englishmen came up to say hello with America. Surprisingly, the Brit and the Frenchman didn't get into one of their violent spats, in light of the pleasant evening so far, and instead kept it very civilized—which meant they settled for a death stare match. Even Denmark was behaving surprisingly well behind the. After intermission drew to a close and everyone went back to their seats, the theatre grew dark again.

And, just like Seychelles had predicted, Austria had quite a few acts in the second half. After two more orchestra performances, the aristocrat had appeared on stage with another pianist that had been in the first part a couple of times. The men had bowed to each other and, after sitting at opposite facing pianos, began to have a duel of sorts. The other one began with a short series of low keys before slipping into high. When he had finished, Austria had countered with a just as whimsical set of notes, ending with a cocky ding. The two went on like this, causing the crowd to laugh at their comical game faces, before blending each others' tune into an elaborate dance and ending lightheartedly.

Another English singer went on after them, then another orchestra that Switzerland forgot the name to. He spotted Austria in the back row of violinists. A woman came on once they were done, playing magically on a large golden harp while singing opera. It brought some people to tears, like Liechtenstein and Seychelles. The Swiss heard sniffing behind him and turned around in a half hope that it was Iceland, but was let down as he saw it was from the woman sitting behind the boy. He thought he spotted the Icelandic smirking at him and was just about to shoot a glare at him, but was stopped when his sister pulled on his arm.

"Brother, Mr. Austria's back on," she said while she dried her eyes.

The Swiss immediately turned away to look back at the stage, regretting not having the chance to threaten Iceland again. He noticed that there was a glossy white piano and bench set up in the middle of the stage. Austria sat with his back to them and he could see that the keys were black as the musician prepped himself for yet another performance.

A single spotlight shone down on him as he started.

His hands moved slowly, deliberately across the keys, emphasizing each note as they reverberated outward. Simple notes echoed one after the other in a finespun wave, gently lapping across the theater. The crowd murmured quietly among themselves as the unknown song continued.

The Swiss sat frozen, a hand coming up to cover his mouth in shock and his other clutching at his chest.

"It can't—" he whispered. He could feel his sister looking at him. "It can't be . . ."

Austria continued the simple song, repeating the part he just did before setting up for the climax of the song. His left hand continued to play languidly as his right fingers picked up the pace, hitting the keys in rapid succession. The notes got faster and faster with a type of heartrending melancholy
and the last note of the crescendo held everyone's hearts aloft in a moment of silent despair, dangling heavily in the air. Then the song returned to the soft, simpering notes of the beginning before fading off. The last note gently died away, leaving the audience stunned into silence for a few seconds.

That all changed quickly, and everyone was soon on their feet in applause. Someone tossed up a rose that landed on the keys, to which the Austrian picked up with a smile. He gave a flutter of his free hand before bowing deeply in each direction. The last one was faced right toward the Swiss and as he rose the blonde could swear he winked at him, kissing the red rose petals.

Switzerland stayed seated, his hands not moving from their earlier positions.

As everyone settled back down for the last performance, Liechtenstein nudged him gently. "Big brother?" she asked quietly. "Is everything alright?"

He gave a small nod, not trusting his voice at the moment. His breath was hitching and catching dangerously and he felt his eyes burning. He desperately shook his head, scolding himself for his momentary weakness. Once he felt like he'd gotten a hold on his emotions—a small hold, but better than none—he ran a hand through his slicked back hair in an attempt to calm himself. He risked a glance at his sister.

Her green eyes were concerned. "What were you talking about earlier when Mr. Austria started playing?"

He gave a sigh. "I just," he struggled to clear his throat and continue, "I wasn't prepared for him to play that song."

"Why? What was it?"

The Swiss turned away from her gaze, his voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "That was the first song he'd ever written."

"Really?" she asked, intrigued.

"Yes," he said softly, his eyes closing. And then, without warning or meaning to, it slipped from his mouth.

"That was my song."

Liechtenstein blinked in surprise. From the way her brother was acting she could definitely tell that it was a touchy subject. She didn't push it any further, instead turning back to the stage as movement caught her attention. She could hear England talking in front of her excitedly and figured the massive orchestra now on the stage was the Philharmonic that he had been talking about earlier. The conductor did a quick tapping—a one, two, three—and the wind section was off loudly, causing nearly everybody to jump. The tiny country was thrilled that they were playing one of their most popular songs: Hooked On Classics. It was one of the few that she knew by them.

The concert ended with their song and everybody was in a standing ovation yet again. The audience stood clapping for several minutes as the curtain dropped down and the theatre lit up so they could see the aisles. People began to shuffle back out into the lobby to leave, chattering and reviewing the show.

Liechtenstein turned to file out into the aisle and found the seat next to her empty. She looked up towards the lobby entrance and spotted a glimpse of her brother dashing past the crowds and vanishing. She felt worry seeping into her skull again and was about to try to shout for him when
she felt a warm glove on her shoulder. The blonde glanced over into cobalt-lavender eyes.

"Don't worry, he's probably fine," Iceland said. The boy couldn't help looking relieved considering that they finally had a moment alone as they slipped into the aisle together.

Liechtenstein slid her petite hand into his coyly, risking a smile up at him through her lashes. His presence did reassure her a small bit. He gave a grin and led her up the stairs into the lobby. Most of the people were just flowing out into the streets, but some lingered behind in groups. Iceland pulled them off to the side, out of the way of the river of people.

Liechtenstein looked around desperately for the Swiss and came up short. Iceland, however, was sort of glad he wasn't around, and was instead hiding from his strange family. Sweden he could handle, and even Norway—but not a drunk Denmark.

"Lilli." The girl turned to her right and spotted the Austrian coming towards her, weaving his way inconspicuously through the crowd. Iceland instantly tried to let go of her hand, but the girl held onto him tightly, blushing. The musician seemed to notice as he stopped in front of them, smiling and holding his rose. He pointed at the Icelandic boy. "Don't worry. It's not like I'm going to tattle on you two for holding hands. However . . ." He snatched up the girl's free hand sneakily. "I must steal her away."

Liechtenstein turned back to Iceland, who was staring crestfallen at her. "Aw man, don't leave me alone with them." He cocked his head at his arguing family.

She released his hand, patting him on the cheek. "Don't worry. At least you got Mr. Sweden." She let the Austrian tug her over to the entrance, blowing a small kiss back to him shyly. His cheeks flushed. "Bye, Emil."

Austria chuckled as they collected their coats, stepping out into the chilly air as he helped the girl slide hers on. He peeked back at the red-faced Ice in amusement. "It seems you're quite the seductress, Miss Lilli."

"Oh, my," she waved her hand flippantly, giving him a sly smirk. "You have no idea. They won't stop flocking, let me tell you."

The Austrian laughed heartily at that. It was amusing to see the girl express herself and joke a bit more freely.

"So what did you think of the show?" he asked.

"Oh, I thought it was wonderful! All the performances were exceptional!" she cheered, twirling around happily. She motioned towards the rose in his hand. "A nice lady even threw you a flower."

"Indeed." He paused in slipping his own coat on, glancing around. "Where's Vash?"

"I don't know," she said as they began to walk towards the parking lot. "He flew out the door as soon as the concert ended."

The brunette sighed. "I was afraid this would happen. I must have upset him."

"With the song you played?" Liechtenstein mused.

"He told you, did he?" The Austrian nodded solemnly, sighing again. "Well, I didn't mean for him to get upset. Truthfully, I played it because I thought he would enjoy it. I suppose not."
The girl stared up at him. "I thought it was great."

He gave a small smile. "Thanks."

"I still don't know where he went, though."

Their rented black sedan pulled up beside them suddenly, as if on queue. The driver's side window roll down, and a blonde head poked itself out. "Hey, come on, get in," Switzerland called to the pair before rolling his window back up.

"Found him," Liechtenstein huffed, opening up the backseat.

Austria mumbled something and walked around the front of the rental car and ducked into the passenger seat. The Swiss barely waited for his door to shut before pulling away from the curb and getting into the line of cars merging onto the streets. "In a rush?" the brunette said quizzically.

"Tired," Switzerland said, turning a corner. "The concert wore me out."

"But you liked it right?" Liechtenstein asked gingerly.

He glanced at her in the rear view mirror. "Of course," he said—much to the relief of the others. "I enjoyed it very much."

"Then why did you run out of there?" his sister asked, still wary.

Another turn, another glance. "To warm up the car. I figured it'd be as cold as an ice box by the time we'd break away from everybody so I rushed out."

Austria seemed to relax a little. "So you weren't upset?" The Austrian noticed his hands tensing on the wheel.

"Why would I be upset?"

"From the last song I played?"

Switzerland scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, so? What about it?"

"Vash—"

"Uh uh." The Swiss turned to him and flicked him in the nose, earning a surprised yelp. Payback time. "I only agreed to have you call me by name while we were at the concert, and since we're not there anymore I believe it's time for you to stop."

"And if I don't want to?" Austria rubbed his nose, scowling. Switzerland turned to him at a red light.

He just raised his eyebrows, stating simply, "I'll make you."

"He hehe . . ."

The two men looked in the backseat as Liechtenstein—always the calm one—erupted into laughter. She clutched at her stomach, doubling over and sideways in her seat, and would have fell over if it weren't for her seatbelt.

Her brother's eyes widened as he went back to driving. "Lil', what's so funny?" he asked cautiously.
"Haha!" The girl gasped for air, tears forming in her eyes. The Austrian kept an eye on her to make sure she hurt herself. After another moment, she fell into a bout of hiccupping. "S-Sorry..." she said, still trying to calm down. "I-It's just so hilarious when you guys bicker!" She started to laugh again. "I know it's not-not that funny, but... You two fight like a married couple!"

The older countries twitched and both were sporting a red tint to their cheeks, silent for awhile as the girl giggled. Switzerland pulled into the parking lot of the hotel that they were staying at, putting the car in park and shutting it off. He turned to the Austrian again, the man whispering to him, "Denmark didn't get her drunk, too, did he?"

The Swiss gave a small laugh as they all stepped out of the car. "Not that I know of."

Liechtenstein managed to calm down somewhat as they walked towards the entrance. She pulled her coat tighter around herself, smiling widely. Once they were in the hotel they immediately headed for the elevators, Austria pushing the button that would take them to the third floor. Once the elevator started moving, she leaned her head against Switzerland's shoulder. The Swiss snuck a glance down at her, catching her mid yawn. Austria handed the girl her key card as the elevator door opened and they stepped onto their floor.

"Goodnight," Liechtenstein said, flashing them both a tired, cute smile. She slid the card into a nearby door slot and went inside her room for the night.

"This is where we part, then," Austria said quietly as he handed the Swiss his own card and one of Austria's, just in case.

"I guess so." Switzerland moved to the door across from his sister's. He slid the card and opened the door, hesitating for a moment. "Goodnight, Roderich," he whispered, ducking into the room and closing the door.

The brunette gave a quiet murmur of goodnight, feeling a tingle of pleasure at hearing his name once more, before entering into his own room next to the Swiss. He clicked the door closed softly and flipped on the lights. He spotted his bags placed beside the bed in front of him and stepped over to them, setting his rose down on the comforter. He bent down carefully to open up his bag but stopped, hissing as the skin on his back stretched.

The Austrian stood straight, beginning to unbutton his jacket. *I guess it's finally time I let it breathe,* he thought reluctantly. He was surprised that he had gone pretty much the whole night without incident—or much of one—and the Swiss or his sister didn't really notice him acting in pain. He arched his shoulders, slowly shrugging out of his jacket. Once he had it off, he inspected the white silk interior closely. He sighed with relief when he didn't spot any blood. Lying the coat beside the rose, he started to undo his vest and shirt. The vest was fine, too, as far as he could tell—considering it was harder to spot on the black material. But then there was his dress shirt.

The satin clung to his skin painfully, pulling sharply and snapping on his stitches. He groaned at the feel of the hot, sticky material peeling off of him. Gretta was going to kill him for this, but at least he'd gotten lucky and the jacket was okay. He got it about halfway off before he heard a knock and a click behind him, and then a gasp.

Austria turned around to see Switzerland in his doorway and his heart dropped.

"What the hell?!!"

Chapter End Notes
Roderich, ma chère! - Roderich, my dear!

Mon ami - My friend

Suisse - Swiss

Je suis désolé - I'm sorry

Rappelez-vous que vous devez mourir, mon ami - Remember that you must die, my friend

Non - No

Une petite souris - A little mouse

Ich könnte eine Maus sein, aber ich bin mehr catty als du - I may be a mouse, but I'm more catty than you. (catty doesn't really have a word in German so I kept it for the pun)

C'est vrai - That is true

Monsieur l'Autriche! - Mr. Austria!

Arrêtez d'être une telle souris - Stop being such a mouse

Je vous verrai bientôt, Roderich - I'll see you soon, Roderich

Ich weiss - I know

Mes chers - My dears

That 'guilt-companion-to-death' quote I believe is from Coco Chanel?

I edited this chapter to fix the concert scene, which has been bugging me for ages! Like, beyond bugging - it's been practically HAUNTING me to get rid of that silly didado part. I fyou don't know what I'm talking about, then thank god. Anyhoo, I hope it comes off a bit better this time and isn't so ridiculous.
Switzerland forces Austria to give him some answers - even if it's something he doesn't want to hear.

That smell.
That damned, godawful smell.

Warm, tangy, sharp—it stung the inside of his nose. The wave of air that hit him as the door swung open, that hot, sticky air, nearly knocked him off his feet. The skin on his face and hands instantly felt clammy, and he had to duck his head back out into the hallway. Gasping in cool air, he steadied himself for a moment. What was this? Confusion and worry running through him, he stepped through the door completely this time. He stopped.

Blood.

Oh my god.

Long, ragged gashes were slit across the brunette's back, from side to side, shoulder to shoulder, and one going right down his spine. There were at least a dozen, all of which had rough, horrid black stitching sewn into them. Red stained the pale, milky skin as it dripped down from loose openings in the threads. Surprised eyes turned to him.

He fell back against the door, words flying from his mouth. He couldn't hear them, though, because his ears were foggy from the adrenaline pumping through his veins. He kept yelling, waving his arms in the general direction of the musician.

He was furious.

What on Earth was going on? When had the Austrian gotten those cuts? Who had done it to him? The aristocrat reached for him but he just smacked his hand away, his throat beginning to hurt. How dare he not tell him about this! It was his goddamn duty to protect him and the hell if he wasn't going to do it! Now he was going to tell him what the fuck was going on!

Breath hitching, body trembling, the blonde leaned against the door again for support but ended up sliding down to the floor. This was one of those moments where he wished he could just square off and hit the man in the face. All he could see flashing across his vision was red and black, red and black, red and black . . .

Violet stepped into view, a hand touching his cheek.

"Please stop crying."

The Swiss stared at him in surprise, blinking. Crying? He wasn't crying. When had he started
crying? He quickly rubbed at his eyes. "I-I'm not . . . crying, you . . ." His voice was hoarse and, despite his attempts to deny it, he felt a whine rising up in his throat and tears started to gather again. "You . . . damn idiot . . ."

Austria gave a dry smile, it never reaching those mauve orbs. He lifted the blonde's chin up, finally establishing eye contact. "This isn't just about the scratches, is it, Switzey?"

His heart gave a painful thump. "What?" he whispered, wet eyes widening. "Of course it's about —"

"No. It isn't." The Austrian sighed, his eyes narrowing sympathetically. He removed his hand from the man's chin and let his fingers brush away some lingering tears. His voice was soft. "It seems no matter what I do, I always end up upsetting you. I apologize."

Switzerland shooed his hand away and wiped all of the rest of his tears away. Dammit! This wasn't like him! Ugh, I have to get a hold of myself, he thought chastisingly. When he pulled his hands away, there wasn't even a sign left that he had been crying, besides his eyes shining. Now I'm going to make him tell me how he got those scratches.

Austria held out a hand to help him, but he just stood up without it. The Swiss straightened out his pajama T-shirt and pants, clearing his throat. He finally raised his dry eyes to those of the musician's, glaring slightly. He didn't say anything, though, and just walked off to his right into a cherry themed bathroom. He grabbed a washcloth of a nearby rack and wetted it under the silver faucet before stepping back out into the bedroom. The Austrian was trying to peel his shirt off again but the Swiss just pushed him to sit back onto the bed, giving him the cloth to hold. He walked around to the other side of the mattress, climbing up and scooting his way so he was seated right behind the Austrian.

He could still feel his hands trembling slightly from earlier as he helped the aristocrat slid the rest of his shirt off. He couldn't help it—the sight really had caught him off guard. He gently pulled the sticky material off of the man's skin, cautious of the stitching and cuts. The blonde set the shirt off to the side and reached his hand around the musician for the washcloth. Austria handed it to him and he began to slowly dab at the tender skin, wiping the blood off.

It was quiet like that for a few minutes, the only noise being the low hum of an air conditioner under the window. Neither of them felt brave enough to break the silence, the calm. It has to be done eventually, Switzerland thought reluctantly. He paused in his cleaning. "Austria . . . tell me what happened."

He saw the brunette's shoulders slump as he exhaled. So they had gotten to it at last. He turned his head to the side a bit to show the Swiss that he heard him and the man went back to wiping the grotesque cuts.

"It's a long story," Austria murmured.

"I don't care. I have all night."

The Austrian sighed again, nodding. "Alright. I'll start then."

Switzerland waited, dabbing slowly.

"Do you know who Vladimir Kolkov is?"

"No . . . Is he then one who did this to you?" The blonde asked, tensing a bit.
"He's the head epidemiologist at a facility in Salzburg, and the lead man in finding a cure for what's been going on. He's also is Gretta's husband." Austria shook his head. "Anyway, he couldn't have done this to me because he's currently in the hospital with this disease."

"Oh. What does he have to do with this then?"

Austria laughed quietly at the man's impatient tone. "Because I went to see him today after taking a boy back to his mother."

That peaked the Swiss' interest. "A boy?"

"Yes. His mother had been assaulted and he was in the process of being taken. I found him while strolling near a bridge. I interfered, of course, to stop the man."

"So you got these while being heroic?"

"No—I just twisted the man's arm a bit and he took off." Austria hissed as the cloth snagged on a thread, the blonde muttering an apology. "I did some hunting and eventually we went to the Gert Pierer and found his mother. There was a really nice nurse there, too, who I'm pretty sure was from England—"

"You're rambling."

"Are you going to let me tell this or not?" he huffed, turning to raise an eyebrow at him. Switzerland shrugged and the aristocrat turned back around to speak. "The nurse told me where to find Vlad so I spent about an hour there chatting with him."

"Chatting about what?"

"His health, obviously, and his research. Despite that he can't be out working, he still gets updates from his colleagues. So far, they've been unable to find a solution to this illness. So that was a dead end. However, he and everyone else with it in the hospital are getting excellent treatment and he's pretty sure he's just going to kick this whole thing to the side." Austria's shoulders sagged again. "Crazy . . ."

Switzerland let him sulk for a moment before urging him on. "And then what happened?"

Austria's mind was clouded as the next events played through his thoughts while he spoke them aloud to the Swiss.

...xXx...

"Sheesh, it's cold."

The Austrian tugged his scarf tighter around his face as the wind picked up. Rogue papers skirted down the empty street and the tall, iron lamps were beginning to beam a dull yellow light as the sun dipped below the horizon. A couple a ways in front of him ducked into a shop but other than that the street was empty, aside from the country meandering down the sidewalk. He had decided to walk from the hospital to where he knew there was a car rental facility.

However, he was lost.

"Not lost, just . . . took a wrong turn," he muttered to himself. It was kind of depressing him that he could get lost in one of his own cities, especially one that he'd been in half his life. He lifted his gaze from the concrete to look around at the surrounding stores and fast food places. But, it really
is different from the last time he'd been to Salzburg. How long ago was that again . . ?

Austria shook himself to be rid of the thoughts, delving into a shiver. The air was biting into his cheeks and his ears had gone numb long ago. He glanced up at a road sign as he came upon an intersection. He crossed instantly on account of there being no traffic, mulling over the street name. "I'm sure it was just up here a ways."

It was strange not seeing anybody else outside. He felt a different chill settle into his spine, causing his nerves to tighten. A natural reaction. Especially considering there were now headlights shining at his back, his shadow stretched far in front of him forebodingly.

The Austrian kept his pace slow, waiting to see what the car did. It didn't pass him—it just seemed to be coasting along behind him, engine rumbling loudly.

The Austrian gave a glance over his shoulder at a white van before bursting into a sprint down the sidewalk. He heard the vehicle speed up as well and he dashed down a narrow alleyway in an attempt to lose whoever it was. Stopping as he nearly hit a brick wall, he cursed in frustration, turning around just in time to see the van park itself in front of the alley entrance.

His only escape now blocked, he stood there with his fists clenched, preparing for what was to come. The van reversed so the back doors were facing him as a group of men hopped out. There were about five of them, three of them big and burly, wearing dark trench coats and bandanas covering their faces. He thought he spotted a familiar red one . . .

He all of a sudden gave a pained gasp as the man nearest him drove his fist into his gut. Doubled over, the one with the red bandana came over and sent his foot soaring and connecting with his chin, sending him flying backward. Blinking away stars, he simultaneously was trying to keep from spitting up blood, hating the iron taste. He rubbed his jaw as he managed to sit up on the damp cobblestone, keeping his eyes on the men as they moved closer to him.

He exhaled in annoyance, having been through this kind of thing before. "Look, if it's money you're after, then go ahead and take—"

The one who kicked him stooped down and grasped his collar roughly, gray eyes piercing his. "It's not money we're after, arschloch. Is it, Raven?" He looked up at the man who had punched him, who shook his head. The thinner man then turned back to him, holding up a recently bandaged hand. "Time to have a little chat."

Austria's eyes widened as it connected with him—the red bandana, gray eyes. He gave another gasp as 'Raven' and another big man came over and hauled him to his feet. "Your—!"

The man waved his wrist at him. "Payback time."

Ok. Clearly this wasn't a mugging.

Austria began to struggle then. He slipped an arm away from the 'Raven' man, managing to land a punch to his cheek and he turned in the other man's grasp, elbowing him in the neck. The man stumbled back, releasing him, and his foot connected to the husky man's chest, knocking him to the ground. The other two men ran at him from behind and he managed to duck the smaller one's punch before close-lining him and swooping down to spin his leg in a circle above the pavement, tripping the larger one.

It was times like these that he loved being a country.

The man with the gray eyes growled in frustration, a knife flicking out of his sleeve as he stepped
towards him. Austria stood to meet him head on. The exertion apparently was too much for him at
the moment, though, and his stomach gave an awful lurch that sent him to his knees. Dammit, not
now!

The man grabbed his hair, causing his scalp to burn, and yanked his head back, thrusting the blade
against his throat. He could feel a single drop of blood fall against his skin as those gray irises
scoffed at him. "Ha, you sure put up a fight for an old man, don't you? Raven, Condor, get your
asses up and throw him in the van!"

The two men that had grabbed him earlier grumbled something as they grabbed him again. This
time, though, one grabbed him under the arms and the other took hold of his legs. His stomach
churned again as he tried to kick the Condor guy off, but to no avail. He still struggled as best he
could as they heaved him into the flat, illuminated space in the back of the van. They all piled in
around him, slamming the door shut.

"Hello there, Austria."

The electronic voice echoed around the small space, static sounding. The aristocrat paused in his
wiggling, his eyes searching about the cabin. He spotted a speaker above him on the ceiling of the
cabin just as scratchy laughter erupted from it.

"So we finally meet, sort of," the voice said. He could tell that it was a male, a bit courtly and
refined. Maybe someone wealthy like a politician or a lawyer. But because it was distorted he
couldn't really tell for sure, and the crappy speaker didn't help, either.

"Who are you?" Austria asked, glaring around him at his abductors.

The voice's laughter trailed off and it gave a blissful sigh. "Ah . . . Bind him."

Gray eyes lit up as he signaled to the other small man on the opposite side of him. "Duckling, use
the rope."

Despite the yellow bandana covering his face, the Austrian could tell he was still a boy—maybe
around the age of sixteen or so. It baffled him to see someone so young caught up in this kind of
work, but he knew it was more common place than he'd like it to be. He softened his glare
somewhat at the boy's nervous green gaze and didn't put up an effort to stop him as he tied his
wrists together tightly. 'Duckling' lifted his arms up and hooked the rope on a piece of metal behind
his head. He turned his look to one of pleading as the boy cut off another piece of rope and tied it
around his head and in his mouth like a gag. Maybe if he could get the kid to see what he was
doing, he would at least change his mind on where his loyalties lie.

Duckling, though, refused to meet his gaze as he sat back, twiddling the excess rope in his hands
anxiously.

"Now that that's done," the voice said, ringing out again. "Let me tell you something, now, Austria.
Something important—something . . . world changing."

He officially had the musician's attention with that last bit, violet eyes trained intently on the
speaker.

"First of all," the voice continued, "has there ever been a death of a country caused by a normal
human? No, of course there hasn't. You personified countries just die and come back a few hours
later. Am I right?"

Austria's glare increased with suspicion. His did this person know that?
"However," the voice prattled. "There have been cases when countries have died: The Roman Empire, Germania, and, of course, the greatest empire to have ruled over nearly all of Europe—Prussia."

Oh. He could see where this was going. Sighing, he closed his eyes, allowing himself to relax his aching muscles, and leaned his head back against the floor. His stomach was giving him hell. The speaker rambled on.

"But look at him now. He's small, degraded, unnoticed, unwanted. That's no way for a powerful country to go out, people vaguely hearing his name now and again. But it's time for the empire to be rebuilt. If the great United States or Russia or China blinked out of existence then the world would hear no end to it. More than likely, those countries wouldn't go down without a fight. As I expect you won't, either."

The aristocrat snapped his eyes open as the voice cackled statically.

"Ah . . . let's give you a little taste of what's to come, shall we, Sparrow?"

"Yes, sir." Gray irises grinned maliciously at him, the man's blade showing itself once again. Austria's heart thumped.

"We don't want him too disfigured, after all he's got some errands to do with his little . . . friends," the voice mused, sniggering still.

It was times like these that he hated being a country.

Austria's eyes flared with a newfound energy and he began to pull on his rope. He knew about the Swiss! And Lilli! No way was he going to let these hard-pressed fanatics get anywhere near them! His legs began squirming as he tried to cut the rope on the sharp metal. The big guy nearest his legs, Condor or whatever, moved to hold him as the speakers laughed mockingly. His heel drove home in the guys cheek and he began banging on the door. It took nearly three of the guys to restrain his legs.

"Hah . . . do try to restrain yourselves boys. Have fun~" Click.

...xXx...

Moonlight shone hazily through the thin veil in front of the window, illuminating the sleeping man softly. His face was relaxed and calm. No creases. No pain.

The Swiss brought his knees up, adjusting himself in the office chair he was in. It seems those painkillers knocked him right out, he thought lazily. He rested his head in his hand, continuing to watch over the Austrian. Just like he'd been doing for hours now.

Ever since the man had told him what happened.

...xXx...

Switzerland had long ago fell silent as the musician told his tale. His hand with the washcloth was still, the white fabric soaked through with red. He made himself focus on the Austrian's breathing, trying to take it all in.

The information was . . . disturbing.

Not to mention that his hands had began to shake, and he had to ball them into fists in his lap to
keep control. Anger boiled in his veins and he was digging his nails into his palms. He should of been there with him! Those thugs deserved to be shot at as many times as a thousand clips could hold. And then some.

"You still awake?" Austria murmured.

"Yeah." Switzerland blinked, lifting his gaze as the man in front of him turned around to face him. He couldn't help the questions bubbling on his lips. "Who stitched you up, then?"

"Gretta did," the brunette said. He dipped his head sheepishly. "I really freaked her out."

"That's because she probably didn't expect to see you sliced up like a bunch of cheese," the Swiss said a bit sarcastically. But it did explain why the woman had been acting strangely. He sighed, remembering the fact that the brunette had been tied up. "What about rope burns?"

"Insightfulness was always your stronghold," Austria chuckled dryly, beginning to take the gloves off that he still had on. The blonde's eyes widened at the sight of red, inflamed skin around his wrists, blisters already making their mark. "And, the miracle of makeup." The aristocrat took the wet cloth from him and gently began to wipe at the corners of his mouth. More bruising appeared and when he cleaned a spot off on his neck, a thin scratch was cut across the jugular.

...xXx...

The blonde's eyes kept flicking to the door, half expecting someone to break in. He tried to snap himself out of it, knowing it was silly and that anyone who actually tried had a death wish. Austria's story had him razzled. He couldn't sleep.

Hence why the clock read 3:46 a.m. in bold green letters.

Switzerland sighed and crossed his legs and arms. Since sleep was evading him, he'd stayed in the room to keep an eye on the musician while he slept. Just in case he went into a coughing fit, busted a stitch, or those insane Prussia fanatics decided to come back.

So there he sat.

Watching.

Waiting.

Thinking.

Why would these people be targeting Austria now? Prussia hasn't been a country for quite some time now. Was it because of the outbreak? Are these hooligans apart of some new extremists club? Or has a secret cult of some sort been hiding in the shadows all this time? But why? Were they waiting for something devastating to happen that would weaken the country? Have they been assisting in the spread of the disease? Are they the cause of all this?

The Swiss stretched his legs out, beginning to get flustered. His eyelids felt heavy as his mind weighed the possibilities. Maybe this whole situation was much larger than they thought. The blonde crossed his legs, leaning on his hand again. Or maybe he was just overreacting. Maybe—

"Switzey, get some sleep."

Switzerland jumped out of his skin and out of his thoughts. His eyes darted to the man that was now sitting up on the bed, staring at him with tired eyes.
"I'm not tired," the Swiss protested softly, his heart still racing. Jesus, a band of monkeys could have waltzed in and he wouldn't of noticed! So much for keeping guard.

Austria sighed, patting the mattress beside him. "Come on, you're restless and uncomfortable. Get out of that chair, Switzey, so you can get some shut-eye."

Ok. The Austrian's hair was ruffled and messy, looking like fluffy down—a sleepy Mariazell complimenting the look. His milky lavender eyes reflected at him sincerely. He called him 'Switzey' twice just now. And he was inviting him to bed. The same bed.

Switzerland's heart fluttered rapidly.

"B-But—!"

"No 'buts'." Austria huffed impatiently, patting the mattress a second time. "Get your ass in bed before I make you."

The Swiss blinked at him a moment but found himself standing up anyway. "Jeez . . . so much for 'Mr. Gentleman'," he grumbled, cheeks reddening.

The aristocrat sighed again, pulling back the covers and scooting over. "It's been a long day. I'm tired. You are, too. I want to go back to sleep. And, frankly, I'd prefer it if my bodyguard wasn't dozing off tomorrow."

"Alright, I get it." The blonde slid into the sheets a bit reluctantly. They were warm from where Austria had just been laying. The man had already rolled over, his muscles relaxing as sleep overtook him again. That was when the Swiss noticed the ache throughout his mind and body as he sunk into the heavenly mattress.

He didn't remember his head hitting the pillow.

...xXx...

Dear Ms. Hungary,

We nearly missed our train this morning. I had such a hard time getting brother and Mr. Austria moving. I had to go get an extra key from the clerk so I could wake them up. Brother wasn't in his room, and was instead sleeping in Mr. Austria's room. I walked in just as the latter was putting on a shirt.

And—Oh! What horrendous scratches all over his back! Where on earth did they come from? You wouldn't know, would you?

He wouldn't say. Instead, he pushed me to wake up big brother while he checked us out. I've never seen him so tired!

Anywho, we eventually made it to the train station and back to Vienna. Switzerland was forced to drive on account that Mr. Austria had another coughing attack. I could tell he was embarrassed, but we made him lay down in the backseat. I don't want him to be self-conscious, especially since he can't help it. It's so sad.

Big brother made Mr. Austria stay in bed all day. He kind of took a turn for the worst about halfway home in the car and passed out. But don't worry! He's okay now, but is still coughing up quite a bit of blood. Brother's been running up and down the stairs, waiting on him, ever since we got back. I tried to help, but brother just told me to sit tight and keep myself busy for awhile.
So I thought I'd write you a letter, Ms. Hungary!

The rest of the day's been kind of strange, though. Because of Mr. Austria's health, there's been a massive storm going on all day. Even as I write this, it's all dark and gray and green outside the dining room window. Rain's pouring down, lightning, and I swear to you that the thunder has not stopped. It's so chaotic! Poor Mr. Austria.

Ah, sorry if this letter is a bit long and old fashioned. I just thought I'd give you an update without taking up long distance minutes. I could of just emailed you. Darn. Oh well, too late now, I guess, huh?

Now I must brave the rain to put this in the mailbox. Wish me luck!

Hope to hear from you soon, Ms. Hungary. Tell Japan I said hello.

Sincerely,

Liechtenstein

P.S. Call me Lilli! :)

Chapter End Notes

Arschloch - Asshole

The birdie bad guys aren't too important, but we haven't seen the last of them.
Hungary does some checking-in, Taiwan and Hong Kong arrive in South Africa, and Prussia does some meddling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hungary set down the letter, playing with the sleeve of her green kimono. It was kind of Liechtenstein to give her an update of how things are going, despite the fact that it made her even more anxious to go home. But she was still stuck with her boss. And Japan, which was a plus, of course.

And Greece had come to visit on their day off today. Not that she minded—it was a good thing she always had her camera at the ready.

Japan came and sat down beside her on the porch. "What did the letter say?" he asked cautiously, his brown eyes inquisitive.

The woman stared out at the autumn colors rippling through the trees around them. A breeze ruffled her long hair. "Liechtenstein said 'Hello' to you, and I think it can count for you, too, Greece," she said as the sleepy man lowered himself on the other side of Japan. "Also, she told me that they got back from Salzburg just fine yesterday..."

"And?"

Hungary lowered her gaze, and her voice. "He had another attack." And what's with these scratches that Lilli mentioned in her letter?

Japan's eyes widened slightly with pity. "I hope he's ok. Would you like to check up on him?" he asked.

"Yes, please." Hungary stood up slowly and moved to go back inside.

"You can use—ah... my laptop," Japan squeaked, his cheeks flushing as a dozing Greece leaned on him. Hungary smiled at the sight, thanking him.

She went and got the white Toshiba off a desk in the corner and walked into her room. She plopped down on her bed eagerly and plugged in her flashdrive. Bringing up a specialized program—made just for her—she was instantly looking at the piano in Austria's living room.

Hungary panned the camera up a bit. There wasn't anyone there. She clicked to the family room. Click. Dining room. Click. Hallway. Click. Kitchen...

Liechtenstein was cutting up vegetables on a chopping block, dropping the pieces into a pan on the stove. Hungary felt the corners of her mouth tilt up. She is such a sweet girl, the woman thought. Perhaps the little blonde could sense her, because no sooner than the thought had passed through her mind than the girl turned her head up to look at the ceiling camera. The girl gave a bright smile
and a wave. Her voice sounded light, if a bit robotical. "Mr. Austria's in his room."

*She must be able to see the light on the camera.* Hungary made the camera tilt up and down to show that she heard the girl before clicking over to the aristocrat's room.

The aristocrat was sitting bent over on the edge of his canopy bed, head resting in his hands as he stared out the window. She zoomed in a bit. His skin was very pale and he looked completely exhausted. Switzerland appeared suddenly beside him, holding out a glass of water to the musician. Austria murmured something and took the glass from him. He gave a sip, took the medication offered to him, and set the glass down before moving to lie back down.

The camera's speaker caught a huge crack of thunder as the Swiss helped the man get settled under the comforter. The blonde walked back over to the door and flipped the lights off just as a flash of lightning illuminated the room with another boom. Then he left.

Hungary sat there for a few moments, watching silently as the aristocrat fell into a restless sleep, lights flashing through his window. Her mouse moved slowly as she closed down the program and Japan's computer, putting away her flashdrive.

So, what Lilli had told her was true.

The woman felt a heaviness settle in her chest as a small groan rose up in her throat. She felt like she was going to tear up. Poor, poor Roderich . . . What did he ever do to get this sick? Certainly nothing had changed in his usual schedule—he was always a stickler for stability—so she had no idea where he had gotten it from, let alone *how*. Countries stood up to most illnesses and diseases, only getting sick if there people were suffering. But then, how had it spread among his citizens so fast?

Hungary shook her head, whipping out her phone. Smiling, she quickly thumbed a text to one of her closest friends asking a favor. Putting away her phone, the woman stood and made her way back out to the porch. She was going to get to the bottom of this using her super awesome spy resources.

Great.

Now she sounded like Prussia.

…xXx…

The black-haired girl frowned, handing her suitcase over to the man behind her and walking out to the curb. Her brown eyes scanned the crowds in front of the airport—tourists, businessmen, airline personnel. It was dark out, the time on the wall clock saying it was quarter after three in the morning. The electric vibe of people looking at the glowing city around them did not seem to reach the woman.

Hong Kong sighed and stopped a few yards back, setting both of their bags down. He glanced around them, not really sure what they were supposed to be looking for. "Um, Mei—"

"'Ello there!"

A strong set of hands suddenly gripped his shoulders and he gave a small yelp of surprise, his head whipping around at the English accent.

A man at least a head taller than him stood there grinning at him, green eyes reflecting kindly behind his spectacles. He was a deep tan, colored, and with spiky redish-brown hair sticking up at
odd angles and framing his face. He wore a light blue cotton T-shirt, pulled tight across a strong chest, and white sweatpants with flipflops.

"South Africa . . ." Hong Kong murmured in surprise, trying to peel away from the man's grip.

"'Sup, brother?" the man greeted giddily, releasing the Asian man from his hold. He sighed in relief, only to find himself in his half-brother's headlock with a fist digging into his scalp. "Hey, didn't I tell you to call me Jamie?"

"James-san, stop it!" Hong Kong snapped, struggling to get free from the annoyance rubbing his head. It was embarrassing to be treated like a child, especially in a public airport. He was a grown man for godssake!

The noogie finally stopped but his half-brother still didn't let him go, instead bringing him close to whisper in his ear, "Hey, is that cutie over there who I think it is?" He pointed towards Taiwan, who was still at the curb looking back and forth.

Hong Kong bristled and started smacking at the man, yelling random obscenities in Chinese at him.

That seemed to get the woman's attention. Her brown eyes widened in surprise when she turned around and saw Hong Kong trapped in some strange man's grip. Wasting no time, she ran at him. "Let him go, you brute!" She hauled off with a hook kick right for the man's chest, her dress and ruffles flying.

South Africa quickly leaped back out of the way only to have Hong Kong barrel into him from the woman's kick. The Asian doubled over, kneeling on the tile. "Ow . . ."

Taiwan gasped and dropped down beside him. "Li! Are you alright?" Her hands fluttered around him helplessly. "I'm so sorry!"

"I-It's fine." He stood back up slowly, his gut twisting in pain. He wobbled and had to lean on her a bit.

"Man, that was some kick, huh? It even managed to knock me back a little." South Africa grinned, ignoring the two glares sent his way. He went to walk back over to his half-brother but stopped when Taiwan instantly took a defensive stance in front of him. The commonwealth just continued to grin and gave a small bow to her. "Excuse my rudeness, miss. I am the national representative for this great country, South Africa," he said dutifully, winking. "But please, call me Jamie."

Taiwan blinked. "What?"

He gave a big, hulking laugh, making everyone nearby stare at them. Hong Kong groaned, half at his stomach and half at the American-ish laugh his brother was making. Annoying one minute, stately the next, Hong Kong thought. Maybe it was because of the mix of cultures in his blood. As the laugh died down, he saw those green eyes glance at him. "Ah, are you alright, brother?" he asked him.

Hong Kong waved his question off. Still gripping his stomach, he gestured with his free hand at the woman beside him. "James-san, this is Taiwan. Mei, this is my used-to-be brother."

"Nice to meet you," Taiwan said, still a little dumbfounded. She shook herself and raised an eyebrow at the two men. "Is that your car over there? Well then, let's get going! We have a lot to do if we want to help Austria get better!"
The pink girl marched off toward the dark sedan sitting on the curb, her chin back in determination, hands on hips.

Hong Kong gaped in surprise. "W-Wait! What?" That's why we're here? "Mei—"

South Africa patted his back again, knocking whatever air he'd collected back out of his lungs. "Come on, brother, let's go." The man stooped down and grabbed his brother's and Taiwan's bags, following the woman to the car.

The Asian man gave a groan and stalked slowly after them.

Once they were all piled in the car, Hong Kong settled into the heated backseat gratefully. He was suffering from jet lag, he hadn't gotten a wink of sleep on the plane ride over to his half-brother's home, and the time difference wasn't helping, either. It would be close to early morning at his home now, but here it was around witching hour. He buckled his seatbelt and sunk down into the warm leather, leaning against the door. His stomach still felt like it was on fire.

Taiwan stared back at him with a guilty look. "Are you really ok, Li? I did kick you pretty hard . . ."

Hong Kong looked at her before nuzzling back into the window. "I'm fine, Mei, just a little tired," he murmured.

She pouted a bit but turned back around as South Africa pulled away from the curb. "So," she said to the man driving, smoothing down her skirt, "where is this facility with the cure you and I talked about?"

The commonwealth smiled at her and turned onto an on ramp, speeding up to get on the highway. "I know you're eager to help Austria, and it's kind of a race against time now that Hungary let the word slip out about his problem. But, it is the middle of the night here, miss. The facility isn't open."

"Ah . . . I see."

"Don't worry, I'll take you two there first thing tomorrow, 'k? But for now you guys can sleep at my house." The man glanced in the rearview mirror at his half-brother, seeing him grimace.

"Can't you just drop us off at a hotel or something?" Hong Kong grumbled, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"Come on," South Africa whined jokingly. "You finally come to visit me in, what, like, ten years? I'm not going to let you sleep in a hotel. Besides—" He coasted the sedan off the highway and turned into a residential area. "—my home's closer."

I don't feel like sleeping in the basement tonight, though, Hong Kong thought reluctantly as he saw his half-brother's house come into view up ahead. South Africa, he knew, only had one spare bedroom, which meant that he would end up sleeping on the couch or the small cot down in the man's basement.

Hong Kong couldn't help the slight heat in his cheeks at the thought of sleeping in the same place as Taiwan. They'd slept in the same room as each other before, same bed, same tent, even the same sleeping bag during the taiga incident—given that was to keep warm, but still. It wasn't because they hadn't slept together before, but . . . well . . .

It was ungentlmanly to intrude into a beautiful woman's sleeping quarters uninvited. One of the few things he actually agreed with England upon.
So it was completely ok for him to sleep in the basement. Yeah. He really didn't mind now that he thought about it more. Sure, he might have an achy back in the morning but it wasn't so bad. Yep, not so bad.

As his thoughts continued to flow on the matter, he hadn't noticed that he'd dozed off. His mind was filled with pink ruffles and glossy black hair. Taiwan was a really beautiful woman, and he often wondered why she even bothered to hang around him. She was a much bigger country than him—even though they were similar in height—and he wasn't much to look at, what with his eyebrows that England had cursed upon him, and his average looking face. He was a stern, quiet, and probably looked unapproachable from a distance. While Taiwan was happy and outgoing, kind to everyone she came in contact with.

So what reason did she have to pay any attention to him—especially since he was always cast either in Britain or China's shadow, barely noticeable to all the other countries? She could have brought Japan along on her adventures, or the hyper Korean, or even Thailand. So, why him?

His heart clenched and his eyelids fluttered open, his unpleasant dreaming thoughts waking him. He awoke gazing out across bed sheets at Taiwan's bare back. Blinking away what little sleep he'd gotten quickly, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment and he swiftly rolled over, not wanting to seem rude or intrusive on her changing.

However, in his haste he'd failed to realize he was on the edge of the bed and ended up facedown on the carpet with a loud thwump!

Cursing quietly, Hong Kong pushed himself up onto his elbows, rubbing his chin. How had he even gotten into a bed, anyway? A bubble of shame burst within him as he thought of South Africa having to carry him in from the car. Damn, he should have just woken him up!

A small giggle sounded behind him and he jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Glancing back, he spotted Taiwan smiling down at him. "Hehe, are you ok, Li?"

Her cotton fuchsia gown was fully on now but the top couple buttons were wide open.

Hong Kong sprung to his feet nervously, finding himself stuck between the mattress and the woman. He averted his gaze from her breasts as he felt his face heat up even more, his hands up lamely. "I-I'm fine, M-Mei," he stuttered. Dammit.

Taiwan patted his chest lightly. "Did you have a nice nap?"

"I-I was . . ." He still didn't have the courage to look at her as the image of her smooth-skinned back popped into his mind again. It had completely caught him off guard. "I'll go move to the couch now," he said shakily, trying to move around her.

The pink girl's face fell slightly. "Li." The Asian man finally turned and looked down at the woman in front of him. His eyes widened when Taiwan wrapped her arms tightly around his abdomen, burying her face into his shirt. His blush was apparent now and his arms hovered uselessly by his sides, not sure what to do. "Li," she said again. "Are you really ok?"

Is she still talking about that kick she gave me? He shook his head, allowing his arms to settle lightly around her shoulders as his heart beat fast. "I'm fine, Mei, really—"

"With Austria?"

His eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "What?"
"I mean the fact that we're here to help find a cure for Austria." Her face lifted to look up at him, tears beginning to grow in those chocolate eyes.

"Mei . . ."

"I-I kinda dragged you here without telling you anything—even though I seem to do that a lot, don't I?—and it seemed like you were pretty upset at the airport when you found out why we were here. I feel bad about it, especially since I know you don't really get along well with any of your half-siblings."

"It's ok, Mei—"

"It's not okay, b-but I couldn't just do nothing! I m-mean, I agree with Switzerland's philosophy, you know? About h-how we sh-should help others when they're in need—!"

A soft kiss from the Chinese peninsula silenced her sobbing babble, surprising them both. Hong Kong pulled away quickly, worry and fear running through him. Had he really just done that?! Wide brown eyes stared back at each other in disbelief. He couldn't help it; the way the woman had looked in his arms . . . He hadn't even realized he'd kissed her until it was done.

But now a cute splash of rose coated the girl's cheeks and her tears were gone. Taiwan smiled up at him with . . . affection? His heart fluttered helplessly as she leaned back up and pecked his cheek. Taiwan began giggling at his expression, giving him a sly smirk. "So, I take it that means you're ok being here after all?" she asked, her cheeks still a pretty cherry.

He nodded dumbly, unable to do anything else except focus on calming his heart. Taiwan patted his chest again and pulled away slowly, walking around the other side of the bed. "Come on, Li, let's get some sleep," she said, plopping down on the mattress.

"I guess I don't have to sleep on the couch after all," he thought, settling back beneath sheets. He clicked the lamp beside him on the table off and rolled over to see Taiwan scooting to cuddle up under his chin, the girl sighing happily. Hong Kong hesitated a moment before pulling the quilt up over him as he dozed off again.

South Africa gave an evil smile from the crack in the doorway and crept back down the hallway. He held up the picture glowing from the bright screen on his phone and gave a quick chuckle.

"Sorry, bro, this is so going on my blog."

...xXx...

"Haha! The awesome me claims the last egg roll!"

Germany shooed Prussia's chopsticks away from his plate where said egg roll was sitting. "Nein, I'm saving it for last. Besides, you've already had three."

Prussia pouted and looked away across the restaurant. His brother had finally let him leave the house so the three of them could go out to eat for a change. Italy had suggested they get Chinese food because he was craving some "Asian pasta," as he put it. He had already eaten three full plates of vegetable, chicken, and shrimp Lo mein, not to mention several pieces of Crab Rangoon, fried dumplings, and tofu soup. Both of the Germans hadn't been surprised that the little Italian was able to pack all that away, seeing as how he was constantly eating anyway.
A red gaze began eyeing the egg roll again. Prussia continued to look away at the other diners while his chopsticks slid across the table slowly, trying to snatch the morsel away without his brother noticing. His chopsticks were at the edge of the plate and he could already taste his victory.

A sharp pain shot up his arm as Germany gripped his wrist tightly, giving him a cold, aqua stare. "Nein, Bruder."

Prussia frowned. Becoming determined, he switched the chopsticks to his other hand and dived for the food. Germany quickly released his wrist and grabbed at the albino's invading hand, while the now free one reached to grab at the roll as well.

Both countries stopped when their skirmishing caused the food to roll off his plate towards the edge of the table. Germany swiftly released his brother in order to catch it, but discovered it already safe in another pair of chopsticks. The blonde looked up into Italy's smiling brown eyes.

"I believe this is yours, Luddy," the Italian chirped happily, pressing the egg roll against the German's lips until he took a bite. Germany had to fight down a blush at all the stares they were getting from the other patrons.

His brother certainly wasn't helping, either.

"Favoritism!" Prussia cried, pointing wildly at Italy. He huffed heftily before jutting out his lip in another pout, stabbing at his noodles in defeat. "Italy's so cute. He should be feeding the awesome me that egg roll . . ." He continued his muttering for a few moments as he ignored the two—unawesome—lovebirds across the table from him.

His pocket began to vibrate and he looked down at it, relieved for the distraction. He pulled out his phone as Italy fed his reluctant brother the rest of the egg roll. The screen read, one new message, and his eyes widened when he saw it was from Hungary. He glanced around to make sure no one was watching him, strangely nervous, before opening the text.

1:23pm:

_Hey, Polsky! I need you to do me a favor, k? Do you think you could do a little recon mission for me on you-know who? Please get back to me soon! xoxoxo_

Prussia's eyes narrowed down at his phone for multiple reasons, feeling conflicted. How had Hungary accidently sent this supposed-to-be secret text to him instead of Poland? And who was this 'you-know-who' person she mentioned? Himself? Was it some new unlucky couple of the week? Was it Austria?

The one thing that's kept running through his mind, though, was the 'xoxoxo,' statement. He grit his teeth, repeatedly telling himself it didn't matter. Poland was currently googoo for Lithuania at the moment, so what did he have to worry about?

"What am I doing?" Prussia muttered. "Why should I even worry about such a stupid thing?" His light chuckle sounded empty even to his own ears and he couldn't break his gaze away from the text.

"What are you worrying about?" Germany asked, taking a bite of his Lo mein. Blue eyes glanced up at him curiously.
"Nothing, nothing," the white-haired man said a little too quickly. He pushed himself away from the table and stood, causing his brother to tense. "I'm done here so I'm going to go wait out in the car, okay?" He forced a grin, winking at the clueless looking Italian.

Germany seemed to relax slightly and nodded, keeping his gaze on Prussia's back as he disappeared out the glass door and into the parking lot.

As soon as he slipped into the navy Mercedes-Benz his brother owned, he held up his phone once more, pulling up his most recent messages again. He clicked on Hungary's number and pressed the phone to his ear, fingers tapping anxiously on his thigh.

Ugh, why was he so nervous? There was no reason to be, since he'd known Hungary practically all his life. Maybe it was the fact that the last time he'd spoken to her she'd beat him senseless with that deadly skillet of hers and shot at him. Yeah, maybe that was it. Maybe he should hang up and not bother—

"Hello?"

Prussia's chest squeezed as the woman's voice filtered from his phone. He snapped himself out of it and instantly put on a farse. "Yo! 'Sup, Lizzie?"

He heard a long sigh echo into his ear. "Oh, Prussia, it's you."

"Hey! What do ya mean 'Oh, it's you'? Of course it's the awesome me!" He didn't really care, though. He was just enjoying the sound of her accent, happy she hadn't hung up on him yet.

"What do you want?"

Prussia grinned to himself, masking his other emotions. "Well, I just thought I'd call to let you know that the text you sent to Poland was sent to my phone instead."

There was a sharp curse on the other line and some shuffling. "Really?"

"Yeah, you did. So . . . why'd you text Poland of all people?"

He could practically feel her eyes rolling. "None of your business," she snapped. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to hang up and resend that text to Feliks. Bye, Prussia—"

"W-Wait a moment!" the Prussian said hastily, wanting to hear her voice for a little while longer. There was a small pause before Hungary said reluctantly, "What?"

Prussia racked his brain for something to talk about that would make her stay on the line a little while longer. "Do you know . . . how he's doing?"

"Who?"

The albino rolled his eyes. "You know who. Austria. Pretty boy. That freeload ing noble."

Hungary sighed into the receiver. "Why do you care?" Prussia was silent for awhile and the woman sighed again, giving in. "He's not doing so well. In case you don't remember, he's dying, you moron. Switzerland gave me a call last night after the concert and said that he was convulsing and losing a lot of blood."

The Prussian blinked in shock. A small tinge of worry hit his chest and his eyebrows furrowed. He glanced out the window just as Germany and Italy were leaving the restaurant and heading for the
car. An idea popped in his head and he grinned. "Hey, Lizzie, how about I go check up on him for ya?"

"What?! No, I—"

"Don't worry, I won't mess with him, kesese!" he chuckled. "My awesome presence is sure to cure him of anything! I'll call you when I get there, tschüs!" He hung up on Hungary's protests as his brother slid in the driver's side of the Benz. "Bruder!"

Blue eyes glanced from the Italian getting in the car to him. "Was?"

Prussia smiled, a mischievous gleam in his red eyes. "I think it might do Austria some good if we go visit him tomorrow."

Germany rolled his eyes and started the car. "The sole reason I'm looking after you is because Hungary said that you cannot be near Austria. Or have you forgotten?"

"I just got off the phone with her and she already okayed it as long as I behave. Besides," Prussia looked at the little brunette, "she said he wanted to see Italy."

Said country perked up, his chocolate eyes like saucers. "Really? Me?" He grinned from ear to ear and spun around to Germany, shaking his arm enthusiastically. "Can we go, Luddy? Please, ve? Please?"

The German exhaled heavily, already worn down by the Italian's begging, saying with reluctance, "As long as it's okay with Hungary, I guess we could go."

"Yay, ve~" Italy leaned over and kissed his cheek, sticking his hands up and cheering. "Roadtrip!"

Prussia smirked and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms. Grabbing his phone out again, he sent out a quick text as his brother backed out of the parking spot.

*The faster we get there, the better.*

Chapter End Notes

*Nein - No*

*Nein, Bruder - No, brother*

*Tschüs – See ya*

It's always fun to branch out for a bit into these other perspectives, though this will be the last chapter like this for this story. The rest will consist of only the 3 main POVs for the most part.
Chapter Summary

Austria and Switzerland have a nice day out together. Their trip to the market is filled with caramel, cheeses, and blood.

Chapter Notes

Also, I know I have a few readers from Austria and Germany (holy crap) and I would just like to warn you that the end of this chapter may upset you. Please know that it is not my intention and I am sorry if I offend anyone! All of the events described by me are purely FICTIONAL and created solely for the purpose of this story's plot. I do not wish real harm upon anyone living or landmarks I mention.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The soft soil squished beneath the soles of his feet, causing him to sink down into the earth. The blades of grass licked at his skin, leaving wet trails that tickled his ankles.

*What is this? Blood?*

A rumble and a gust of wind hit him, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. *Was that gunfire? A canon?*

The feeling hit him again and he took another step across the wet lawn. A streak of light lit up the sky, illuminating dark clouds all around him and terrifying black figures etched against the mist, surrounding him on all sides.

He spun around as a crackle erupted behind him, angry dogs nipping at his heels. He fell backwards with another gust of wind, ears going numb as echoes of more dogs screamed in the night. The saturated ground caught him with ease and his gaze caught another brilliant ray of white light snaking its way across his vision. A heavy boom followed close behind the serpent and rocked his ribcage, stealing his breath away with the wind. More blood drops rained down upon him from the side, drenching him as yet another canine howled its malicious pleasure.

He struggled to cover his face from the violence, squeezing his eyes shut against the horrors around him.

He felt something warm grab him under the arms and he found himself being slung across someone's back. He grasped around the person's neck and clung to him tightly, watching as his savior swung a mighty silver blade that sliced clean through the wall of dark silhouettes. The figure ran faster than the cutting wind, taking him deeper and deeper into the dense forest and away from the battle.

The foliage began to lighten with topaz and emerald colored light, trees and ferns dissolving out of the dark mist. The figure's tattered cloak flittered behind them and he turned to glimpse a quick
profile of thick lashes. Slowing down in a clearing, the figure set him down gently on the dry grass, leaning him up against a stone jutting from the soil. His savior had his back to him for a moment before turning to face him with the same glowing emeralds as the trees and ferns.

The figure knelt down and pressed a firm hand against his chest and spoke his language in a familiar, if thick, accent.

"Ich werde dich immer beschützen."

And then he opened his eyes.

The musician blinked, lifting a hand to block the harsh rays of sunlight biting at his eyes. He yawned and rubbed his face. By how much the sky was lightened he could tell it was around early morning or so. Wait. How could he see the . . .

Austria sat up quickly, hissing at the tugging stiffness in his back, and widened his eyes.

He was lying in the center of his back yard.

*How did I get out here?* He leaned back on the damp grass and sighed, smoothing out his hair. He forced his mind to think back to the night before.

Switzerland had given his last amount of medicine for the night and left him to sleep. He'd woken up sometime in the night with an incredibly dry mouth and got up to get some water. He remembered walking downstairs, his house was dark and a massive thunderstorm was raging outside his sliding glass doors. He stepped over to the glass to get a better look at the lightning and —

"I must have wandered outside," he murmured, confused. Why would he do such a thing? He sighed again. "Ah well, I guess it doesn't matter now, at least I'm in one piece."

Austria stood up carefully, minding the stitches in his back. He stretched a bit and heard his joints cracking loudly. He gave a sigh and glanced around him. Despite the raging storm the night before, the morning was gorgeous. There wasn't a cloud in the bright blue sky and birds were chirping around him in the trees and bushes. There was a dewy chill in the air and the wind was picking up, but he stood there happily enough and enjoyed the wholesome feeling in his chest, instead of the normal pains. He listened to the way the breeze rustled through the trees and looked to see their limbs rocking and swaying like some kind of ritualistic dance. The red and yellow and orange leaves rustled against each other as nature's chimes and rhythmically *ticked* against the ground in tune with their brothers in the trees.

The Austrian gave a small smile and turned away from the tiny melody, starting towards his house. He slid the glass door open slowly—thankful he hadn't locked himself out—and peeked inside. The house was quiet and warm, showing no sign that anyone was up yet which kind of surprised him considering how early he's seen her get up. He stepped quickly inside, slightly grateful for the climate change, and locked the door behind him before heading for the staircase. He probably should change out of his damp clothes, maybe even take a shower to get the dirt smell off of him.

So he spent about an hour cleaning himself up, minding his stitches of course, and getting dressed for the day as the sun rose steadily into the sky. After he was done and felt fresh and awake, he began his way towards the kitchen to see to his growing hunger. Since he was starving, having not really eaten since lunchtime the day before, he was looking forward to breakfast with extra vigor.

He opened up the fridge and was met with bare shelves. He looked inside the containers that he put
the leftovers from the other day in and spotted just enough for a meal left. I suppose Switzey and Liechtenstein had the rest last night, he thought to himself, grabbing out the containers. He scooped out the rest of the gulasch and the last dumpling onto a plate. He placed the plate into the microwave and punched in a time before pressing start and walking back upstairs to make his bed while he waited for the food to heat up.

Austria stopped in the hallway for a moment and gave a peek inside one of the other bedrooms. He spotted Liechtenstein curled up, sleeping soundly despite the light shining in on her face from the window. He silently left the little girl to her peaceful sleep and backed over to the room across from his. Creaking the door open cautiously, he gave a quick glance at the sleeping blonde buried under a mountain of comforter and blankets. Switzerland was sleeping deeply, undisturbed by the sun as he had pulled the thick, velvet drapes closed across the windows.

I hope he's ok, he thought to himself. Maybe he's having a bad dream. Or . . . Austria's heart surged with a sudden panic. What if he's sick? What if I made him sick?

He quickly pressed his palm to the blonde's forehead to see if he had a fever, but since he was running one himself he couldn't tell for sure. He exhaled in frustration and pulled his hand back. He could go grab a thermometer and see if the Swiss had one that way, but he didn't want to risk waking him up. The only other way to tell if he had a fever would be to . . .

Kiss him.

Austria could feel his cheeks warming just at the thought. The lips were the greatest way to tell if someone was running a fever or not, because of the sensitive nerves under the skin. Actually, now that I think about it I believe that Vash was the one who told me that, the aristocrat thought, trying to distract himself. It wasn't like it would be the first time they'd kissed, though they'd never kissed on the lips. Switzerland obviously had to kiss him whenever he was sick—for fever's sake—and vice versa, not to mention the quick little cheek pecks he'd manage to sneak by when they were younger.

And the kiss he'd given him the other day on the forehead.

So, that's what he would do. He would just give him another kiss on the forehead to see if he had a fever. Nothing more, nothing less.

The Austrian leaned closer to Switzerland's face, gently brushing a few blonde strands of hair to the side. He bent down quickly and pressed his lips softly to the man's forehead, ignoring the emotions heating up inside him while he focused on the temperature. Relief filling him as he felt nothing but coolness against his lips, he couldn't help but press another sighful kiss to the blonde's forehead before pulling away. It must be a bad dream.

Switzerland's face seemed to relax afterwards and he muttered sleepily, rolling onto his back, his hands moving to rest on his pillow. He spotted pink sleeves hanging loosely around the blonde's arms, lace embroidery around the wrists.

So this is the infamous present that Liechtenstein gave him. The aristocrat gave a soft chuckle and lightly traced underneath the Swiss's eye, happily thinking, I'm glad his black eye is finally gone. The musician let his finger run down a silk-skinned cheek and across his bottom lip. His cut is
better, as well, and the bruises on his neck. He continued to brush against the blonde's face, forgetting the world around him.

Austria's heart and limbs froze as he witnessed the fluttering of eyelashes next to his finger before dark forest green orbs peeked out from under the black curtains. "Hey..." the Swiss murmured, his voice thick with blissful sleep, and leaned into the country's hand on his cheek.

What? Austria mind came screaming to a halt, his cheeks heating up a tad. For a second, it looked as if the man was about to smile, but then suddenly green eyes widened with a mix of realization and horror.

"What the—?!" Switzerland's shout was cut off as he hit his skull on the headboard in his attempt to spring away from the Austrian. Grasping his head in pain, the blonde paused and glared up at him, growling, "What the hell are you doing in my room?!

And there he is. Austria was silent for a moment and couldn't think of a reply. He was a tad too occupied with staring at the chest revealed beneath the open buttoned shirt, his mouth beginning to salivate at the sight of flushed skin and a little pink nub peeking out. Switzerland seemed to notice where he was staring and his face went beet red all the way to his ears.

"G-Go away, you—you idiot!" the Swiss stammered, pulling closed his shirt. He seemed to notice something else and somehow his face got redder as he took the comforter and pulled it up to his neck self consciously. He glanced at the clock. "Scheisse, it's only 6:30! What are you doing up so early?"

"I only woke you up so I could ask where you put my medicine," Austria said calmly, literally spitting out the first excuse that came to mind. He didn't want to state the real reason he was in the blonde's bedroom. Or what he had been doing.

Switzerland seemed to calm down slightly, his eyebrows furrowing. "Did you have another episode?"

"Ah... sort of," Austria muttered reluctantly, finally looking away from the Swiss. Now he was wishing he hadn't said anything to him.

The blonde's face became concerned and he sat up, still holding his shirt closed. "Tell me what happened," he said.

"Go back to sleep," Austria replied instead, standing up slowly. He smoothed back his hair and headed for the door. "I'll just get it from you when you wake up later."

"I can't go back to sleep now," the Swiss grumbled, rubbing his eyes. He waved his hand at the musician, shooing him out of the room. "I'll bring it to you in just a second, but let me wake up first."

The Austrian couldn't help but chuckle again and nodded, leaving the blonde's room. His heart failed to calm down from the scare that had just went through him. If the Swiss had known that he was kissing him in his sleep he would have definitely hit him and given him the scolding of a lifetime. His mood fell somewhat at that thought and he suddenly became nostalgic. They didn't have to worry about little things like a kiss when they were younger, and now that they were older they barely acknowledged each other.

But the way that Switzerland had reacted to his touch when he woke up was... encouraging. Maybe—just maybe—there was something still there. The aristocrat laughed to himself and ran his
fingers through his hair. The only good thing that came about from his illness was the fact that it brought the Swiss to him again.

And he wasn't going to let him get away.

...xXx...

He heard footsteps coming up behind him as he dried his hands, already finished with eating breakfast and doing the dishes. The Austrian turned around to spy a certain Swiss standing in the middle of his kitchen, and was delighted to see that he hadn't changed out of those pink pajamas of his. Unfortunately, though, the shirt was now buttoned, but it really did suit him, if that wasn't mean to say.

Switzerland mumbled a tired and late, "Guten Morgen," and rubbed his eyes, a pill bottle in his other hand.

The musician frowned.

"You know, I don't really need to take those today. I feel fine, actually."

"Liar," the blonde sighed. "You just got through mentioning that you had another episode... Which, by the way, you've yet to have told me what happened."

It was Austria's turn to sigh and he pushed up his glasses. "Forget about it. You don't need to know." As soon as the words left his mouth he instinctively cringed, knowing full well there was about to be an argument.

Because his words hit a nerve within Switzerland, and his small hand came up to rest upon a pink covered hip. "What do you mean I 'don't need to know'?” he snapped, his disheveled hair swishing. His mood was already foul partly because it was still so early in the morning and he hadn't quite woken up entirely just yet. "Of course I have a goddamn right to know what's going on with you—why else would I be here if it wasn't to keep an eye on you?"

The aristocrat returned his anger with a steely gaze, hiding the pang of hurt that flashed through his chest. Right. Switzerland and his sister were there just to keep an eye on him for Hungary, nothing more. That fact saddened him a little.

"Why should I tell you?" he asked coolly, his voice slightly hardened.

The Swiss stuttered for a moment, trying to regain some composure. He pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned in frustration. "It's because," he started, green eyes looking back up at him. "It's because I'm concerned for your health."

Austria's expression changed as he tried to hold back a smile, snickering and pointing at him. The blonde shook his head in confusion.

"What?"

"I'm sorry, but... I just can't take you seriously in that outfit."

Switzerland's face flamed and he let loose a stream of insults at the musician, self consciously smoothing out his shirt as the Austrian began to laugh. There was a long, tense pause that was filled with the man's chuckling and the Swiss gave a pout, a growl, and threw his hands up in the air. "Gah! You're an impossible man, you know that?" He turned around and started heading out into the hall. "I'll go change if it bugs you that much! Stupid... idiotic... moron noble..."
"No, no, wait," Austrian said quickly, catching him by the shoulder. He managed to halt his laughter and instead gave him a charming smile, gesturing to the pill bottle. "How about we make a deal?"

Emeralds glared at him cautiously. ". . . What?"

"I'll take my medicine peacefully," he said, a glimmer in his violet eyes, "if you promise not to wear anything else but that for the rest of your stay here, hmm?"

"Hey!" Switzerland pushed him away as he fell into another laughing fit. "You're absurd! I can take you poking fun at me every once in awhile, but this is a little too far. My sister made me this, and I will not have her be made fun of."

The brunette raised his hands in surrender. "I'm not making fun," Austria said, smothering his next chortle. He looked at the hardwood flooring as he calmed down and covered his mouth as his cheeks warm up a little in embarrassment. "I actually do really like you in those pajamas. I swear on my honor."

"You have no honor," the blonde muttered in vexation. He gave a great heave and thrust the pills toward the aristocrat. "Here, just take the damn things before you give me an even bigger headache."

Austria grabbed the bottle without question and kept his gaze on his fellow country as he took his morning pills.

Switzerland's frown deepened. "If you expect me to keep my end of that ridiculous bargain, you're going to be disappointed."

The Austrian gave the man back the bottle. "Now who has no honor?"

The Swiss rolled his eyes up to the grand painted ceiling, as if begging the marble carvings to fall on him and spare him from the lunacy of it all. He waved a frill bordered hand in dismissal and began to walk towards the staircase. "Whatever. I'm going to go get dressed now and when I get back I expect you to tell me what happened."

The aristocrat exhaled loudly. "When you get back we're going to go to the market," he said, catching the blonde's attention. "I need groceries if you two are going to be staying here for awhile more. We'll pick up some things for breakfast for you and Liechtenstein while we're out, too."

"Alright then."

"Do you want her to come with us?" Austria asked.

Switzerland stood a moment on the step, thinking. "No," he said quietly. "She usually doesn't sleep this late so she must be tired." He began walking upstairs again. "We should let her sleep."

Austria nodded in agreement and watched the man disappear up the staircase. He went back into the kitchen and grabbed his car keys from beside the fridge before heading towards the sliding glass doors in the dining room.

He stood there for a moment, looking outside at his yard, his eyes ghosting over the trees and the rolling hills out behind his house. The sun was surprisingly bright that morning, even though it was only a little past 7 o'clock. There were no clouds at all in the sky—having rolled away from the nighttime storm a few hours ago—and the sky was a light baby blue with a touch of grey and pink from the risen sun.
The distant trees were displaying gorgeous colors of reds, oranges, yellows, browns, and even a touch of violet amongst the plethora of leaves they still held onto. It was autumn and the colors were starting to fall, painting the grass with odd patterns. And he knew that a little ways into the painted forest there was a small drop off that led to a river that flowed throughout his entire property. It was probably swollen now from the constant rain over the past week and the musician could imagine the banks overrun with fast moving water.

The thought of the water gave him a chill and Austria realized it was pretty cold in his home. He slipped on his shoes and stepped outside, quickly traversing to the right and across his line towards a small greenhouse. He payed no mind to the flowers for the moment—he would feed and water them when they got back—and instead stooped down beside the door where there was a pile of chopped firewood. Grabbing a few pieces, he made sure the greenhouse door was shut tightly and returned to the house.

Switzerland was just making his way back down the stairs as he entered, fully dressed in his green uniform and hair neatly combed. He looked at him quizzically, inquiring, "What are you doing?"

Austria walked by him into the living room, saying, "I'm going to get the fire started. It's a little chilly in here, don't you think?" And he did just that.

The Swiss waited patiently until he was done and the fire was roaring before asking, "Haven't you got a thermostat or something? This seems a little old fashioned."

The aristocrat blinked at him, raising an eyebrow and giving him a look that practically screamed 'Are you blind?' The brunette comically gestured to himself and his home, the house creaking to add effect to the point he was making.

And he could swear there was a hint of a smile on Switzerland's lips as they walked to the front door. "At least even you can admit that you're a bit outdated," he murmured as they pulled on their coats and scarves.

Austria rolled his mauve eyes but smiled as they left the house, glad the Swiss' mood had alleviated a tad, and continued towards the garage.

...xXx...

The drive to the market went smoothly but they had to park a ways away from the store due to traffic. There were more people about than you'd think there would be on a Saturday morning, but that was alright for the two countries and they took their time walking the rest of the way, enjoying the cool air and the sunshine.

"So, where is this market we're heading to?" Switzerland asked, peering into a confectionery at all of the sweets and cakes.

"It's just a few blocks away." Austria gave a small chuckle at the man, catching the blonde's attention.

"What?"

The brunette motioned towards the shop the Swiss had been staring into. "We can go in, if you like, Vash."

Switzerland visibly twitched at the use of his name again, but let it slide since they were in public. He shook his head, glancing at the candy wantonly one last time before turning away. "No, I don't need sweets right now. I haven't even had breakfast yet—" The man gasped when a hand caught
his wrist and he found himself being tugged into the shop. "Hey!"

"It doesn't hurt to look," Austria said to him jovially, releasing his arm once they were inside.

Switzerland grumbled something quietly into his scarf and smoothed down his jacket, looking around. The confectionery was quaint and homely, a few other customers inside, along with the cashier, that were happy to be out of the cold. He couldn't help himself as he inhaled deeply, taking in the many aromas that were thick in the air: the sharp scent of cinnamon and pure vanilla, the warm smell of cocoa and rising flour, and the sweet perfume of delicious fruits like raspberries and oranges. The shelves were stocked with various kinds of chocolate bars, candies, and gummies while the display cases were full of many different cakes, truffles, ice cream, mousse, and even some pretzels covered with gooey goodness. All of it handmade.

The blonde's heart fluttered.

The Austrian watched in amusement as the man went about roaming through the store. His mood was totally changed, and he had a softer look across his face and those gem eyes of his gleamed. I guess our love for sweets is another thing we both have in common, he thought. The Swiss was completely dazzled by the shop.

But he didn't go crazy by grabbing armfuls of candy or anything—not like he wanted to—and instead Switzerland settled with a couple of chocolate bars, some sour looking flower-shaped gummies, and two caramel covered apples. After purchasing his stash he strode back over to the Austrian and handed him an apple.

Eyes widened behind wired spectacles in surprise as Austria grabbed the stick the apple was perched on slowly. "You didn't have to."

The Swiss scoffed as they stepped back outside, sliding his candy carefully into his jacket pockets. "It's not like it cost me a fortune, idiot. And it's the least I could do to repay you for the concert," he said nonchalantly holding up his apple. "Plus you're the one that dragged me in there . . ."

"Vielen dank," the musician hummed warmly. The Swiss just waved off his thanks and swiftly darted out his tongue to catch a drip of warm caramel before it fell.

Austria had to peel away his gaze from the sight, his chest growing warm, and began to eat his own apple.

The blonde paused a moment and glanced up at him. "By the way, I've been wondering . . . How on earth did Gretta have outfits for Lilli and I ready so soon? We didn't even know we were going until the day of."

"I called her why you were in the bath after you got to my house," the brunette said, glimpsing a small blush form across the Swiss man's nose. "I asked her if she had anything put away that she could use for you—which she replied that she had a dress and an old suit stored away and that she would see what she could do."

"Yeah, but," the blonde said, "She got our sizes dead on and only had to adjust it a little."

"It was just luck, I guess."

"Mmm."

They strolled calmly down the sidewalk for awhile, peeking into other shops and finishing up their snack before arriving at the supermarket. It all went pretty smoothly, in the Austrian's opinion, and
they didn't have a single fight while they were out up until that point. And of all of the things to fight about—

It had to be cheese.

"I don't see why you insist on buying such expensive cheese!" Switzerland hissed, glaring at the questioned object in the man's hand.

"And why shouldn't I buy this?" Austria scowled down at him.

"You don't have to impress me, idiot. I know you practically hoard every cent you can get."

"Oh, and you're any different?"

"Well, I—I mean, that's not my point here." Both were staring exasperatingly at each other, attracting much unneeded attention from other patrons in the market.

"I like this cheese just fine, the price doesn't matter to me."

"It should—it's over 11 Euros!"

Austria sighed in frustration but kept the cheese in his basket. "Alright then, what kind would you like to get?"

Switzerland held up a block. "See here? This kind is just as good as that."

"Doubtful."

"And it's only 3 Euros!"

Austria rubbed his temple, squeezing his eyes shut against the moody Swiss. When he opened them again a quick flutter of fabric out of the corner of his eyes caught his attention. He discreetly glanced to the side and noticed two men standing a few aisles down from them, their backs facing him. One was big and burly with a bald head and wearing a trench coat while the other was small with a black sweatshirt on.

And then he noticed the bandanas tied around their arms. One blue. One red.

"If you want it that bad then I'll get both, ok?" the Austrian whispered harshly, grasping the blonde's arm tightly and pulling him towards the checkout.

"What? Don't get both, that'll just cost you even more—"

"It doesn't matter, keep your voice down!" the brunette shushed, peeking behind them. He saw the smaller figure turn around and he got a glimpse of fierce grey eyes. His heartbeat sped up as he quickly led the confused Swiss around another aisle.

"What's going on?" Switzerland asked. Sensing movement, the blonde looked behind them to catch sight of two men following them. His eyes narrowed and his hand instantly went to his hip where he had a pistol concealed. "Are they—?"

"Yes," the musician huffed, his eyes searching around them for somewhere to go. He spotted a door nearby and quickly made a beeline for it.

Switzerland felt all of his muscles tensing as rage began to seep into his veins. These were the bastards who had hurt the musician not two days ago, giving him those horrid lacerations on his
back.

Oh, they have some nerve to be showing their rotten faces around here so soon, he thought, fuming.

He barely had time to growl out a curse before he found himself being yanked into a tiny, dark room. Austria closed the door against the bright supermarket, bathing them in blackness. "What are you doing??" the blonde snapped before the Austrian covered his mouth with his scarf.

"Shh, Switzey, we mustn't be discovered," the aristocrat whispered, his face very close to his. Not only that, but because of the limited amount of space in the room they were in—some small broom cupboard or the like judging by the brooms and mops they were leaning on—their bodies were pressed flush up against each other and they barely had any wiggle room. The grocery basket was digging into both of their sides and Switzerland didn't dare try to reach for his gun, lest he touch something else accidentally.

The only audible noises were that of the market customers and the sound of heavy boots scurrying by, some choice words following them. Neither of them dared to breathe until they were absolutely positive that the men had gone, in which they both sighed with relief.

Switzerland tried to adjust his position, but froze when it caused the two men's thighs to rub against each other. Austria gave a short cough at the movement, covering it with his hand, and looked down. His chest was still heaving in and out from the exhilaration of running away, his shoulders shaking slightly. Both of their faces were flushed with adrenaline and embarrassment—and anger.

"Why did we hide?" the blonde snapped, trying to ignore the feelings pooling down in his gut. "You should have let me confront those bastards!"

"Be quiet," the aristocrat muttered heavily.

"No, I won't. They're gone already," the Swiss spat back quickly, avoiding looking at the other—though that was nearly impossible. "They deserve to be shot, and don't tell me I'm wrong!"

"B-Be qui—"

"Oh, if I could just get my hands on one of them," the man continued to rant. "I swear I'd make them wish they'd never been born!"

"Vash!" Austria gasped, all of a sudden lurching forward. The blonde caught the man around the waist as a heavy head rested on his shoulder, hot breath wheezing against his skin.

"Whoa, what's wrong?" the Swiss asked, concern filling him rapidly as he supported the aristocrat between him and the wall.

"B-Be quiet," the man panted. "I-I just need a moment . . ."

"Austria." The musician didn't answer him as his breathing got softer and softer, until it was nonexistent. "Austria?"

Switzerland's heart gave a painful thump.

"Roderich!"

...xXx...
Liechtenstein yawned and rubbed sleep from her eyes. The light coming through the windows to her left was blinding and she could hear birds chirping on the other side of the glass. She rolled over lazily and stretched her limbs across the huge queen bed she was in. She yawned again and glanced at the bedside clock.

8:13 am.

The little blonde squeaked in surprise and shot up out of bed. "Ah, I slept too late!" she fretted, flying across the bedroom towards the closet. When she and Switzerland had arrived the few days before, Austria had insisted that they make themselves at home and that the closets and dressers were at their disposal. So she had taken the liberty of hanging up all of her dresses and uniforms in the massive walk in closet her room had.

Liechtenstein quickly picked out a lavender dress with red lace to wear and went in the bathroom to get ready. This messes up my whole day, she moped. She was going to get up extra early and surprise Mr. Austria with a clean house and a nice breakfast to try and cheer him up. She was going to dust the furniture, polish his piano, do the dishes and laundry, sweep the floor . . . She sighed as she buttoned up the back of her dress. I hope they won't be angry at me for sleeping so late, she thought while brushing her hair. Though brother is probably just getting up by now.

The tiny country slid on her matching red and purple stockings, securing them above her knees with the use of garters, and stepped back into the bedroom. She crossed back over to the bedside table for her ribbon and spotted a slip of paper lying underneath it. Tying the plum string in her hair, she picked up the note and opened it, spying her brother's handwriting.

Lilli,

We went to the store to pick up some groceries but we'll be back soon. Keep your Sphinx close and remember not to answer the door for anyone, ok?
-BB

The girl couldn't help but smile down at Switzerland's note in her hands. He always signed the notes he gave her with BB—Big Brother. Her shoulders relaxed somewhat and all of her hasty thoughts from a moment before disappeared. I guess they got up pretty early.

Liechtenstein grabbed her twin Sphinx pistols—a gift for her birthday from her brother a few years ago—out from under her pillow and slid them onto the garters beneath her skirt. She knew not to part from them, otherwise Switzerland would have a fit and fuss over her not being protected. It would probably surprise many of the countries around the world to find out she was always concealing like her brother, and not just guns, either. She always had a small knife strapped to a belt under her skirt that she could access in a moment's notice.

Her big brother made sure she could take care of herself.

After finishing up her morning routine, the girl made her way downstairs with the intention of still getting some cleaning done while they were out—but first she'd need some good music.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she noticed the hearth was lit and went over to stoke the embers, bringing the flames back up. Then she made her way across the hall into the family room that was situated behind the dining room towards the back of the house. It sported a more modern looking black leather couch and loveseat, a flat screen television, an old record player, and a huge stereo system with three shelves full of CDs and cassette tapes. There were framed records all along the wall with pieces of paper inside the glass, signatures written on them. Big names in classical and modern music like Mozart, Haydn, Salieri, Michael Jackson, Elvis, Johnny Cash, Elton John, The
Beatles, and many others.

The tiny country knelt down in front of the shelves and scanned through them, her eyes widening.

"Mein Gott, his collection is astounding," she whispered to herself, slightly envious. He had a whole shelf dedicated to classical music with many of the discs consisting of the before mentioned composers and many others from all around the world.

The second shelf had modern day artists, that ranged everywhere from Celtic to Pop to Rock & Roll to Jazz. There were names such as Rammstein, Whitney Houston, E Nomine, Celtic Women, Shania Twain, Klangkarussel, Swedish House Mafia, Cro, Celine Dion, Cher, and—wait a minute, was that Falco? The Falco? She pulled out the disc, and giggled when her guess turned out to be correct.

Her heart jumped in happiness when she saw Bastian Baker's name and instantly plucked it off the shelf. She stared at the Swiss musician's picture on the cover of his album, and smiled. He was considered a heartthrob in her big brother's country; having gone from playing ice hockey to making music, and she had to admit he was pretty good. She quite enjoyed listening to him at home.

Liechtenstein popped the disc out carefully and slid it into the stereo, eager to hear his voice. She turned it up as the starting track began to play and she began to hum along with it. She set the case down on top of the stereo and bent back down to look at the final shelf of music. Mostly cassette tapes lined those shelves and she pulled out a couple to look at them. They all had handwritten titles on them like "Strings #3," "Winter Piano, '79" and "Orchestra #355," and some of them just had dates on them.

As she was making sure to put them all back in their proper place, she spied a curious title on one of them. Plucking it out of the order, she glanced down at the cursive scrawl:

"Edelweiss."

Curious, but respectful of boundaries, Liechtenstein was just about to put the tape back when she heard a loud thump at the front door.

...xXx...

"Come on, Roderich, stop messing around."

Switzerland's heart pounded as he shook the musician in his arms, trying to get him to wake up. When the brunette didn't respond, he began to panic—something he wasn't used to. He adjusted the heavy weight of the man, shifting his arms around his chest and hugging him close to support him. "Roderich?" he whispered in the Austrian's ear desperately. No response. "Roderich, please stop this. Answer me, dammit!"

The lack of reply seemed to prick at his heart and for some reason he felt his eyes burning. Is he . . . ? The Swiss shook his head in disbelief and held the man tighter to him, burying his face into the aristocrat's neck. "Roderich, please . . . Please wake up," he murmured, feeling his throat constricting and his voice getting thick.

Why? Why is this happening now?

"R-Roderich, please, you can't do this. Not now. Y-You can't. You can't 'cause I-I . . . just no. Please . . ."
He called the man's name a few more times and remained quiet after that, sinking deeper into the heavy silence that surrounded them in the small room. It felt like the darkness had truly closed in on him. Shrinking and pushing in on his ribcage until it squeezed out a choked, high pitched noise from him, his vision blurring and his body shaking. *No, he's not... I won't believe that. No, no, no..."

"No!" He slammed his fist into the man's chest angrily and the tears fell from his eyes, the world crumbling around him. "Wake up!"

A large cough escaped from the Austrian's lips, causing the Swiss to jump in surprise. He blindly stared, wide-eyed, at the closet wall, feeling the man heave and gasp wildly, fighting against the blood gushing from his throat. The blonde just held onto the musician, supporting him as he struggled to catch his breath. His arms were like vice grips. Despite the relief flooding through him at the man's revival, even as he felt warm blood begin to pool on the side of his neck in between the skin and his scarf, he didn't let go. He couldn't.

Switzerland let the aristocrat get it out of his system, staying quiet until he had regained control of his lungs. "Don't you ever do that to me again," he whispered harshly, squeezing his eyes against the flow of tears that were streaming down his cheeks.

"I-I'm sorry," Austria wheezed softly, his words barely audible. He lifted his head up slowly, shaking, and the Swiss glimpsed the appalling sight of blood rushing out of the man's mouth and down his chin. It was like something out of a vampire horror flick.

The blonde held him up with one hand as he untied his scarf and went to wipe away the blood—giving his mind something other to do instead of focusing on the scare he just endured. In the faint light coming from around the door he could see the Austrian's eyes crinkle in confusion and he grabbed his wrist. "Your scarf..." he said hoarsely.

Switzerland shook his head and easily pulled out of the man's grip, beginning to wipe at the man's face. He repressed an old memory coming to the surface of how he used to do something like this all the time, and just kept himself calm, fighting to stop his tears. He felt the musician place a hand on his cheek, a thumb slowly brushing away the tears trails on his cheeks.

*Dammit,* the blonde thought. *I was hoping he wouldn't notice.*

"I'm sorry," the Austrian repeated, his eyebrows furrowing some more. "I'm so sorry, Vash. I must have worried you."

The Swiss stiffened and stopped wiping after the blood was all gone. He glared at the man's own scarf, as if it was the garment's fault that the country nearly died. "Damn right," he hissed halfheartedly, feeling his eyes well up again. "Nearly scared me half to... t-to—"

The aristocrat just wrapped his arms around the blonde, standing a little straighter to try and take some of the weight off of the smaller country. No words were said for quite some time and that was okay. The Austrian was still recovering from his attack, breathing labored, and the Swiss was trembling and trying to stay composed.

After awhile, Switzerland pulled away, his face dry, and stuffed his scarf into his pocket. Keeping his head down, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

Austria covered his mouth as a slight cough jumped its way out—causing the Swiss to freeze in fear, praying that he wasn't about to fall into another attack. Nothing happened, though, and the musician gave him a small apologetic smile. "I'm better now, sort of. Thank you."
"For what?"

The Austrian stroked his cheek again. "For being here."

Switzerland's eyes widened in the dark and he looked away at the door, his heart racing. "Yeah, well, how about we get out of here now, huh?"

The aristocrat attempted a chuckle, smiling down at the blushing blonde. "Well, no matter how we exit this here cupboard, I guarantee it'll be awkward. We should get a few curious stares." He chuckled again, throat rumbling.

The blonde frowned. "Stop joking, this is serious."

"I know. That's why I'm joking."

The Swiss just rolled his eyes, shifting his hand towards the doorknob and trying to open it. He jiggled the knob a few times before muttering out a curse. "It's locked."

"Now it's going to be even more awkward," Austria huffed.

Switzerland gave a long, drawn out sigh and thumped his head against the wall. "What do we do?" he mumbled, completely exhausted.

"We could call out loudly and bang on the door, maybe moan a few times," the musician quipped, regaining some of his personality and general pain-in-the-buttness back.

A thought popped in his head and, ignoring the man's lewd suggestion, pulled his phone out of his pocket. *Guess I have no choice*, he thought and dialed the most familiar number to him.

…xXx…

Liechtenstein's heart gave a great lurch as someone pounded on the front door again. She padded her purple dress quickly and took out one of her Sphinx pistols, turning off the music playing behind her. Another *thump* sounded before she could hear someone fiddling with the lock.

Perhaps it was just her brother and Mr. Austria outside with their hands full of groceries, unable to open the door.

No. That thought instantly struck her as wrong. Her stomach began to tighten up and she did the only sensible thing she could think of.

She hid.

Ducking around the corner into the living room, Liechtenstein slipped in among the antique furniture, crouching between one of the couches and side tables. Flicking the safety off of her pistol and tucking down against the wall, the girl heard the front door open and heavy boots shuffle in.

Heartbeat thudding loudly in her ears, Liechtenstein held her breath and kept still.

"Oi! Warum bist du so langsam, Bruder?"

The tiny country nearly fainted when that voice echoed through the wall behind her. Confusion spilling into her skull, she immediately got up from her little niche and put her gun away. She strolled carefully around the corner into the main hall, peeking to see Prussia kicking his boots off while a disgruntled looking Germany came in from outside.
"Mr. Germany?" Liechtenstein chirped, drawing attention from the three standing near the door. The man looked liked he was just about to say something when all of a sudden an excited brown blur whizzed by him straight for her.

"AUSTRIA!"

The brown blur—whom she quickly deduced as a certain eccentric Italian—smashed into the poor tiny country and picked her up, hugging her tightly. Squeaking, her dress fluttering, Liechtenstein tried in vain to pull away only to see Italy actually looking at whom he hugged and set her down.

"Ah, I'm sorry, la mia piccolo bellezza," he gasped. "I thought you were Austria. But sì! You're cute, so I'll hug you, too!" And with that, the blonde girl found herself being hugged again by the Italian, though a little less forcefully. She just giggled at the man and patted his back.

"Italy," Germany chastised quietly, eyeing the display with a mixture of exhaustion and anxiety. The Italian parted from her and turned to look back at the two Germans staring at him.

"Ve?"

"What are you guys doing here?" Liechtenstein questioned, twiddling her fingers nervously as she did so. The Italian she didn't mind so much, as he was carefree, kind, and nothing if a bit of a sweetheart. However, she felt herself shrinking in the shadow the two Germans cast as they loomed above her. And from the mixture of looks between them—one cocky and mischievous, the other tired and uneasy—she began to feel her heart beat quicken again.

She kept reminding herself that her guns were only a skirt lift away. Her knife less than that.

"So, where's your host?" Prussia asked loudly, strolling past her down the grand entry hall, raising his arms up above him. "I'm here to cure him with my awesome!" He looked around the room distastefully, as if the paintings and carvings insulted him. "I bet he's upstairs doing that yoga thing he's so fond of, practicing his Flexibilität for whatever."

Liechtenstein heard a sigh come from behind her, along with a muttered, "How am I related to him?" She turned to see Germany pinching the bridge of his nose.

The blonde man looked at her apologetically. "I was kind of, uh, ganged up on. And that's why we're here now."

Ignoring another giggle rising from her at the thought of the tough German being 'ganged up on,' she called after the Prussian, "Mr. Austria and my brother aren't here right now."

"Ve?"

"Really? Huh. So, they just left you here all by yourself? Alone?"

Prussia turned around, scarlet eyes wide. "Oh, pity," Prussia snorted. He stretched his arms above his head, his joints popping loudly. "After we came all this way, too. I guess we'll just chill here until they get home."

The tiny country felt herself getting a tad annoyed. "I do not believe I gave you permission to stay here—"
"It's not yours to give, twerp," spat the silver-haired man, grinning playfully at her with narrowed eyes.

And now she was a tad offended. "Even so, I believe that Ms. Hungary told you not to come—"

"Ms. Hungary isn't here."

"That doesn't mean that you can just come in here and—"

"I'm awesome and can act however I want, wherever I want."

"It's still not your home—"

"It's not yours either."

"—and it will never be yours." Liechtenstein leveled her own glare to his and held her ground. She didn't care if he was twice her size and stronger than her, she would not tolerate any disrespect to her or Mr. Austria.

An uncomfortable silence fell between the four countries and Germany was just about to step in and diffuse the situation when a phone went off, scaring everyone in the process. The dirty look erased from the girl's face as she pulled out her cell from some hidden pocket in the fold of her violet dress and read the caller ID.

Mein Bruder.

She put the phone to her ear, answering with a, "Hello?"

It was silent for awhile and Germany stalked over to Prussia, hitting him in the arm and scolding him. Italy stayed near the tiny country, but kept his attention glued to the two Germans. It was only when Liechtenstein spun around to face them, as well, did he spare a glance to her. Her face was contorted with worry and she caught the man's attention instantly with the pleading tone in her voice.

"Mr. Germany, I need to borrow your car!"

...xXx...

"What the hell were you guys doing in there? Bloodplay?"

"Ve? What's bloodplay?"

Austria sighed at the laughing Prussian and oblivious Italian as he removed his red-stained scarf and necktie. Liechtenstein had shown up to let him and Switzerland out of the convenience store janitorial closet, towing along Italy, Germany, and the silver-haired buffoon. The young girl looked ready to throw a fit at the sight of the two men walking out of the closet: faces and shirts all bloody and looking haggard. The Swiss was currently doing his best to try and explain the situation to his fretting sister while simultaneously grilling into Germany on what exactly they were doing there.

The Austrian, however, was still trying to regain his composure from his massive attack, his mind whirling on what possibly could have caused it. He glanced around the aisles and noticed something strange. There were no people around their small little group, no gawkers at the fact that two men just stepped out of a closet covered in blood. The back aisleway of the store was completely barren.
He gave a cough and cleared his throat of all of the gobbledygook stuck in it, handing his grocery basket to a distracted Liechtenstein. He wove his way around a still laughing Prussia and down one of the aisles toward the front of the store.

"Austria, where are you going?"

Oh. So they were no longer on a first name basis, good to know. The brunette shook his head and stuffed his soiled necktie into his jacket. The worry Switzerland had expressed for him was foreign, but pleasant. The only person he was used to fussing over him nowadays was Hungary. Her and Germany—but Germany was a whole different matter entirely. It was just strange for the blonde to act that way toward anyone but his sister, especially since they haven't been on the best of terms lately. But now the Swiss was back to his usual stone exterior, remaining vacant, if a bit annoyed, around the other countries.

He missed it. He missed how they used to be. How they didn't care for anyone else but each other. So the musician would just pocket their moment in the closet until he could review it at a later date.

Austria felt more than heard the group of countries following after him as he rounded the corner at the end of the aisle and stopped.

All of the patrons from the store, employees and customers alike, and even some people filing in off the street, were gathered around the cashier in a large mass and all looking up at a big television. Flashing across the screen were photos and videos of a massive wildfire taking place somewhere and the reporter rambling on about rescue attempts by the local firemen.

His gaze would have only lingered on the TV for a moment if the news hadn't flickered to a map of his whole country to show the size of the fire. Austria's mouth dropped open and he heard a gasp beside him.

His whole border with Germany was lit ablaze.

It all made sense now; his attack, and why the two Prussian extremists had showed up. They wanted to mock him, pin him down and make him watch himself burn. His eyes flashed quickly over the map as his heart rate increased—from the Dreieckmark all the way to the town of Bregenz on the Bodensee. Towns and forests on either side of the border were lit aflame by what seemed to be a massive arson attempt.

People in the crowd were murmuring their sympathy and distress. Some were crying and trying to ring up relatives in the areas shown. Some were even remarking on how there was no way that fire was caused by man, that it was an act of God himself. Photos from the dead forest of the Dreieckmark area appeared on the screen and various towns as well. And the reporter was saying that in some areas the blaze had travelled as far inland as 32 km (20 miles), and was swallowing up cities like . . .

_Salzburg._

The Austrian's hands flew to his mouth in horror as the television showed photographs of bakeries on fire, parking garages, theatres, schools, hospitals, cars, and homes.

He felt strong arms catch him as his legs gave out and he managed to tear his gaze away from the sickening newscast to look into cobalt eyes. Germany just looked back at him with a combination of alarm, confusion, anger, and sadness. He could almost feel the man's pain pulsing out of him and mixing with his own. It was not just Austrian cities that were on fire, but Germany's as well.
Landmarks, history, and culture on both sides were being burnt to a crisp.

Austria managed to regain his feet and grasped his brother's hand on his shoulder, squeezing it tight to help keep the both of them grounded.

And they snapped into action. Whipping out his cell, the musician quickly made his way through the mob of spectators around the television and out of the store, as did the German. He heard the others race after them and while Germany was calling up his boss, Austria tried instead to call Greta.

As he put the phone to his ear and suffered through the agonizingly long rings, he was met with one of those snarky answering machines. Dread started to creep into his nerves and his hands began to shake as he redialed the number at least a dozen times. He muttered a curse and finally decided to call up his own boss, striding down the sidewalk and swiftly heading for where he had last parked his car.

Germany followed close behind and called back to his brother, pausing from his phone conversation, and tossing him his car keys, "Look after things for awhile, ja?"

Prussia just stood agape at him, barely catching the keys. "What the hell's going on?"

Germany just shook his head and ran after the Austrian.

Switzerland glanced at the Prussian and then at the two men practically jogging down the street, and then at his sister. She stood beside him, holding the grocery basket, her big green eyes wide. He shuffled his feet anxiously and looked back at Austria's retreating form. He felt a hand touch his.

"Go on, Bruder, I'll be alright," he heard Liechtenstein say.

And that was all he needed to get his feet moving. He vaguely remembered shouting for her to be careful and that he'd be back soon, but the only thing he was truly focused on was catching up to that purple coat fluttering in the distance.

Chapter End Notes

Ich werder dich immer beschützen – I will always protect you
Sheisse – shit (or Sheiße some times)
Vielen dank – Thank you very much
Warum bist du so langsam, Bruder? – Why are you so slow, brother?
La mia piccolo bellezza – My little beauty
Sìì! - Yay!
Flexibilität – flexibility
Mein Bruder – my brother
Ja - Yes
Bruder – brother

I have a firm headcanon that Austria is a fan of music - shocking, I know! Not just classical music, though, which I'll acquiesce is most definitely his favorite, but in my headcanon he's a fan of all types which is why I made a point to list so many. Even Falco! (which if you don't know famously sang "Rock Me Amadeus")
Chapter Summary

Austria confronts his boss, Prussia, and his feelings, while Switzerland and Liechtenstein get thrown into the action.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Switzerland had caught up to the two men and slid into the backseat of the violet Audi, he felt a hand clasp him on the shoulder. He turned to see Germany nodding at him—grateful for his presence—before turning back to his cell phone as Austria hit the gas.

Despite the mid-morning traffic, the musician sped through the streets quickly, narrowly avoiding other cars and pedestrians while chatting on his own cell.

The Swiss flinched slightly when the man cursed and flung his phone into the passenger seat as he braked for a red light. "Where are we going exactly?" the blonde asked carefully.

"We're going to pay my boss a visit," Austria murmured, sounding way more calm than he looked. "I want to know exactly what's going on. How the fire got started and who started it, etcetera."

Switzerland met his gaze for a moment in the rearview mirror. "I think we both know the answers to those questions."

There was a solemn pause before the aristocrat's eyes left his and held steadfast on the road in front of them. No more words were spoken the rest of the car ride aside from Germany's heated discussion with his own boss. The Swiss could feel the tension in the air spitting and crackling like a batch of lightning—and beneath it he could start to feel the utter sorrow radiating from the other men, filling the cab with gloom. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, to convey his sympathy—no, empathy. He was apart of this land just as much as them and could almost feel the fire seething through his veins like he knew it was doing to his kin.

Germany had finished his phone call and had rested his elbows on his knees, burying his face into his hands. Rarely did any of the German countries reveal the more touchy emotions like sadness to others, especially amongst themselves, but this lapse in control was not looked down upon by either of his company. It was a shared moment of silence in which each of them understood one another without having to speak. Switzerland felt his own bones begin to ache for them and he reached out to clasp both Germany's shoulder and Austria's in front of him, a small token of camaraderie in which the blonde was pledging himself to help in their endeavor. Both leaned a bit into his touch and he gave them a reassuring squeeze.

They were going to catch these bastards.

...xXx...

Liechtenstein stood on the curb outside of the grocery store with the Italian, both of them weighed down with bags of food while they waited for Prussia to pull Germany's rental car up.
Italy gave a sigh. "I hope Ludwig and Austria will be okay."

The girl looked up at the moping brunet, offering a small smile. "Don't worry, Mr. Italy—"

"Veneziano."

"Veneziano." Her smile widened. "I'm sure they'll get everything sorted out and be alright."

Italy beamed down at her, lifting his grocery laden arms into the air. "Yeah. Totally! I'm sure Luddy will be ok, ve!" He paused, his cheeks reddening. He quickly put down his arms and ducked his head in embarrassment. "A-And Austria, too . . ."

The smaller country giggled at his expression, shifting the bags in her arms. "Yes, of course."

A red BMW 550i sedan stopped in front of them and the trunk popped open, Prussia stepping out of the car. He walked towards Liechtenstein and took the heavy groceries from her as Italy stashed his in the trunk. She blinked in surprise, her green eyes following the silver-haired man as he went around to the back of the car. He glanced up at her as he began setting the bags in the trunk, catching her gaze. "What are you looking at?"

The little blonde gripped her dress tightly. "Danke shön."

Prussia paused a second, giving a barely-there nod before ducking his head behind the trunk lid.

Liechtenstein blinked in disbelief again. Was the Prussian . . . actually trying to be nice to her? And . . . was he embarrassed about that? No. No, that didn't sound right. What the hell was he supposed to be embarrassed about? And why was he all of a sudden being nice to her? Prussian had only ever shown sarcasm and distaste at her presence.

And she was totally over thinking this.

"Get in the car, airhead, before I drive off without you." Red eyes glared at her as the man closed the trunk, brushing past her. The girl shook herself from her thoughts and slid into the backseat of the sedan. Glancing at Italy in the frontseat as she belted herself in, the silver-haired man poked his head in the driver's side window. "I'll be just a moment."

Prussia stepped away from the car and made his way back towards the store. Most of the crowd that had gathered to watch the tragic news of the fire had dissipated, headed home or went to finish their shopping—like they had done. He had to admit to himself that he didn't plan on having to grocery shop with Italy and the chick today, or any day for that matter. The Italian was alright, but he didn't really care for Switzerland's little sister. However . . .

She wasn't that bad.

She just looked too much like him.

That broody bastard with the stick too far up his ass.

Though, he doubted the Swiss had actually ever tried having a stick up his—

"Hallo."

A force slamming into him ripped him away from his thoughts, and before he could blink his body was dragged around the corner of the store and into an alleyway. He swung his arm blindly and he could feel his knuckles connecting with a jaw. A loud yelp of pain sounded and he was able to
twist away, whipping around to see two men standing before him: one thin and lanky with a red bandana tied around his face and gray eyes, the other a hulking man with a blue bandana who was currently rubbing his cheek where the Prussian's fist had hit it.

"What do you want?" Prussia barked in his native tongue, his fists raised in a defensive stance.

The red bandana guy held up his hands in surrender, taking a step back. "Hey, we're here to give you a message. We're not here to fight." Gray eyes glanced over at his partner. "Though you did clock Albatross pretty good."

"Shut up, Sparrow," the blue bandana hissed, straightening up.

Sparrow? Albatross? What the hell was up with the weird ass nicknames? Wait a minute . . . Prussia's burning red eyes narrowed at the two men and he lowered his hands, his body beginning to relax. "Are you Silver's men?" he asked.

Liechtenstein had sprung out of the car the instant she saw Prussia get nabbed by a couple of guys, yelling for Italy to stay and keep the car running. Even though the two of them didn't get along—at all—she still ran over to try and protect the man. He would probably hate her for even thinking that, but the fact of the matter was that he was no longer a country and, thus, could die as easily as any other human. Plus, trying to help was the right thing to do.

Racing towards the entrance to the alleyway, the girl stopped in her tracks and hugged her body to the brick wall. Hands on her knives, she carefully peeked around the corner. Adrenaline seared through her veins when she spotted Prussia standing with his back to a dumpster, his fists at the ready. She was just about to jump in and help when she heard one of the men speaking to him. Then he suddenly lowered his hands, calming himself and talking back.

What is he doing? Liechtenstein thought. Her emerald orbs squinted at the scene, trying to listen in.

". . . Agent Silver's men?" she just caught the last bit of Prussia's sentence.

"That we are," one of the men replied, the one with a red bandana around his face.

"Then why the hell did you fuckin' grab me?!"

"W-We needed to get you alone, sir," the brute with a blue bandana answered this time.

"We were supposed to give you this message yesterday but you had already left and it took awhile for our master to find you because we lost you at the airport."

The girl could see red eyes rolling up to the sky even from where she stood. She had to strain, though, to hear the Prussian mutter, "The little bastard could have just texted me."

"Too risky."

"Whatever. What the hell does he want me to do now? I already managed to convince my dense brother that we should come here."

What? Who were these guys? The tiny country's pulse quickened as she continued to listen to the conversation, a bad feeling settling into her gut.

"He says that you—" the red bandana began his sentence but then stopped, and Liechtenstein had to pull her gaze away swiftly back behind the wall as he glanced around. The mysterious man then whispered something unintelligible and there was a pause. He spoke up again and she was forced
to use all of her willpower to hear him say, "He says that all you have to do is to plant this in Austria's home and we'll take it from there. Then just go back home and wait. We'll contact you. But before you go, there's something we have to deal with first."

Liechtenstein waited silently a moment before the slight sound of shoes scuffing pavement a few feet away from her snapped her back to attention. She hurriedly burst away from the wall just as a large arm swung around to grab her, catching the back of her dress. She gave a long shriek, purposely ignoring her weapons, and caught the attention of a group of passersby.

"Helfen Sie mir!" she shouted. Just as the pedestrians ran towards her, yelling at the crook who grabbed her dress, she could feel the violet material rip and she managed to literally tear herself away. Feet pounding not nearly as fast as her heart across the asphalt, she flung open the driver's side door of the BMW and slipped in.

Italy gave a surprised gasp as Liechtenstein punched her foot down on the gas, the tires squealing as the car took off from the curb.

The tiny country did her best to try and stay composed as she struggled to see where she was going and keep the car in her lane. As she adjusted her seat forward and up, she noticed that the Italian was spitting questions at her.

"Ve! Are you alright? What happened? Where's Gilbert, ve? Why did we leave him back there?"

Once she got herself situated and her heart composed itself, she buckled herself in and looked over into worried brown eyes.

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine Mr. Italy—I-I mean, Veneziano, I-I'm sorry but there were these m-men after me a-and I just had to get away f-from them," she stuttered out. Huh. Apparently she wasn't as calm as she thought.

Liechtenstein felt a warm hand on her thigh and she glanced down to see Italy's fingers touching the white satin under-dress she had on, visible beneath the huge rip in her clothing.

"Your dress . . ." he began.

The girl patted his hand lightly before waving off his concern. "I'm fine, really," she said, taking a slow, deep, soothing breath. She nodded to herself, finally feeling her nerves starting to settle down. "I'm fine," she stated again, more to herself this time.

Italy eyed her carefully for a moment before settling back into his own seat. "So where are we going?"

"Back to Mr. Austria's house, I guess. There's nowhere else to go."

"What about Gilbert, ve?"

"I don't know." The tiny country flinched slightly at the name, her mind still trying to process the conversation she had overheard. What with Prussia talking to these shady looking men, wearing bandanas and snatching him off the sidewalk, she was having difficulty understanding what she had just witnessed. They had been talking about doing something to Austria, and while she didn't know what exactly, it still made her on edge. And what the red bandana man said about the Prussian . . .

"Veneziano?" Liechtenstein asked softly, catching the humming man's attention.
"Ve?"

"Can you promise me something?" She wasn't sure whether or not she could ask this of him.

Italy grinned at her. "What is it, bella?"

"Could you . . ." the girl took a deep breath, turning on the highway. "When we all get back to the mansion, all of us, do you think you could convince Mr. Germany to take you back home?"

"But . . . ve?" The Italian's eyes widened in confusion at her. "But I'm staying with Luddy and Gil in Berlin."

"Oh, no! I didn't mean that he had to take you home home, I meant if you could get him to take you two—you and Prussia—back to Berlin," she corrected quickly.

"Why?"

"Because . . . Prussia is going to try and hurt Mr. Austria tonight." It wasn't exactly a lie, but at the same time she didn't really know if that statement was true or not. The only thing she did know was that he was planning something with those bandana wearing thugs and some guy called 'Agent Silver.' Whatever it was, she wanted to prevent it at all costs because it didn't sound right.

"Ve? Really?" Italy chirped and she nodded. She saw him twisting his hands in his shirt in her peripheral vision, a rare thoughtful look on his face. There were a few minutes of silence, aside from the quiet alternative rock music on the radio, before he spoke up once more. "Is that why we left Prussia back there?"

The smaller country didn't fail to notice the name change on Italy's part. "Ja," she murmured. She spared another quick glance at him, her bright gem eyes pleading. "Please? Oh, won't you help me with this, Vene, bitte?"

The Italian smiled somewhat at her abbreviation of his name, closing his eyes happily and nodding. "Si, bella, I'll help."

The relief flooding over her almost made her miss their exit, and she let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding. "Danke! Oh, danke so viel. Promise me you won't tell anyone?"

"I promise, ve!"

Liechtenstein drove them the rest of the way back with a smile on her face. Feeling accomplished that she had semi-gotten Mr. Austria a way to avoid Prussia, she put aside the incident that just happened and enjoyed the car ride with her newfound ally. So yeah, she smiled.

Not even noticing the white van trailing behind her.

...xXx...

"Switzerland, what are you doing here?"

The country in question shifted from foot to foot nervously. Austria, Germany, and he had entered the Austrian's capital building a few moments before, pushing past press, PR officials, and security quickly to head for the president's office. Having Austria with them was a blessing, as the security detail seemed determined to keep the German and Swiss outside. It wasn't until the aristocrat had flashed a badge and murmured that they were with him did the burly guards let them go.
The marble floor and paintings lining the hallways glided past them swiftly as they hurriedly followed the brunet. When they had reached the office, the president had been leaning over a pile of papers on his desk with his secretary and several high officials chatting away in his ear. One of the officials was just spouting something involving a terrorist attack when Austria burst into the room, Germany and Switzerland hanging back out in the hallway.

"I demand to know what's going on!" the musician hissed.

The room went silent for a moment before the president ordered everyone else to leave. The man that had mention terrorists protested until the commander gave him a glare and he slunk out of the room with everyone else, passing curious glances to the three countries loitering in the doorway.

And so that's where they were now. Austria's boss had snapped at him for being difficult to get a hold of and he didn't even glance twice at Germany's presence—as the fire was also his problem. But as soon as the hardened eyes spotted the Swiss the man had stiffened, adjusting his glasses and asking why the blonde country was there as well.

"I'm . . . on holiday?" he offered, sharing a look with Austria. He said the first excuse that came to mind because he didn't think the man's boss would take kindly to him 'babysitting' his country. Especially with their recent history.

"You picked a hell of a time to vacation," the president grumbled, shuffling the stack of papers on his desk.

"You never answered my question," Austria said, frustration steeling his voice.

The commander straightened the papers, his voice gruff as he said, "Have you seen the news lately? We know about as much as the press, and they probably are finding out more than we are at this point." He frowned at the Swiss again but the blonde held his ground until the man spoke again. "Switzerland, Germany, if you wouldn't mind waiting outside, I need to talk to him. Privately."

They didn't need to be told twice and, even though the Swiss was unhappy to be left out, he stepped out of the room, sharing a glance with Austria before closing the door and taking a seat on the hallway bench with Germany.

...xXx...

"Now then," Austria's boss began once the other two countries were gone.

"What started the fire?" the aristocrat asked, though deep down he already knew who the culprits were.

"We don't know," the president admitted. He gave a tired sigh and slumped back into his leather chair, taking off his glasses and rubbing his face.

Austria began to pace back and forth in the office as his boss continued to speak, absently rubbing at the burning sensation on his right arm.

"There were no lightning storms along the border yesterday or today that could have caused such a blaze."

"Mmm."

"Even if there had been it is doubtful that this was an accident. The fire was so controlled as it has
only spread along our border with Germany that the only assumption can be that it was purposeful. However . . ."

The commander let his words die as he finally looked at his country. Austria was pretty much making a track around the room, needlessly straightening objects or his outfit, brushing back his hair, adjusting his glasses, and rubbing his arms as if they itched. He was also muttering, but the man could only catch snippets of it. "History . . . Centuries and centuries of history just . . . As if it didn't matter . . . And my people . . . oh god—"

"Austria."

The country snapped his head up at his boss's stern tone, tearing himself away from his agitated state. The man looked just as exhausted as he felt but was doing a pretty good job of keeping it together. Austria quit his pacing and cleared his throat, embarrassed at his momentary actions. He couldn't let himself panic—that wouldn't help anyone.

"My apologies."

His boss nodded and was about to speak again when he gave a rough cough, grabbing a few tissues off of his desk and coughing into them. Austria's heart sank and he leaned his hands on the desk.

"You're not doing any better?" he asked in concern.

"Neither are you," the president gruffed out, throwing the tissues away. "First the contagion and now we have to worry about damn terrorist attacks. Do you have any idea who could be the culprit?"

The aristocrat gave a sigh and sat down across from the man. It was about time he'd told his boss what had happened, considering he'd been putting it off for the past couple days. So that's just what he did.

The man sat quietly through most of the country's story as he told him all about Salzburg and the alleyway incident. Austria purposefully left out Switzerland and Liechtenstein, not wanting to make things more complicated than they already were. When he was finished, his boss quickly wrote down the men's descriptions that the musician gave him and the van. He would have his secretary notify all police departments and news networks to put out an APB out for them as soon as possible. When he was done scribbling, he looked back up at his country.

"Now then, here's what I would like for you to do . . ."

...xXx...

Switzerland had his eyes closed for a long time as he sat on the uncomfortably plush and iron bench outside the Austrian President's office. Germany had been called in to speak with the other two a little over an hour ago and, thus, he was left to his thoughts as he was, yet again, uninvited. The room was sound proof so there was no trying to listen in on what was being discussed. Instead, his mind played through the events of earlier.

It was the fire that had caused Austria's massive attack at the store. His hands clenched tightly into the fabric of his discarded coat that lay beside him on the bench. His hands weren't the only thing to tighten up as he thought of the scare he had gone through inside the closet. When he thought that the musician had truly died . . .

"R-Roderich, please, you can't do this. Not now. Y-You can't. You can't 'cause I-I . . . just no. Please . . ."
Switzerland's eyes flew open to stare incredulously out the velvet draped window opposite him. What . . . What had he been about to say to the aristocrat in that moment?

"You can't 'cause I-I . . ."

His cheeks flushed in unknown embarrassment. He really had no idea what he would have said in that moment, but the implications made his cheeks redden and his heartbeat quicken all the same.

The Swiss coughed into his hand and forced his thoughts away from the subject. Instead, he focused on remembering as much as he could about the two men who had followed them into the grocery mart. He mentally jotted down every physical aspect he could remember.

One was about 5'6 with either tied back or close-shaved hair hidden under a black hoodie. Odd gray eyes, almost silver. Red bandana over his lower face. Left hand and wrist bandaged—most likely because of the scuffle with Austria.

The other was way taller, close to 6'4 at least. Short brown hair, blue eyes, blue bandana. Trenchcoat.

It wasn't much to go on, but he filed away the information nonetheless.

A country never forgot a face.

Switzerland started as Austria burst out of the doors to his right, shouting back inside, "I'm not doing it and that's final!" The hazel-haired man muttered angry insults under his breath as he stomped down the hallway as dignified as he could, ignoring the blonde completely.

The Swiss stood up quickly to follow the pissed off aristocrat, when a hand on his shoulder halted his movements. He glanced back to see Germany inclining his head back towards the office. "He wants to talk to you."

He must have looked surprised since the German nodded in confirmation before following after the seething musician.

Switzerland blinked a moment in confusion. After a moment he straightened his shoulders, still unsure of what happened, and, his face set in serious determination, walked into the Presidential Office, shutting the door behind him with a soft click.

...xXx...

Hello again, it's been awhile since I've had to vent over anything, so here goes.

My day was absolute hell.

It started off just fine, I suppose, despite the fact that I somehow woke up outside. I went and made breakfast and then went to check on my two house guests. I'm glad they're sleeping well here—Lilli especially seems to have settled right in. Vash is still a little uncomfortable, as expected. After all, this isn't his home anymore.

I wonder if he feels unwelcome. Maybe I should do something to quell those fears?

Anyway, I'm glad he didn't wake up when I was checking him for a fever. That could have complicated things between us even further. Or maybe it wouldn't have? He did lean into my palm when I touched his cheek as he slept. One can hope.
But, alas, whatever reason he did that must have disappeared as soon I’d frightened him awake.

I’ve also begun to question his feelings for me quite a bit the past few days. Not just because of this morning’s incident, but also when I blacked out earlier in the store, in that dreadfully tiny janitorial closet. Vash had cried for me—really cried for me. I must question him on this later. And his body was pressed so close to mine . . . It would be a lie if I said I wasn’t disappointed when Lilli and the others freed us from our predicament.

Speaking of Vash, he's still not here. It's close to 9 o'clock at night. Where could he be? Maybe still at the office. I wonder what he could be discussing with my boss that could take all day to talk about.

Oh yes, back to my original purpose for writing today.

So, my meeting with the President didn't go exactly as I had planned. Not only did I get into a major confrontation with my boss, but it had also been in front of Ludwig. And then I had stormed away—admittedly—like a child. I was terribly discomfited afterward, and spent our whole drive back home switching between apologizing for my behavior and ranting about what my boss had told me to do.

He wants me to leave.

To abandon my people.

My country.

Myself.

To go and stay with Ludwig or Elizabeta until this whole situation blows over.

I will absolutely not do that. Despite my usual politeness, I told my boss just exactly what I thought of that idea. It wasn't one of my shining moments. Even though he is the leader of my country, he has no right ordering me to do this. Whether or not I am here doesn't matter if my people and I don't survive this onslaught of disease and terrorism, so I have chosen to stay.

In a metaphorical sense, I am going down with my ship.

Unfortunately, that was just the start of my horrible day. I believe the real reason as to my needing to vent on paper (which I haven't done in months, might I note) has to be none other than that silvery, red-eyed scoundrel who seems intent on ruining my life every chance he gets.

When Ludwig and I had arrived home earlier it was only about noon. It's odd to think just how early all of this happened; this day has flown by. Anyway, when we returned here we happened to walk in on quite a—oh, how shall I put this? Awkward? No, no, not quite. Dangerous is the word I'm looking for. Yes, we walked in on a dangerous situation.

Let's just say it was shock that probably held Ludwig and I back at first. I mean, when we stepped through the doors the first thing that appeared in front of us was Lilli—this sweet, innocent girl who's barely 5ft tall—pinning a certain fool up against the foyer wall. One of her knees was dug into the man's abdomen as a dainty arm pressed tightly against his throat.

I have never quite seen a sight that was both alarming and a tad bit hilarious at the same time. The fact that this small young woman who barely weighs anything overpowering a full grown man nearly made me laugh. However, the severity of the situation quickly set in once we saw Prussia
reaching for a vase nearby to use as a weapon, and Ludwig and myself dashed forward to break up the scuffle. I easily lifted the girl away from him as Ludwig detained his brother.

It surprised me how much Lilli was shaking in my arms—and truly she weighs next to nothing. Whether with anger or fear, I couldn't tell because whatever emotions were in her big eyes immediately disappeared as soon as I had taken her into my arms. I gave her a stern glare, to be sure. Violence is not suited for a young lady, country or not. But she just looked surprised at my interference for an instant before hugging me tightly. Who was more taken aback in that moment, I do not know.

I, of course, couldn't stay mad at her for long. I don't know what this feeling for her in my chest is exactly—perhaps paternal affection? Or maybe I was just leading up to another heart attack.

Once we had separated the two, I left Lilli with Ludwig and Veneziano—who had appeared silently after the fight ended—and pulled Prussia down the hall into my study. I had choice words I wished to give him, plus questions about what had been going on. Here, I shall write down as much as I can remember of the conversation, including our actions, to chronicle this exact event that nearly made me strangle this man:

"What on earth are you doing?" I had only raised my voice a little.

"What do you mean? She attacked me." Red eyes narrowed at me incredibly rudely.

I'd crossed my arms. "Are you serious? You're twice her size! Not that I'm giving you reason to fight Miss Liechtenstein—you know what? Why were you two even fighting in the first place?"

"It's none of your business!"

"Of course it's my business!" Again, my voice was only barely raised. "You come into my home, and assault my guests—"

"Oh, stop being such a tight ass. Yet again, you always did have a—"

And so I smacked him. Not one of my prouder moments, but I was so, so angry that he even dared to change the subject to one such as that. I believe this is when I got really infuriated. Here's the rest of the conversation:

"Do not speak of that. How dare you bring that up."

Prussia just gave me one of his stupid grins and rubbed his cheek. "It seems you're still sore about that. Tell me; are you still sore in other places other than that icy heart of yours?"

I raised my hand again. "You . . . You vulgar miscreant—!" He caught my wrist when I swung to hit his smug face again, and pushed me against my desk. It was painful against my hips and—I'll admit only to you, journal—that a spike of fear ran through my veins.

"Ooo, there's that fiery spirit that I've missed," he laughed. "You keep it so well hidden."

"You used me to get to Hungary. All you do is use and use, never thinking of the repercussions," I spat at him.

"Oh, and you don't?"

"I will not be talked down to!"
"Lackaffe."

"Fickfehler!"

His grin was mocking, those demonic eyes taunting me, but I knew I got him with that one.

I shoved him away with a swift kick aimed at his knee, which he barely avoided. I wish he hadn’t.

"I’m done with this. Leave. Now." I pointed at the door crossly and when he made no move to leave, I gave up and pushed past him.

But then he grabbed my arm and I felt a chill run down my spine as hot breath was pressed against my ear.

"Watch yourself, Roddy."

Oh, I would have slapped him again if the urge to run at his words didn’t kick in beforehand.

I can’t help it.

All those memories of that time came flooding back and I—I just couldn’t be in the same room as him any longer. You, journal, you already know. However, for nearly the past nine hours I have moved around my house and cleaned aimlessly. Sweet Lilli tried to help me, but I just told her to get some rest from the scare she’d had and—oh dear, when I saw her ripped dress! I swear that man is such a brute. If he comes anywhere near my house again I swear I’ll . . . I’ll come up with a good threat later.

Right this moment, now that I’ve written down everything that happened I am doing my best to put that man from my thoughts. He got me so worked up earlier that I did eventually have an attack. Thankfully, I was able to hide it from the others. I don’t want them to worry more than they do.

I do feel guilty that I kicked Ludwig out early, as well as that indecent oaf, but there were just too many people in my house. I couldn’t take it at the moment. So, he had taken his brother and left—how those two are ever related I will truly never understand. They’d left for a hotel nearby for the night, I suppose, so Veneziano opted to stay here. I didn’t really want him here at first, and tried to convince him to leave with the others, but the face he had given me broke my resolve.

He and Lilli helped me with cleaning—against my better wishes. Well, Lilli helped with cleaning and the Italian made lunch, and then dinner not too long ago. I simply couldn’t stomach it, put off from all the events of today. Veneziano seemed disappointed to the point of tears, so I told him to store some away for me and I shall eat it later. Hopefully. I believe I might soon; I can start to feel some hunger pains.

I convinced Lilli to give me her dress so I can mend the tear in the fabric instead of just throwing it out. Really! It’s such a beautiful lavender, it’d be a shame to waste it. The two of them are resting now, thankfully planted in front of the television watching one of the movies from my collection—the Titanic, I think—afraid to put on live TV for the news. I don’t blame them for wanting to ignore the world for the moment.

Perhaps when I’m done with Lilli’s dress I’ll go join them. Or I could take a break; this dining chair is hurting my back somewhat.

Oh. Oh was that the door? Yes, yes it was. It looks like Vash is home. I’m eager to hear about his day and clear my mind of troubles.
Vash is home. I missed the sound of that.

~R

...xXx...

Austria gently closed the leather bound journal and tied it shut. He gave a sigh and leaned back away from the dining table, stretching his back. He glanced over into the kitchen and could see a familiar blonde man slowly trudge into the room. His hair was slightly disheveled and he looked incredibly worn down. The man didn't even look up to see him; instead he just threw down his coat and scarf on the counter and immediately headed for the refrigerator.

The musician gave a small huff of concern, resting his head in his hand as he watched the Swiss pull out the large bowl of spaghetti leftovers. The Austrian just sat in stillness, listening to the Titanic echoing in the background, along with a few comments from the two countries watching it, and scrutinizing the man in front of him preparing the cold food.

As a particularly loud orchestral sequence arose from the television behind him, Austria couldn't help but turn and look to see a ballroom flashing across the screen. A small smile tugged at his lips as memories of many balls and dances flitted through his mind. He continued to watch the movie from a distance until a small clank of a plate being set down caught his attention.

He leaned away from the table again and looked to see the blonde sitting down at the chair to his right, setting his food down. He also glanced down at the table to see an identical plate of food steaming in front of him. His chest began to heat up and he smiled softly at the food. "Danke schön."

"Bitte schön," Switzerland barely muttered out before digging into his plate of pasta.

Austria's smile widened and he stood up to go fetch them some ice tea to drink. The Swiss muttered his own thank you when he handed it to him, and soon the both of them were eating and drinking in silence, paying the most attention to the Titanic in the living room. Liechtenstein had sleepily turned her head at the sound of her brother's entrance and called out a soft 'Welcome back,' Italy waving a 'hello' to him, too, before the both of them turned back to the television.

The musician was brimming with questions to ask the blonde, but he waited patiently for the man to settle down. He just focused on keeping his food down—and refraining from inhaling the pasta as fast as he could because he was, indeed, starving. He hadn't eaten all day, but with the way the day had gone he just simply hadn't thought of it. And the Swiss probably guessed this to be the case since, without even glancing at him, he had reheated a fair portion of food for him.

Switzerland sat quietly beside him, sipping at his tea slowly once he finished eating. The aristocrat could see the stress visible on his face, and he knew by how intently he was staring at the TV that the man was prolonging the inevitable questions that the Austrian was going to ask him.

And though he really wanted to know what his boss and the Swiss had talked about for so long, he instead went a different route.

Austria pushed his empty plate away from himself and turned more towards the blonde, seeing the country's shoulders tense up at his movement. But the blonde still kept watching the movie. It wasn't until the brunette began to lean towards him did he snap his attention to the man beside him, quickly leaning his face just a tad out of reach.

Green eyes were wide as he sputtered in a harsh whisper, "W-What the hell are you doing?!"
The Austrian just gave him a slightly disappointed look, eyebrows furrowing. "I was about to thank you."

"Th-Thank me how?! You could just say it!" The Swiss kept up his whisper so as not to alert the other two countries. "And f-for what, exactly?"

The musician raised his hand up and stroked his thumb on the blonde's left cheek, brushing up under a shocked eye softly. "You cried for me."

"Wait, what?"

The aristocrat sighed, continuing to rub the man's cheek as along as he would let him. "Did you know it's easier for someone who cries a lot to hold in their tears than someone who doesn't cry a lot? You cried for me. Not many people would do that anymore."

Switzerland was so dumbfounded by the statement that the only thing he could come up with was, "My tears were just an allergic reaction being so close to that frilly necktie of yours." He paused. "France would."

Austria gave a small smirk at the comment. "France cries at everything. And Italy."

"Liechtenstein did," the blonde said faintly, casting his eyes down at the table. He gradually looked back up at the man still absentlty stroking his cheek. "Wait, was that a vague reference to me?"

"I was simply stating a fact that would help prove my point."

"Uh huh." Switzerland leaned out of the musician's touch and rested his head on his own hand, leaning on the table while looking suspiciously at him. "So you believe I should shed some tears to help relieve my burden?"

"No, it was just a simple fact."

The blonde rolled his eyes to the ceiling, and gestured melodramatically at the man. "Oh dear, is your shoulder available? I feel a sob coming on!" He huffed and took a sip of his tea. "Screw you, too, idiot."

The Austrian just began to laugh that lilting, exhilarating laugh of his and the Swiss couldn't help but only sigh half-angrily. "Why are you laughing? I just insulted you!"

Austria hummed pleasantly and stared warmly at him with calm violet orbs. "At least you're acknowledging me."

"What's that supposed to mean? I've been here for five days, now, so of course I've acknowledged you!"

The aristocrat just hummed again and lifted his hand to touch the blonde's chin. "We got a little off topic, now didn't we?" The Swiss froze in panic as his heart began to thump heavily.

"Now, are you going to let me thank you?"

"H-How, exactly?" He couldn't keep the stutter out of his voice.

"By fucking you so hard up against this dinner table until the legs give out."

Switzerland's cheeks began to turn a cute cherry color and he gasped when the brunette's thumb ran
along his bottom lip.

Austria was thankful that he hadn't really voiced that option aloud. It would have complicated things possibly beyond repair. Damn, his lewd thoughts were starting to surface, what with the Swiss making that really adorable expression at his touch. Instead, he said, "Like how we used to thank each other when we were little. Just a simple peck on the cheek."

The blonde's emerald eyes just stared at him incredulously as he mumbled out, "Yeah, well, we're men now. Grown ones, at that, too. There's nothing simple about . . . doing that."

The Austrian blinked.

Oh. *Oh.* This might become a problem later on.

He'd never even gave a thought as to the Swiss' sexual orientation—though in the man's country it's not like there was public prejudice towards this kind of thing. As long as you didn't flaunt it, no one cared. And as for himself, he never really preferred either gender, what mattered to him was the type feelings he had for whomever he cared for.

And did he care for Switzerland.

Oh, he *most certainly* did.

"But still," he finally spoke up after a moment of awkward silence, pulling away from his thoughts. He decided to turn on his charm and gave a little pout, lightly patting the other country's cheek with his fingertips. "Please? Just let me do this?"

He could see the internal struggle happening behind Switzerland's guarded façade until finally the man gave a heavy sigh and turned to look at the television again. In the light flashing on his face from the screen, the musician could still see a dark blush coating that lovely skin of his. He gave a curt nod, scrunching his eyes closed tightly. "Fine."

Austria's heart soared and he wasted no time in going in for the kill. He gently splayed his fingers over the man's throat and underside of his chin, his other hand playing with the small hairs at the nape of his neck. He caringly pressed his lips to the blonde's cheek, never ceasing to wonder at how smooth and supple the skin was beneath his lips. Like a silky dessert, the Austrian couldn't help but nip at the cheek tenderly, closing his eyes in bliss. He whispered a passionate, "Vielen dank," and his fevered breath tickled the blonde's cheek.

He could feel the Swiss shudder beneath his touch, a tiny whimper sounding beneath his fingertips—and that's when his control faltered. He began laying equally vigorous kisses all over the skin beneath his lips; on the man's cheeks, jaw, neck, loving the irresistible taste and heat against his own skin. His right hand gave a small tug at the man's hair as his other hand snaked up the lithe throat. Switzerland gulped beneath his touch nervously and his thumb yet again rested upon a plump bottom lip, spreading those pink luscious lips apart just as a ragged gasp escaped the blonde. The musician directed his gaze hungrily upon the man's envyingly succulent mouth and he began to direct his line of abuse down towards the blonde's lips. He gave a slight growl as he spread them farther apart to allow him immediate access to the hot, wet cavern that he was dying to explore and taste every crevice of. He pulled just a centimeter away as he moved the man's jaw so he was facing him directly and he'd be lying if he said he didn't get an immediate arousal at the man's expression. The look he was giving him—mouth parted invitingly, pupils dialated, heavily panting, cheeks flushed and skin reddening even more from the sudden enthusiastic attention—it was so erotic it should be illegal.
But in his moment of hesitation the country in his grasp seemed to snap back to reality and swiftly, if a bit clumsily, slid out the other side of the chair. He grabbed his plate and all but jogged into the kitchen. Austria's hands were still midair and he lowered them in defeat, sighing in exasperation and running a hand through his hair. He heard the sink turn on as the Swiss began to wash his dishes frantically, looking as intent as one could be when trying to ignore something else.

Damn. Damn it all. He blew it.

The aristocrat stood up and pushed both the dining table chairs in, grabbing his own dishes. He saw Liechtenstein and Italy begin to get up from the couch as the movie's end credits played, stretching and yawning. Apparently they hadn't seen anything so that was good. He walked into the kitchen and set his plate in the sink on top of the blonde's, seeing his neighboring country tense up at him being so near after what just happened.

He was about to turn away from the man ignoring him and glaring down at the dishes, refusing to look at him, when he heard Switzerland spit out harshly, "That was not a little peck."

Yep.

He blew it.

There was no hope left for him to salvage the situation.

Even though a knock sounding from the front door gave him a needed distraction from his current inner scolding, he was still left in a daze. Austria stepped out of the kitchen and into the foyer, opening the front door to see Germany standing there.

"I'm here to pick Italy up," he said, adjusting his green scarf against the cold and the Austrian quickly ushered him inside. The musician felt a presence behind him and turned to see the brunette in question walking up to them, sleepily rubbing his eyes.

"Ve, Luddy?"

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Can I stay here tonight?" Italy asked, pleading just a bit with those bright brown eyes of his as he glanced in between the two Germans. "Please, ve?"

Austria looked to find that Germany's expression was a tad disappointed, if also bit weary as he crossed his arms. The aristocrat thought it might be because he didn't want to be separated from the Italian, or have to deal with his brother all night by himself. Or both.

"You shouldn't trouble him, Vene," the blonde muttered, not really protesting.

Before Italy could say anything Austria spoke up and gave a kind smile to him. "How about you go with Ludwig, hmm?" The Italian looked crestfallen so he continued with, "If you're good about it you can come and visit me tomorrow if you wish, yes? I'm not going anywhere."

Italy still looked a little deflated but nodded in agreement before going to collect his jacket. In the meantime, the German gave him a relieved look. "Danke."

Austria just shook his head. "No, it's fine. I'm sorry to burden you with this. How are you?"

Germany uncrossed his arms, shuffling his feet slightly. That's when the brunette noticed how the man was favoring his left side, shifting most of his weight onto his right foot and somewhat
cradling his left arm against his torso. He saw the Austrian notice his actions so he didn't say a
word in response.

The aristocrat just stared sadly down at the wooden floor, repeating, "I'm sorry."

"This isn't your fault," the blonde grunted out, straightening up a bit in frustration. "We'll find these
insane bastards and make them pay, be sure of that."

Austria couldn't help but smile as the German's usual fierceness began to show itself, comforting
him a little. Italy returned with a thick coat and scarf on and the two of them promptly left after
saying their goodbyes to everyone.

The country slowly closed and locked the front door, prolonging the inevitable confrontation he
and a certain Swiss were sure to have.

However, when he turned back to the rest of the house, he saw Switzerland dressed in a heavy
jacket turning around the corner with his suitcase in hand, a tired Liechtenstein by his side.
Austria's heart gave a painful thump and he took a frightened step back to block the door. Was he
going to leave?! Did he really upset him that much when he kissed him? Damn, he really messed
things up . . !

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going back home," Switzerland said, stopping in the foyer to put his boots on and not sparing
him a glance.

The musician did his best to hide the desperation in his voice. "Will you be coming back?"

The blonde finished tying his laces and stood up, finally facing him with a look that was brimming
with sarcasm. "Of course I'm coming back, idiot, I've left half my stuff here. And I'm not about to
leave Lilli here with you forever, either."

The flood of relief that assailed him nearly made him have to lean up against the door for support.
That was when he noticed that Liechtenstein was already wearing a cotton blue nightgown and
standing barefoot next to the Swiss. She perked up a bit and said, "I'll be staying here with you if
that's alright, Mr. Austria."

He couldn't help his bright smile as he was still getting over his scare. "Good company is always
welcome to stay." He turned to the blonde, knowing this was a grave matter and that he was
trusting him immensely by leaving his little sister here with him. "I'll look after her, don't worry."

The Swiss rolled his eyes. "She's staying here to look after you, idiot. Not the other way around.
And I'll only be gone a day, at most." His tone was only half serious, though, and he gave a
miniscule nod of appreciation. There was a strained moment of silence between them as
Liechtenstein gave her brother a goodbye hug and Austria opened the door for him, handing him
the keys to the Audi. Their hands touched briefly and Swiss only met his eyes for a short second
before dashing away and—oh. Oh, was that . . ?

A bit of pink tinged the tips of his ears as he bashfully tucked a strand of blonde hair behind one
said ear. He strolled down the porch and towards the car, the light from the house illuminating a
small wave he gave them. Austria's heart rocketed against his ribcage.

So, it seemed hope wasn't dead after all.
Chapter End Notes

Danke - Thank you
Bitte schön - You're welcome
Hallo - Hello
Helfen Sie mir - Help me
Ja - Yes
Bitte - Please
Si, bella - Yes, beauty
Danke so viel/Vielen dank - Thank you so much
Lackaffe - "lacquer monkey," AKA a male who dresses overly flashy and thinks that makes them better than everyone else
Fickfehler - "fuck error," AKA someone who's birth was unplanned
-literally a fuck error omg I can't stop laughing at this one someone help me;;;

Clearly, you can tell Germans have the best insults. I looked up some and these were part of the results so I though I'd give 'em a chance to shine here between the two feisty boys~

Womp, so there's a past PruAus subplot maybe? I mean, Austria got around quite a bit so who's really surprised here. No worries, nothing shall come of it except their usual shared angst and annoyance.

EDIT: I don't know why the journal portion wasn't all italicized and spaced weird, or why none of the translations showed up before, but I fixed it now.
Chapter Summary

Liechtenstein plucks up the courage to ask Austria for the truth about his feelings, and Switzerland returns with news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, Liechtenstein made sure that she got up extra early in order to finally do some housework.

Austria the day before had tried to clean around the mansion, but the man had been too frustrated to do anything else other than polish his instruments and sew her dress—which he did a beautiful job restoring it.

However, she put on an older grey, cotton gown that was worn and frayed, with grey and black striped stockings, and tied her beloved ribbon to her hair. The girl didn’t want to get all dressed up just for some dusting and laundry, but she didn’t think it was proper for her to move around in her pajamas all day. Tightening a bandana over her hair to push it out of her face and pulling on an apron she’d brought from home, the country completed her usual workday outfit.

Before getting started, Lichtenstein went over to her bedside table where she kept Austria’s medicine her brother had given her, and took out two pills. She went to the bathroom and got a small cup of water before quietly opening her tenant’s bedroom door. Seeing the man lying under a mountain of blankets, his back to her as he breathed deeply, she tiptoed over to the table beside his bed and set down his medicine and water.

Lichtenstein smiled and exited the room as silently as she came.

The small blonde sped downstairs to quickly make herself some breakfast before getting started. Pausing as she poured some cereal into a bowl, she let the quiet of the old house sink into her for a second.

It was an odd feeling being in another country’s home for so long, even though they had been there less than a week. Now that Switzerland was gone for the day, she felt an unusual tingling sensation fill her chest. A sense of independence of a sort, and loneliness, she assumed. She’d never spent a day without her brother since she’d gone to live with him, and now that he was gone and she was in someone else’s home entirely, a tinge of uncertainty filled her, followed by a strange wholeness.

But these were fleeting emotions that only hit a person once one is alone and soon she shook them off, returning to her breakfast.

She didn’t waste any time after she finished eating and figured it’d be best for her to start by doing the dishes. She and Austria had gone to bed relatively soon after her brother had left to catch his flight and neither of them had cleaned up their dinner dishes. So she spent the first hour or so of the day scrubbing, rinsing, and drying various plates, cups, and silverware, humming to herself quietly. She remembered that the musician had a stereo system and so when she’d finally put the last knife
out to dry on the counter she headed into the living room and turned it on, smiling as she finally got to listen to that Bastian Baker CD.

The small country went into the hallway and found a linen closet where she acquired a mop and bucket, broom, sponges, and various cleaning solutions. The next several hours were spent washing the hardwood floors, tables, counters, windows, changing out CDs, putting away the dishes, dusting the furniture and knickknacks, stoking the fireplace, bleaching the bathrooms, making her bed, changing out CDs again, starting the laundry, and sweeping the back patio.

That’s what she was currently doing when she heard footsteps coming towards her through the house, and she turned around to see the aristocrat opening the sliding glass door. He was dressed in a light button up shirt and simple slacks, treading barefoot out on the cobblestone to greet her.

“Good morning,” he said, glancing at her attire.

Liechtenstein beamed brightly at him, happy he was finally awake. “Good morning, Mr. Austria!”

He pointed at the broom and then gestured back to the house. “Have you been cleaning all morning?” When she nodded he gave a sigh, smiling at her. He gently lifted the broom from her and ushered her inside the mansion. “Come on, I’ll make us some lunch.”

“But I ate when I woke up—” her tiny protest was cut off by her stomach growling and she bashfully straightened out her dress.

The Austrian raised an eyebrow at her. “When did you wake up?”

“Quarter to seven.”

Violet eyes widened and he gave an incredulous laugh, patting the girl’s shoulder lightly to usher her into the kitchen. “It’s after noon.”

She blinked. “Wow, really?”

He smiled sheepishly. “My apologies for sleeping so late. I would have helped you clean.”

“Oh, no Mr. Austria, you’re fine! I figured you were tired so I didn’t want to wake you and instead I wanted to help clean around the house because, you know, my brother and I are staying here; and I’d feel bad if I didn’t pull my weight around here like a freeloader when we’re supposed to be taking care of you—”

“Lilli.” The young girl stopped twisting her skirt fretfully when the man pressed a warm kiss to the top of her head. Her large emerald eyes stared up at him in surprise, and he smiled gratefully down at her. “Thank you.”

Liechtenstein couldn’t say anything so she just nodded at him as he turned towards the fridge. Her eyes were still wide and she reached up to touch the top of her head gingerly, her cheeks heating up.

He’s so kind, she thought.

“My home hasn’t been this spotless in ages. As a reward,” Austria continued as he began pulling out some of the groceries she’d gotten yesterday, “I’ll make you lunch. Take a break for now, all right?”

Again, she nodded and went over to sit down at the dining table. As Mozart played softly in the
Background, the small country watched as the man moved around the kitchen. He glided to and fro about the tile, from the fridge to the oven to the counter and back again—he was as graceful about cooking as he was about anything else. From his manners, to music, to fashion, to cooking...

*I can see why Vash likes him so much,* Liechtenstein thought, smiling to herself. *And he’s so nice to me even though we haven’t spoken much over the years. I wonder why? Maybe it is just because of my brother, or because of my childhood—whatever the reason, I’m grateful. I hope they both find happiness together.*

“What are you grinning about over there?” Austria called back to her, smirking over his shoulder as he kneaded a ball of dough.

The girl snapped away from her thoughts, piping up. “I was thinking about you and my brother.”

“Oh?”

She didn’t fail to notice how his motions slowed and the aristocrat seemed more intent on listening to her than before. That made her smile widen.

“I was just thinking . . .”

*Should I say something to him?*

“Yes?”

“About how you two are so alike,” the small country trailed off, losing her nerve. She wasn’t quite brave enough yet to voice her real thoughts.

“We are?” the man asked, none the wiser. “How so?”

“Well, you both love to cook.”

“Yes, very much so. He may not look it, but Big Brother’s very good in the kitchen! He doesn’t let me cook very often when we’re at home, even though I can.” She smiled down at her hands, straightening her skirt out. "Usually the only time I cook is when he’s too busy or I wish to make something special for him, try out new recipes, that sort of thing.”

The musician nodded, expecting this. “Does he still like making homemade chocolate?”

She hummed her agreement and nodded. “It’s very sweet.”

He gave an amused huff, humming under his breath. “Of course it is.” He shook his head and began placing the dough in a pan and flipping the oven on. He paused a moment and looked like he wanted to ask something else. Liechtenstein waited patiently for a few minutes before he finally asked, “How has he been the past few years?”

She was slightly shocked at the question and didn’t know what to say at first. Since her and her brother had been staying with him the past week it was easy to forget that the two countries have barely spoken to each other for the past couple of decades. They obviously didn’t call each other for updates and only spoke at world meetings or sporting events when the occasion arose. The thought saddened her a bit and she murmured, “He’s been good, not too stressed out lately since things have been pretty peaceful at home. However, might I ask you something?”
As she was talking to him, the man had placed the pan in the oven and put a kettle on the stovetop before walking over to sit across from her. “Yes, of course.”

She hesitated for a split second before realizing that she might as well just come out with it.

“Do you like my brother?”

The man visibly stiffened at her question and fell quiet. Minutes passed between them in silence and she avoided his stare, twiddling her thumbs on the table nervously. The aristocrat had his head turned away from her, gazing intently out the sliding glass door. This went on until a soft whistle began to sound from the kitchen.

“What do you mean?” he asked, eyes narrowing—as if he was glaring at something in the yard.

“I-I, well . . .” She struggled for words, gulping nervously. *I shouldn’t have said anything!* “I mean do you, you know, *like* like him? I know you two were really close growing up so it only makes sense that you would, but I mean . . .” Liechtenstein just sighed and forced the rest of her inquiry out. “Do you love him?”

The Austrian stood up and went to grab the kettle, not sparing her a glance. The silence was so thick after her question that she was afraid to even breathe; terrified of the angry retort she was most likely to get from the man.

The young girl was so lost in her thoughts and fears that she jumped when a cup of tea was sat down in front of her on the table. She looked up as the musician sat down again across from her, taking a sip from his own tea. He gave a long sigh and set the cup down on the dark wooden surface.

“Yes.”

She blinked, one, two, three times; pleasantly surprised at his answer. The small country had been almost certain he would be furious with her for even suggesting such a thing, given what their recent history has entailed. But she could slowly feel her spirits rising over the moon with happiness.

The man stared down into his cup of tea, his eyes hard around the edges. “I apologize if that makes you uncomfortable, Miss Liechtenstein.” She could swear she heard a deep sadness in his voice.

“N-No, it doesn’t make me uncomfortable!” she sputtered out quickly, nearly knocking her cup over in her excitement. “No, I’m perfectly fine with this! I was just asking to confirm what I thought already. I didn’t mean—uh, I . . . um . . !” Her face was turning a cherry red at his gaze, she could feel it.

“You . . . knew?” he asked and she nodded. He gave a slight puff, his eyes glancing outside as he began to chuckle self-consciously. “Well. This is awkward.”

“What do you mean?”

Austria set down his cup and took off his glasses, rubbing his face. He stopped and all she could see was an amused expression as he peeked through his fingers at her. “Was I *that* obvious?”

“Haha, no not really,” she giggled, taking a sip of her tea. “I’ve actually had my suspicions for quite a while now; both you and my brother still care for each other’s well being. And I, um,” she glanced to the side bashfully, “saw you two, uh, last night . . .” She tapped her cheek a couple of times.
It was the man’s turn to blush, pink rising in his cheeks. He ran his hand through his hair and leaned back in his chair. “I, well—Vash didn’t really, ah, approve of that move on my part.”

“That’s not what I saw,” she said.

“Really?” He asked a tad too eagerly, and caught himself, coughing in embarrassment. “I mean, a lady should not witness such things. I apologize again.”

Liechtenstein just giggled once more, sipping her tea. “It made me happy.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, smiling. “Big Brother has never really been with anyone before—or at least not since I’ve moved in with him. And it’s good to see someone caring for him other than myself.”

The hazel-haired man was quiet as he absorbed the statement, slipping his glasses back on. He sighed, tapping his fingers on the table absently. “To tell you the truth, I’ve loved your brother for a very, very long time.”

She perked up. “How long?”

“Since before you were even a thought.” He smiled sadly. “I’m ashamed to admit that when he took you in I was incredibly . . . jealous. I figured that he’d finally found someone that he loved that wasn’t me; and, I mean, you’ve always been by his side since then so it was only logical to assume—” The girl nodded in understanding, urging him to continue. “But then I talked to you again for the first time since you moved in with him, and I realized I couldn’t hate you. His happiness meant more to me than some petty rivalry.”

Austria went silent for a moment, sipping his tea contemplatively. “It still does. Plus, I realized pretty quickly that Vash only had honest brotherly intentions towards you, so that took some of the sting out of it, of course.

“Though, if you’re truly curious as to how long I’ve loved him, I’d have to say since we were both young countries—not even, really—and still under Rome’s rule. I believe it started off more as a sibling sort of affection, not unlike the one you two share. When I’d first met him he came off as tough and brash, always fighting with Rome over one thing or another. Whereas I preferred the finer things in life like music and dancing. However, I began to see that he wasn’t a mindless brute and instead equally loved the greater things, such as myself, especially cooking.” He smiled fondly to himself at the memory and finished off his tea. “Not to mention that he’s saved me more times than I can count, both in and out of battle, and I would always do my best to try and return the favor—though that didn’t go well too often.

"Back then we were . . . inseparable.” The Austrian's face fell as his words faded off, and he became quiet again.

Liechtenstein took a moment to absorb the information, chewing her lip. “I’m sorry if it’s painful to talk about—” she began, but he only waved her off, shaking his head.

As he arose to go and fetch them some more tea she called out to him, “I’m surprised you’re being so open with me, Mr. Austria. I thought you’d be angry at me for asking about this.”

The musician just shook his head as he took the tray out of the oven and began setting up their lunch. “It’s about time I tell someone other than my journals about this, and it feels good to talk about it.”

“Ms. Hungary doesn’t even know? Or Mr. Germany?”

“I believe that they have inferred about my feelings towards Vash, and heaven only knows what
crazy fantasies Liz has conjured up, but neither have outwardly spoken to me about it." Austria sounded nonchalant as he reached up to pull down a set of plates and a serving tray from the cupboard above him. "Let them think what they want. The only thing that matters to me is my own feelings."

“But you’re speaking to me about it.”

“I have to admit that it gets lonely when your thoughts are your only friends.” He shot a sad smile back to her. “Like I said, it feels good to finally talk about this—even if it’s a tad bit discomforting. Plus, you seem trustworthy enough, not that the others aren’t, but you’d also be the first affected if anything did ever happen between us. It seems only fitting that you know now of my intentions towards your brother.”

Austria returned to the table with a silver tray, setting it down carefully between them. On it was the kettle of tea, a container of what looked to be syrup, and two plates filled with slices of deliciously smelling cinnamon raisin bread. Liechtenstein thanked him and took her plate, lifting a piece of the warm bread to her nose and inhaling deeply. Her stomach responded with another round of grumbles and she eagerly took a bite.

“Mmm, it’s so yummy!” she said, quickly going for a second bite.

The Austrian laughed and poured them both a generous amount of syrup on the side of their plates before taking a piece of the raisin bread and dipping it in the sweet substance. He waited for the stream of dripping syrup to stop before bringing it to his mouth, purring in satisfaction. When he’d swallowed, he said, “I haven’t had this in a long time. It’s surprisingly filling and fast to make. Try some of the syrup.”

She did as he suggested and the both of them ate both of their plates and the rest of the tea in quick succession. Liechtenstein had heard about his baking skills but had no idea that he could turn something so simple into something so utterly scrumptious. The syrup went perfectly with the cinnamon and the tasty raisins gave the bread an irresistibly chewy texture. She was full within minutes.

Austria stood up and began to clear the table. When she tried to do the same he just smiled at her and waved her away. “Why don’t you rest for a bit? I can finish cleaning this up. And if you wish to speak more on the topic of my affections later,” he gave a smile, “we shall do so.”

Liechtenstein nodded and thanked him for lunch before heading upstairs to take a quick catnap.

...xXx...

I am a fool.

Lying down and reclining across his leather couch, Austria sighed into the plush material and rubbed his face in mortification.

“I should not have told her that,” he whispered, “I should not have told her my love for him. Ah . . .”

His mind was whirling, his cheeks heating, and he covered his face in lonely embarrassment. The little country seemed warmed and downright happy at his revelation, and she seemed like she could keep a secret, but . . . he hadn’t really known her that long. The whole time that Liechtenstein had even existed as a country was practically a mere blink in his lifetime. Hell, he had known Germany and Hungary for much longer but he still hadn’t told them! And the girl was always glued to
Switzerland’s side so he never really got to know her until the past week.

*What if she tells him?*

The brunet swallowed the lump in his throat, his chest squeezing painfully. He was silently cursing himself for not lying to her. For instead giving in to that innocent demeanor of hers and spilling the verbal beans, all the while trying his best to keep calm. If she told the Swiss about his feelings, his intentions, he would just—just . . .

Austria rolled over face down in the leather, ignoring the uncomfortable feeling of his glasses pressing into his face, and gave a shaky groan.

Truthfully, he didn’t know how he would react. The aristocrat liked to think that he would be stoic and cold, brushing off the news with icy words and glares. Winter on the outside—boiling, bubbling volcanic shame on the inside. He would just want to retreat so far into himself that there was no possibility of him resurfacing. He would cower and hide within the confines of his own humiliation; building walls around himself, brick by brick, until there was no escaping his indignity.

Oh, he would just die.

Ironic.

He chuckled at his own thoughts, despite the topic. Funny, how even though his country and body were breaking down from all the terrorist attacks, border fires, and mysterious plague, it would be his secret crush getting out that would end him.

Damn, did he sound like a teenager again.

The Austrian mentally smacked himself and rolled over into a more comfortable position on his side, facing the back of the couch, and adjusted his glasses back into place.

How would Switzerland even react to the news? Would he be shocked and feel uncomfortable around him forever afterward? Like they needed any more awkwardness between them than there already was. Or would he blow up at him with disgust and resentment and try to cut him down in his weakened state? He would probably let him.

Or—dare the thought even cross his mind?

Would he . . . embrace him?

Just the thought of the handsome blond man looking all flustered and confused, a blush rushing across his cheeks, trying to form a coherent answer to refute his crush, but at the same time not really opposing the idea—it made him shudder with pure, unhindered excitement.

Austria shifted uneasily on the couch, suddenly realizing that the room had gotten hotter and his trousers were feeling a bit tight.

Jumping as fast as he could off of that train of thought, the brown-haired man stood up and decided to busy himself by going to tend to his flowers. Watering his carnations and corianders, and trimming his roses should distract him.

As he walked outside, the heat from the sunlight didn’t help calm the flush beginning to spread over his skin. And as he rushed his way into his greenhouse, the stifling humidity inside also did nothing to help his *growing situation*. 
He tried his best to busy himself by pruning his beloved plants. He fed and watered all of his flowers, taking his time to prune them and throwing the plucked pieces into a bucket. He spent a good amount of time in the greenhouse, and pretty soon his uncomfortable problem was starting to ebb away. Setting down his clippers, the musician gave a sigh of relief and leaned against the wooden workbench. He stood there a few moments, taking deep breaths in the dense, damp air, and simply just took a minute to relax among his surroundings.

And that’s when he heard the low rumbling of an engine.

The Austrian straightened, listening among the floral silence around him as the sound ceased. He wasn’t expecting anyone to visit that day. Except maybe Italy, but he knew that Germany would call before coming over. And it certainly wouldn’t be anyone from his government, as they would be more inclined for him to come to them. The implications, then, of who could be parked in his driveway sent a chill right up his spine.

*One problem after another, I suppose.*

He removed his gardening gloves and quietly set them on his work bench, softly stepping his way across the greenhouse’s cement floor. He slid his way outside and the first thing that hit him was the eerie stillness in the air. There was no wind, no birds chirping, and it seemed the sun itself had gotten colder. As if his land knew something was about to occur. The aristocrat swiftly crossed the short distance across his lawn and ducked under his back porch awning. He began to creep towards the front of his house in a slow, hushed manner, keeping his back to the brick of his home and stopping every few seconds to listen for anymore sounds.

Reaching the corner of his house and pausing behind one of his bushes, Austria steeled himself before peeking around the front of his house.

Nothing.

Instead of relaxing, the man just felt all his nerves stand on end and he mussed his hair in frustration. *Am I going mad?* He was more angry at himself than anything for acting paranoid—even if he did have good reason. After all that was going on, he supposed it was his right to be jumpy, what with being kidnapped not days before. And it wasn’t just him he had to care for, as Liechtenstein was sleeping unawares at the moment. But, it appeared there was nothing for him to worry about. Huffing and turning about to head back inside, he rammed into something.

And then that something threw him to the ground.

...xXx...

*Why is it I can never seem to escape him?*

Switzerland shut off the violet Audi and sat in moonlit silence. He sighed and relaxed into the leather seats, letting himself have a moment of reflection as he sat outside the Austrian manor.

It had been a long night, day, and night again.

After he had left the musician’s home the evening before, he had driven to the airport and then had taken a flight back to his home. He needed to not only pick up some more clothes, but he had to meet with his boss and the senior staff of his government in order to discuss plans of action to send aid to his neighboring county. During his long discussion with Austria’s own president, the man had asked for Switzerland’s assistance since the blond had already been watching over the aristocrat—not exactly what he was expecting to discuss with the man. He’d spent most of the
flight between Vienna and Bern contemplating what he was going to say and how he was supposed
to present it, even though he was pretty sure there would be little to no opposition to the idea. There
wouldn’t be much reason to object now that the cat was out of the bag about the mysterious illness
circulating the country, or news of the strange terrorist attacks.

And when his plane got closer to the border, he could see a faint orange glow out of the window
that made his heart drop and his resolve strengthen all the more.

Despite that, when he had arrived and tried to get down to business, everything he thought would
happen simply . . . didn’t.

His government wanted nothing to do with what was going on. He'd spent the rest of the night—
and morning, and afternoon, and a good part of the present evening—doing his best to try and
convince everyone otherwise. They felt that it was too dangerous to send in aid because they
believed the pathogen would spread to his country, as well, or they could attract the same kind of
‘attention.’

“We’re not going to send troops over while there’s a deadly disease running rampant. The
Austrian government doesn’t even know how it’s spreading,” his boss had firmly stated.

“But it’s not spreading to any other countries, even with infected people traveling!”

“I’m not putting Swiss citizens in harm’s way, Mr. Zwingli.”

“We can’t just sit by while a friend is—”

“Mr. Zwingli. This country, you, are neutral. We don’t have enemies. We don’t have friends. We
stay out of conflict. I figured you of all . . . ‘people’ would know that.”

And he had been so upset. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. This totally went against
Switzerland’s policy, his people’s policy, his policy to help those in need. And instead of helping,
his government was too busy passing a travel ban to and from Austria that would come into effect
within the week.

So he had to waste his day and a night’s rest telling them off, barely managing to convince them to
allow refugees to cross the border and stay, if they so chose. Liechtenstein’s president had even
shown up in the early afternoon to concur with his plan and offered to keep the small country’s
borders open, even though it really wasn’t up to him. Between the two of them, they managed to
sway his boss to help—even in this miniscule way for now.

The Swiss heaved a sigh and dragged himself from the über plush leather seats of the aristocrat’s
R8, stepping out of the car and ambling his way up the stone pathway to the front door of Austria’s
home. The country finally allowed the exhaustion he’d been holding back until then to rush
forward and overtake him. He let his movements sluggishly bring him atop the porch and as he
reached for the doorknob he gave a quiet curse, remembering that he didn’t have a key.

Switzerland could hear the faint sound of music filtering through the old wood, soft indistinct
voices conversing inside. He tried the doorknob, just in case it was unlocked, and low and behold
the old cherry wood door opened. He gritted his teeth a bit in frustration as he walked inside the
warm inner atmosphere. You’d think that after everything’s that happened he’d at least lock his
front door, he thought.

After he’d turned the deadbolt behind him, he gratefully slid his boots off and parked his suitcase
in the entrance. The Swiss glanced down the hallway and froze, spying a certain Austrian holding
his sister to him, his hands on her waist.

*Wait, why’s he holding her like that?* Partially bristling, the yellow-haired man started to march towards the pair but stopped once he realized that the man was giving short instructions to the girl and leading her around the family room floor.

The country just exhaled in exasperation and ran a tired hand through his hair, feeling silly that his thoughts had immediately distrusted the musician. His nerves were fried from his lack of sleep and the no shortage of annoyances over the past two days. He instantly felt guilty, reminding himself that in all his years of knowing the aristocrat he had been nothing but a gentleman towards women.

“Oh, Miss Lilli, it seems that we have an audience.” Switzerland snapped out of his thoughts to see that Austria had twirled the little girl around to face him standing in the hall. Both of their faces lit up and Liechtenstein unraveled herself to trot over to him happily.

“Welcome back, Big Brother!” she chirped, smiling at him.

The Swiss managed a smile himself, wrapping an arm around her petite shoulders. As he walked them down the hall towards the Austrian, he looked between the two in tired amusement. “It looks like you’re having a delightful time. I see you’ve convinced him to teach you how to dance, Lilli.”

The Austrian chuckled. “Well, it only took a bit of coaxing before I caved.”

Liechtenstein sported rosy cheeks and leaned into her brother’s side affectionately for a moment. “I didn’t pout or anything,” she said. The girl pulled away from his grasp and began spinning around the room, her grey dress puffing out and fluttering. “It’s fun—I never knew there were so many dances to learn! I mean, I knew a few, of course, but still.”

Switzerland leaned against the nearby wall, crossing his arms. He just gazed at her with sleepy fondness, willing to entertain her for the time being. “Oh? How many are there then?”

“Dozens upon dozens!” she said, turning to face him and clapping her hands gleefully. She looked at both him and Austria in bewilderment. “How is it that both of you know all of them?”

Green eyes widened as he blinked at her. He switched his gaze between her and staring accusingly at the Austrian. “I—wait, no—I don’t know them all.” He settled on Austria. “I *don’t* know them all.”

“Don’t be shy, of course you do. Well, maybe not those new dances that teens these days have come up with, like . . . Oh, I don’t even know—they embarrass me to think about it.” The man just waved his hand and pushed up his glasses.

The Swiss’ cheeks reddened and he crossed his arms. “Oh? What can *I* dance then?”

“Mmm, let’s see.” The brunet gave a mischievous wink and took one of the blond’s hands, and alarm bells immediately started going off in his head. Austria began to walk backwards into the room, dragging his neighboring country with him, swaying his hips side to side. “The Waltz, first and foremost.”

“Austria,” Switzerland warned, glaring. He gasped when the man pulled them flush together and began leading him around the floor, starting to waltz to the low piano music emanating from the stereo.

“The Vienna Waltz, being the first one that you learned. Obviously.” The aristocrat gave him a playful grin, spinning them around fairly quickly with light steps that the Swiss automatically
followed on instinct. “Then there’s the Scandinavian Waltz, the American.” The two parted except for two hands grasped and Austria put his left hand on the blond’s right hip, led him a few feet, and then they turned and switched sides before pulling close again. By this time the other country gave up and just went along with it, too tired to argue. “The Mexican, Tropical, and the Cajun,” the musician purred, swaying his hips a little more at the last one. “Peruvian, Venezuelan, oh dear, there’s so many lovely versions. France’s Valse Musette was especially fun, don’t you remember? All the rage in the 18th century, I believe.”

“19th,” Switzerland muttered, resting his head on the Austrian’s shoulder in exhaustion.

Austria paused their steps a moment, his face looking up at the marble carved ceiling, pondering. “Let’s see . . . Besides the Waltz, I know that you know the Tango, Flamenco, Swing, Ballet, Fox Trot—”

“Ballet?” Liechtenstein interjected from her seat at the dining table.

The Austrian tilted his head to look at her and gave a quiet laugh. “Ah, yes, ballet was very popular, for a time. Italy showed us it during the Renaissance. Well, he showed most everyone—the Renaissance was a very popular era, mind you. And it was more of a dance for the royal courts. Today’s ballet that everyone knows was developed by France and Russia for the stage, not the ballroom. It was one of the few times I’ve actually seen them get along.”

“Oh. Still, it’s amusing to think of big brother doing ballet,” the girl said cheerily.

“That it is.” Austria smirked and turned his attention back to the Swiss in question, confused at the man’s silence. And the fact that he hadn’t pulled away from his grasp, despite them having stopped dancing. His expression turned tender and he lowered their intertwined hands, wrapping an arm securely around the man’s hips. “Oh, my.”

Liechtenstein perked up, standing from her seat and taking a few steps closer to the pair. “What is it?”

“It’s seems my dancing has lulled dear Vash to sleep.” He spared the girl a quick smile before focusing on the country in his arms.

“He fell asleep standing up?”

“Indeed.” Austria carefully pulled away to see the man's serene face, cradling the back of his head gently. “I don’t believe I’ve seen him do that before.”

“Is he all right?” the girl said worriedly, stepping over to get a closer look.

The chocolate-haired man nodded and began to carefully lower Switzerland towards the floor until he could reach behind the man’s knees and haul him back up into his arms bridal style. “Ah, there we are. He’ll be fine, Lilli, he just needs to rest. I didn’t think my dancing was that bad . . .” he muttered quietly, walking towards the staircase.

“It wasn’t,” she said, laughing a bit before her face clouded with worry. “He’s had a pretty rough day. My boss called earlier with an update and also told me that it looked like Big Brother hadn’t even slept last night.”

“Well, I better get him to bed as soon as possible, then,” the Austrian said, starting up the stairwell.

Liechtenstein agreed and left him to go turn off the stereo.
Austria’s grip tightened on the man in his arms as he made his way carefully up to the second floor. He gave a sigh and rested his head atop soft, golden locks. He stopped at the top of the stairs and leaned against the wall for a moment to take a breather. “You weren’t this heavy the other day, were you?” he sighed, shifting the weight in his arms so he could brush a strand of hair away from the man’s face.

Switzerland began to shift and groan and the Austrian had to stoop down closer to the floor to make sure he didn’t slip out of his arms. “Whoa-ho there a moment.”

Sleepy green eyes peeked open a tiny bit, and the Swiss looked around for a moment before gazing up at the brunet. Those eyes, however, were dull and barely awake, uncomprehending. “Wha—”

“Shh, you just fell asleep,” Austria soothed, standing up slowly.

The blond hummed and closed his eyes again. The musician would have figured he’d already fallen right back to sleep if the man hadn’t twisted more into his torso and murmured, “Take me to bed.”

The aristocrat stopped mid-step, heat flashing over every inch of him at those words. The Swiss probably had no idea that what he just said had set a fire in his heart, and he clutched the man to his chest, lips brushing a pale forehead.

“I intend to,” he whispered, kissing in between hidden emeralds.

And that was when he made his way back down the hall with new determination and glided into the master bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading so far~ I hope you'll shoot me a review, as well. Your words keep me going through hard times and give me strength to finish this little fanfic fantasy of mine!
Light & Laughter

Chapter Summary

Switzerland comes to a daunting dilemma as Austria makes a horrid mistake - or is it?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He knew he was just torturing himself. He knew. But he couldn’t bring himself to back out of the situation.

After bringing Switzerland upstairs, the Austrian had laid him down in his bedroom on the soft violet comforter before heading back downstairs. He fetched the blond’s suitcase and tried his best not to look too excited as he made his way back to the second floor. He eye-spied little Liechtenstein heading into her own room and sent her a sheepish smile, wishing her a goodnight. She’d given him a grin and he could have sworn he heard her snickering under her breath before wishing her own goodnight. He could feel his ears reddening as he dropped off the suitcase in the Swiss’ room before heading back to his own and closing the door behind him.

Austria leaned up against the door for a moment, his palms beginning to sweat. His ears wouldn’t stop buzzing, and he took a long, deep breath to calm his nerves. He was already feverish and he didn’t need to add to it.

But as his gaze traveled to the canopy bed across from him, the sight of the golden-haired man lying on his satin comforter made his heart flutter in a way that it hadn’t done in centuries.

And that thought brought him back to the present where he was currently kneeling in between the man’s thighs and unbuttoning his shirt. Switzerland was still completely asleep—and he intended to keep it that way.

All he wanted to do was lie with him. Hold him tight. Run his fingers through soft yellow hair. Just . . . he wanted to keep him close, while he could.

Despite his rationalizing, the musician couldn’t keep his hands from shaking as he undid the buttons on the Swiss’ dress shirt. He needed to calm down—it’s not like they hadn’t changed each others’ clothes in the past. He lifted the man up off the mattress carefully with one arm while he slid the shirt off with the other and set him back down.

He tossed the garment to the side and took a moment to just revel in the sight before him. The smooth planes of Switzerland’s stomach and pectorals were milky soft, the muscles slowly rising and falling with the man’s quiet breathing. Austria dared to rest a trembling hand on the man’s toned stomach for a moment, a charge of electricity filling his fingertips as he brushed against the supple skin and traced the dips and curves on the surface. Even in times of peace it seemed like the Swiss still made sure to keep his body strong and fit.

The Austrian pulled away and looked at the wall for a minute, calming himself. He grabbed the pajamas he’d set aside, a silky baby blue nightshirt and shorts of his. He didn’t want to ruffle
through the blond’s luggage so he was just going to loan him a pair of his night attire. And he didn’t mind seeing the Swiss in his clothes.

After he had put the shirt on Switzerland and buttoned it up, Austria began to remove the man’s pants quickly, trying not to dwell on what he was actually doing. A couple of moments later he’d removed the other’s slacks and replaced them with the silk shorts and turned down the bed so he could move the Swiss underneath the sheets. The man gave a quiet sigh in his sleep and rolled on his side.

The aristocrat smiled to himself, relieved that that whole ordeal was over. He dressed himself in his own pair of pajamas slowly, working on calming himself down and trying not to think about how incredibly sexy Switzerland’s red briefs were.

Once he was changed into his own pair of black silk night clothes, Austria flipped off the light and crossed his bedroom back over towards the bed. He sat down on the edge of the mattress, hesitating a moment before he finally slithered in under the covers beside his beloved Swiss.

...xXx...

It was around midday before Switzerland finally dragged himself from Austria’s soft bed. While he was still groggy from sleep, his head and aching bones felt better than they had in days. He didn’t quite register at first that he wasn’t in the guest room, but instead underneath soft plum covers and a raven canopy. He stared up at the inky curtains, confused on what time of day it was. Rolling across the sheets to the other side of the bed he spied the time on an electric clock on the bedside table, reading 3:47pm. He groaned and smushed his face back into the sheets.

How was it so late? Why was he in the Austrian’s bedroom? What was the point of getting up now? He inhaled deeply, taking in the hardy scent of the brunet and himself on the sheets. Pomegranate shampoo and ink, sweat and cologne all swirling together in a toxic mix that just made him press his face more firmly into the mattress.

It took him even longer to realize that he wasn’t wearing his own clothes, but instead a pair of blue pajamas that he didn’t recognize. They were probably the Austrian’s.

Switzerland sighed, sitting up and wrapping one of the wool blankets on the bed tightly around himself. The room was still dim despite it being the afternoon, the sun barely peeking around the thick velvet drapes over the window. The blond leaned his head back and sighed again, grumbling to himself about wanting to go back to sleep and how the darn silk pajamas were too hot sliding against his skin as he stretched and stood up from the bed. Making his way to the door he wrapped the blanket around him tighter, shivering slightly at the cool wood beneath his feet.

As the Swiss walked out the door he glanced into the empty spare bedroom across the hall that he had commandeered for his stay at the Austrian’s house. The shades were open, sunlight casting in through the windows across the perfectly made and untouched bed, his suitcase sitting neatly beside the dresser. He pondered why the musician hadn’t just set him in there along with his luggage.

The golden-haired man started walking away, back to the stairs, thinking, What was the point of putting me in his bedroom if he wasn’t going to sleep in there, too?

Switzerland’s foot hovered over the top step, his mind rearing to a halt.

Did I . . . did I really just think that?!
He shook his head and pushed the thought from his mind, attributing it to his sleepiness, and started down the stairs.

The mansion was chilly and quiet, with dazzling sunlight flickering through the many windows and warming spots on the hardwood floor. The Swiss pushed a strand of flaxen hair out of his eyes as he reached the landing, hiking up the blanket so he didn’t trip on the last few steps. He padded his way through the living room and out into the hallway, heading for the kitchen.

Rounding the corner he spotted the figure of his host standing in front of the sink, staring out of the bay window. He was calmly sipping from a mug, humming quietly.

Switzerland’s breath caught for moment as he walked silently towards the man. His mind blanked.

Austria was here.

He was still breathing.

He was still drinking that strong, aromatic coffee of his.

He was even humming.

“You damn beautiful bastard,” the Swiss whispered and he pressed his face in between the man’s shoulder blades, wrapping the purple wool blanket around them both.

The Austrian’s humming halted on a high note as he jumped at the sudden pair of arms around him, nearly spilling his coffee. He tried to twist his head around to see the Swiss, but could only spy the top of a yellow head buried into his back. “Well, well, good afternoon, sleepy head,” he said, turning back to his coffee. When the arms squeezed around him more and the smaller man made no sign to move, he tilted his head to glance back over his shoulder. Then he froze, his heart racing fast, just realizing what the man had said. “Wait, what did you call me?”

The blond grumbled and turned his head to the side. “I said good morning.”

“Is that so?” Austria chuckled, setting his mug down on the counter. As much as he loved the feel of the Swiss willingly touching him—and giving him compliments—he pried the hands from around his waist so he could properly talk to his neighboring country. He turned to face the man, ready to voice his confusion, when Switzerland just wrapped the blanket around them again, this time pressing his face into his chest.

Surprised once more, the chocolate-haired man just stood there for a few seconds before settling his own arms around the man’s waist.

“Is something the matter?” he asked softly.

Switzerland mumbled something and just turned his head to the side, pressing them closer together.

“What?”

“I said your heart is beating.”

The musician raised an eyebrow, staring fondly down at him. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“No. Definitely not,” the Swiss whispered, and for a moment they just stood there in silence—Austria, in flustered mystification, and Switzerland, who was content to listen to the rhythmic thumping of the brunet’s heart. The wool blanket and their shared body heat warmed them against
the chill of the rest of the house, though it did nothing to help the Austrian’s rising blush under the blond’s affection.

*I hope he can’t hear my heart skipping a beat.*

The aristocrat gave up trying to figure out what was going on and settled himself to holding the smaller country. He rested his chin on the soft fair locks and went back to humming like before; hoping to calm whatever was bothering his companion. He figured *Clair de Lune* was a soothing choice and went with that, rubbing circles into the Swiss’ silky back with his fingertips.

Austria hummed through the song twice, swaying them gently side to side unconsciously. His fingers tapped along to the melody occasionally as he massaged the other’s lower back. Turning his chin so his cheek rested atop the blond’s head, he heard the man in his arms let out a deep sigh. He opened his eyes—he hadn’t even realized he’d closed them—and looked down to see tired emeralds staring up at him.

Switzerland’s eyes ran over every aspect of the Austrian’s face, memorizing every facet and blemish. The beauty mark by the corner of his mouth, the slight crows feet on the corner of his eyes, the tiny magenta and navy flecks in his violet irises.

He didn’t want to forget a single thing.

His mind was empty, not even bothering to question why he was doing this. Something inside of him seemed to have opened up and he no longer cared to keep his distance from his neighboring country. It was most likely because of the previous day’s meetings, but it didn’t matter. His worries over the past couple of days began to seep out of him as the musician continued to expertly knead the tension away from his lower back. All his worrying if the man had been all right; if he’d had any attacks whilst he was away, or any more memory incidents, if he had been taking his medicine, if he’d been sleeping okay, if . . . If.

He could hardly take the worry while he was home, and it pissed him off that he was so wound up in the first place. The nation remembered having to fight himself not to call the estate every five minutes to check in.

Switzerland finally looked away from the Austrian, shaking his head to clear his thoughts. A slight heat rose in his cheeks as he realized that they’d been standing in the middle of the kitchen embracing for awhile now, and he finally started to notice just how close they actually were.

Austria’s kneading stopped. “Tell me what’s wrong,” he murmured.

“I’m just . . . hugging you,” the blond finally said, unable to make eye contact.

“Mmm, I’ve noticed. But why?”

“Just a hug.” There was a moment of silence between them.

“No. Is this ‘just a hug’ like how the other night was ‘just a peck on the cheek’?”

Switzerland’s eyes snapped up in shock, his mouth falling open slightly at the statement. Austria’s eyes, however, were completely serious, and his mauve stare was guarded. The shorter man’s cheeks darkened more at the memory of the other night when they were sat at the dining table and
he’d received the Austrian’s ‘thank you.’ He remembered how his skin had burned everywhere the man’s lips touched, and how appalled at himself he had been that he had actually let something like that happen—let alone the fact that he liked it. Like, like liked it. A lot. For most of it he didn’t even want the man to stop. And afterwards he’d unfairly lashed out at the Austrian; more angry at his own strange thoughts than the act itself.

But he’d seen the hurt in those amethyst eyes he’d caused, and had immediately wanted to take back his sharp words.

And on the flight to his capital city he’d realized something.

Something that had been nagging at him ever since that kiss-not-kiss. No, since he’d started staying at the Austrian’s home nearly a week ago. Hell, if he was being honest with himself, the something had been bothering for much longer than that. Years. Many, many years, in fact.

Since forever ago.

Switzerland lifted his arms to wrap up around the man’s collar, taking the blanket up with him, hands cupping around the back of his neck. His thumbs inched up through silken chocolate hair and pressed down on the ends of the temple arms of his specs. Austria’s glasses shot up comically over his brow and revealed his eyes even more. The act managed to make the musician pull a smile, easing his serious expression.

Oh, his smile.

That’s what the Swiss had realized.

...xXx...

What?

It took him a moment. Then two. Then three.

He shook his head, mind still reeling. He was trying his best not to stand there like an idiot with his mouth gaping, and failed miserably.

What just happened?

Austria blinked slowly for a moment as his brain finally caught back up to him.

Switzerland had just—just . . .

He’d been hugging him, humming, massaging his companion for nearly a half hour. They’d been holding each other, actually holding one another, and the Swiss had been the one to initiate it.

And then he’d stolen his glasses.

Just popped them right off the musician’s nose, untangled the blanket from around them, and walked past him.

Cold air washed over him and the sudden loss of heat did nothing to dull his shock. He continued to stare wide eyed at the spot in front of him where Switzerland had previously been standing.

“Wait—Wh-What—?” the aristocrat sputtered, spinning around to see the blond man casually leaning up against the counter. The purple wool spread was draped over his lean shoulders like an open curtain, revealing the blue silk nightwear beneath. Firm, strong legs exposed themselves from
underneath the fabric; one foot relaxed back against the cupboards, the shorts doing nothing to conceal the creamy, pale skin running from the man’s upper thigh all the way down to his toes. He’d taken the Austrian’s coffee—gone lukewarm now—and was sipping at it appreciatively, throat rumbling in his approval.

The brunet’s glasses were perched on his nose.

Austria’s throat went dry.

If he hadn’t been aroused before when they were embracing he certainly was now, staring at the beautiful picture before him.

The Swiss had been enveloped by him.

He was in his home, his kitchen, his arms before, his blanket, wearing his pajamas, even his glasses, sipping his coffee . . .

*I want to hold you again,* he thought, his heart aching a bit.

Oh god, did he want to take him more in that moment than in any other moment in his entire lifetime.

Wanted not only to surround the man with his body, but to fill him up inside until he had completely devoured every last inch of the Swiss. To blend them together until there wasn’t a piece of either of them left. Molding them into something new and raw.

He gulped.

The golden-haired man smiled a bit sheepishly at him, lifting the mug up slightly. “Don’t want to waste the coffee.”

*“I love you so much.”*

It took Austria a full minute to realize that he had said that aloud.

...xXx...

Giving a yawn and a stretch, little Liechtenstein awoke to the shining sunlight peaking through the wooden blinds in her room. Her voice keened happily as her joints popped and she laid there for a moment in lazy relief.

One thing she enjoyed about staying at the Austrian’s house was the easy atmosphere, how there was no feeling of needing to get up early. Not that she felt the need to get up early anyway; her internal clock was just automatically set for earlier times apparently. And she didn’t mind waking up with the dawn, she got to see the sunrise and prepare a nice breakfast for her and her brother most of the time. But here in Austria’s home she quite enjoyed her long, languid snoozing—feeling that she could literally just lie around in bed all day and that would be okay.

Not to mention that the Austrian’s guest mattresses were just *divine.* It felt like she was sleeping on a cloud.

Sitting up and stretching some more, she glanced over to the clock before standing up out of bed. It was still in the later *am* and she could hear happy sparrows and wood pigeons chirping and cooing outside.
The small country didn’t bother to get dressed yet, just slid on some fuzzy slippers and a light pink, cotton robe that Austria had let her borrow—apparently it had been one of Hungary’s that she kept there for whenever she stayed over. It was a little long, tickling the tops of her feet, but at least it was cozy. She made her bed and opened her blinds fully so she could peer outside at the fields and trees. She spotted a buck and several doe in the distance grazing and smiled.

Liechtenstein wanted to get some more housework done from the previous day that she hadn’t finished yet and set off to do just that.

She picked up the small pile of discarded clothes by her dresser and made her way out into the cool hallway. She briefly wondered if the Austrian and her brother had any dirty laundry and decided she should check. Walking downstairs, the little country quickly set her clothes down and grabbed an empty basket to take back upstairs.

Opening the other spare bedroom first, the little blonde gazed over the untouched guest bed and suitcase off to the side. She smiled. Shutting the door and turning to quietly open the master bedroom across the hall, the girl made sure to gently place the basket in the doorway and tiptoe inside.

Liechtenstein spied the two figures of her host and her brother under the thick plum comforter, the latter snoring softly. Her grin grew and she took a moment to appreciate the fact that they were contentedly sleeping beside each other, calm and peaceful, instead of at each other’s throats like in the past. She’d much prefer them to get along like this, even if they were just sleeping, than ever going back to awkward stalemates. And after what the aristocrat had confided in her yesterday she figured that he was probably very happy with the turn of events. She knew deep down her brother was, too.

She was also very happy she hadn’t walked in on, well, something else.

Gingerly stepping across the wooden floor, trying her best to avoid the squeaky spots, the small country picked up the clothes scattered on the floor and in the hamper beside the closet. There wasn’t much, just a few shirts and socks, and her brother’s uniform from the night before. She hurriedly put them in the basket, picked it up, and quietly shut the door on her way out.

The girl spent the next hour or so sorting out the laundry into piles, changing around the washer and dryer, and folding the clean clothes and neatly putting them back into the basket.

When she’d finished and carried the clothes upstairs to put back in the bedrooms, Liechtenstein noticed that the men’s sleeping positions had changed and she had to set the basket down and cover her mouth to help stifle her giggles. Austria was simply lying on his back, but her brother had stolen all of the covers away from him and hoarded them on his side of the bed. Switzerland had turned into a mound of blankets and quilts and all she could see of him was one leg twisted among the musician’s and the top of his head resting on the other man’s shoulder. The Austrian’s left arm was dutifully wrapped around her brother’s heap.

Her chest warmed at the sight and she quickly set the clean clothes on top of the nearby dresser so she could leave them in peace.

Several hours passed with no sign of the men getting up any time soon, so Liechtenstein made the most of it. She tidied up around the kitchen, finishing off the last of the dinner dishes and making herself some peach iced tea. While she waited for her drink to chill the girl grabbed some leftover slices of the Austrian’s delicious raisin bread with some syrup and went out on the back porch to eat and watch the birds. After she’d eaten and enjoyed her sweet tea she went and made up a good sized fire in the family room, hoping it would combat the lingering chill in the mansion.
There’s wasn’t much to around the house since she’d thoroughly cleaned the day before, and she stood in front of the fireplace at a loss for what to do. She wanted to do her best to repay Austria for letting her stay, even if all she could do was clean and do a bit of cooking.

After idling a few moments she decided to watch a movie.

Liechtenstein perused the aristocrat’s DVD library and plopped down on the living room couch. Flipping on the TV the volume was loud and terrifying, making her nearly jump out of her skin. As she struggled to quickly turn down the noise, the girl noticed that it was the news channel on and the story airing caught her attention.

Switzerland’s President was standing at a podium at a press conference, apparently addressing the nation about the current situation going on in Austria. Several politicians stood in a row at the back of the stage behind the figure, including her own boss, and the news reporter was currently summing up what the leader was saying.

“The President eased growing fears around the region by stating that the pandemic happening in their neighboring country was contained and there looked to be no signs of the virus spreading to Switzerland, or any other surrounding nations. The leader goes on to tell citizens that the Swiss/Liechtenstein border with Austria will be staying open to allow any refugees to enter the country and that proper housing and accommodations will be provided to those fleeing from these violent attacks.”

Liechtenstein let out the breath she hadn’t noticed she’d been holding and patted her chest comfortingly. At least her brother’s trip home wasn’t fruitless. The news crossed over to show a clip of reporters asking the Austrian President what he thought about the support as he walked through the group of paparazzi.

“Any help at all is very much welcome, and we appreciate this gesture of goodwill on Switzerland’s behalf.”

The man coughed into a handkerchief and turned away from the cameras, excusing himself.

The girl jotted down a mental note to ask her brother more of what happened while he was away as the stories switched over to talk about the weather. She was about to change over to the disc player when the radar appeared on the screen and the remote nearly fell out of her hand.

There was a massive storm brewing in the Western tail of the Austrian state and in was an imposing mix of oranges and reds, smudging and swirling dangerously slow and predicted that it would cover just about the whole nation by the later afternoon and evening. The meteorologist was waving their arms and explaining the storm path, saying words like ‘severe winds’ and ‘hail’ and to not travel unless absolutely necessary.

Liechtenstein glanced back over her shoulder through the sliding doors out at the sunshine and cloudless day and back to the impending storm on the television.

She felt her stomach drop.

She wasn’t particular to storms and this one just looked dangerous.

Looking at the clock, she wondered if she should wake up the Austrian to let him know. It was two or so now so she didn’t think he’d mind, but she didn’t want to disturb his sleep.

But... she really, really didn’t like storms. And that didn’t look like any normal storm, especially not for autumn.
Pausing the news, the little country made her way up to the second floor as swiftly and silently as she could and opened the door to the master bedroom. The two countries were in more normal positions than last time, Austria on his stomach and her brother still hogging all the blankets on his side of the mattress.

Kneeling down by the side of the bed, she reached out and gently shook the musician’s shoulder and whispered, “Mr. Austria?”

A couple of more pokes and prods finally woke the man and his eyes slowly peeked open. It took a bit for his eyes to adjust and he blinked a few times before his gaze focused on the small girl.

“’s everythin’ all right, Lil?” he muttered, voice cracking with sleep as he sat up on his elbow.

“It’s just, ah,” she started softly, feeling silly now that she had woken the man up for such a thing. “It’s just the weatherman is talking about a really severe storm on the TV and, well, I don’t like storms and this one looks awful and I’m really sorry to wake you up, but I thought you should have a look, and-and . . .” her rambling faded as her cheeks reddened in embarrassment.

Austria just gave a groggy smile and kissed her forehead reassuringly. He mussed her light blonde locks as he sat up fully, carefully untangling himself from what little covers he had. He stood—she could hear his joints and bones cracking from slumber—and held out his hand to her, helping her stand up off the floorboards.

“I don’t mind, dear,” the aristocrat said, mindful of keeping his voice low so as to not wake Switzerland. He leaned over and picked up his glasses, placing them on his nose, and ran a hand through his hair in hope of neatening his bedhead a bit.

Still hand in hand, the two countries walked out into the hallway and, after closing the room door, down the stairs. Liechtenstein did feel bad for waking the man up but he didn’t seem to mind very much. His hand was warm and big around hers and she did admit that his presence comforted her immensely. However, when they sat in front of the television in the living room and she pressed play for him to see, the same dread from earlier filled her again.

Her hand tightened on his.

Austria watched for a moment until the TV went to a commercial and turned a kind gaze to her. “Don’t worry, Lilli, I’m sure everything will be fine and blow over,” he said. “We’ll just keep an eye on the sky today, hmm?”

The girl nodded and leaned into his side as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, giving a soothing squeeze.

“Sorry to wake you up.”

The man just waved her off. “It’s nothing to worry about, dear. It’s nearly three anyway, and I should have been up hours ago. You really don’t like storms, do you?”

She shook her head vigorously. “Oh, no, they scare me terribly. What with all the big booming and flashing, and plus the rain hurts when it’s pelting down like that. It’s not nice, soft rain.”

“Is that why you made me go outside to put that letter in the mailbox the other day when it was storming?” He smirked with amusement.

The tiny country blushed and nodded sheepishly. She twirled with the ribbon in her hair nervously. “Do you think there will be tornadoes?”
Austria gave her another squeeze. While tornadoes were extremely uncommon in Europe, or anywhere outside of North America, really, they could and have happened. And with the way that storm was looking it seemed like a strong possibility if he’d ever seen one. But as he looked down at Liechtenstein’s nervous expression he decided it was best not to say such things around the lady.

“Nonsense,” he confirmed, nodding confidently towards the television. “I’m sure it’ll just be a bit of bad rain and lighting and it’ll all blow over by morning.”

Great. First a virus, then terrorists and fire, and now tornadoes. What’s next? Aliens?

The girl muttered a quiet, “Okay,” convincing herself that he was probably right and that she was just working herself up for nothing. She sighed in relief, wrapping her small arms around the man’s chest in a quick hug.

“Danke.”

“Bitte.”

After the hug the hazel-haired man stood and, upon noticing the movie out on the coffee table, opened the DVD player and placed the disc inside. “Were you going to watch this?” A nod. “Why don’t we watch it together, then? Take our minds off the weather. It’s still quite nice outside, but if it turns we’ll switch the news back on, okay?”

Liechtenstein nodded in agreement and settled herself into the comfy couch as the musician went into the kitchen for some coffee.

...xXx...

He continued wiping the towel over the wooden floor, trying to sop up as much of the dark liquid as he could.

“Switzerland?”

The man ignored the other, pointedly focusing on the task of wiping and picking up pieces of the destroyed coffee mug that he’d dropped when—

When the man had said that.

The blond hadn’t meant to break the mug.

Then again, he hadn’t expected those words to come out of the Austrian’s mouth, either. "I love you so much."

He’d stood there a moment in pure shock, trying to decide whether or not he’d actually heard those words escape the man or if he’d been hearing things. After the weight of the declaration settled over him—and after he saw Austria slap a hand over his mouth as his face morphed into sheer horror—the cup handle just slipped right through his fingers and the drink smashed, spilling all over the kitchen floor.

The initial crash snapped him out of his stupor, giving him a welcome distraction. A string of apologies flowed out of his mouth as he dodged the sharp pieces carefully with his bare feet to grab the towel on the oven handle and start cleaning it up immediately.

But he couldn’t clean forever.
“Come on, look at me.”

*There it is again, his pleading voice,* the Swiss thought. He resigned himself to avoiding looking at the man, and his statement, in the face.

“Will you please just look at me?”

“No.”

“Please.”

“I . . . don’t think I can,” Switzerland said, his voice barely above that of a whisper.

“Vash, I—”

“No. Just, no.” He didn’t know what question for sure he was answering.

And while he spoke quietly, the words cut like daggers through the other man’s heart.

Austria gave a heavy sigh, running hand through his hair and tugging at the strands. Hard. *Idiot, idiot, idiot!* He felt sick to his stomach; like his insides were churning and sloshing back and forth like ocean swells, and he could barely stay standing. *This isn’t how I wanted to tell him!*

He waited another moment, two, staring pitifully at the top of Switzerland’s head before finally stumbling his way out of the kitchen. It felt like he was escaping a lion’s den.

Like the coffee mug, he had shattered.

Liechtenstein looked up from the movie when she heard a loud crash from the kitchen. She was about ready to stand up and go and see if the Austrian was okay when she saw him damn near bolting out of the room and disappearing across the hall. She craned her neck after him, puzzlement burning in her mind, and she saw him return a few seconds later with a green and white quilt. He made a bee-line for her and the couch as he unfolded the fabric, and he wrapped it around her and himself when he sat down. And while she was grateful for the extra warmth, she didn’t miss the look on the man’s face as he settled down beside her to watch the movie.

He looked absolutely petrified.

“Is everything okay?” the girl asked cautiously, tugging the blanket into a comfortable position as she kept a wary eye on the country.

Austria blinked and shook his head, before stopping himself and nodded instead. “Yes, yes, everything’s fine,” he said, his words rushing out of him like air out of a balloon.

“It sounded like something broke.”

The man kept his gaze fixed on the television screen. “Oh, that? That was nothing, dear, don’t worry about it.”

The small country could definitely tell something else was bothering him immensely and she rubbed the back of his hand, hoping it had a calming effect. It seemed to work a little because the musician dropped his eyes down into his lap. She leaned forward to snag the remote to pause the movie and turned to give him her full attention.

After several quiet seconds and more encouraging pats on his hand Austria’s voice finally came out, sounding incredibly broken.
“I told him.”

Liechtenstein furrowed her eyebrows. “Told who what?”

“Your brother.”

“Oh, he’s awake?”

“Yes. And I told him.”

The girl took a moment to absorb this information before her mind started to click into place. He didn’t . . . ?

“Oh. Oh. And you—?”

“Ja.”

“You told him that you—?”

“Ja.”

“And he reacted badly?”

“Ja.”

“Oh.”

“I . . .” His expression twisted with pain, his voice thick and heavy. “I could have gone my whole life without knowing that he’d say no.”

And with that the man’s minor façade of calm seemed to fracture and he practically collapsed in on himself, burying his face into his hands as a sob retched itself from his throat. The girl had never heard such a heartbreaking sound before in her life and her chest instantly hurt for him.

Just then a loud clap of thunder rolled by, making the girl jump with fright.

*Oh, oh dear*, she thought, staring out the window as the sky began to considerably darken. *Oh, no. Oh, no, no.*

Liechtenstein didn’t know how else to react so she just pulled the blanket over the broken man and hugged him close to her. “There, there,” she murmured, unnerved slightly at how the Austrian wasn’t making a single sound. His shoulders weren’t even shaking and she had to focus hard to notice if he was even breathing, which thankfully he was. They sat like that for what felt like a long time.

What had her brother done? Did he say something mean? Yell? She hadn’t heard any loud voices from the kitchen. Did he hurt him, well, physically? Did he throw something at him? Maybe that had been the loud crashing noise she’d heard. She knew her brother could be frustrating sometimes and hotheaded, but . . . Obviously he’d rejected the musician in some way considering how the man was reacting. She hoped it wasn’t too terrible, that they’d somehow be able to reconcile and at least be able to act civil around each other again. She knew how much her brother meant to the Austrian, and the image of them sleeping happily in the same bed earlier that she had witnessed popped into her head and her gut immediately dropped in sadness.

Liechtenstein felt completely helpless.
The Austrian suddenly sat up, surprising her, and rubbed at his eyes. She didn’t see any tears or even redness around them and was convinced that the man had literally just shut down. Dark lavender irises stared emptily down at the ground and his voice came out low and monotone.

“My apologies, Miss Liechtenstein, I don’t mean to trouble you.”

The girl gaped at him, eyes wide. He kept speaking, though, and with every word she saw more and more light leave those amethyst eyes of his.

“I knew this wouldn’t amount to anything; it just slipped out by accident. It was a fool’s hope to wish for anything more. Rose-colored glasses and all.” The man’s voice stayed low and it looked like a piece of him had died away. “I promise not to bother you again with this.”

The small country immediately stood up, startling both herself and the Austrian. “I’ll be right back,” she called over her shoulder to the man as she marched her way towards the kitchen.

She could hear the aristocrat call after her, but she ignored it.

Making her way into the room, the girl stomped her foot as she stopped, getting the attention of the Swiss. Her brother had his back to her as he faced the stove, brewing a new batch of coffee. He turned around when she gave an impatient huff, seeing her fists planted firmly on her robed hips.

“What is it?” he asked, a bit wary of what looked to be anger radiating off of his sister, which was rare for the girl. Her face was in full pout, cheeks puffed out against her will and a slight shine to her eyes hinted at possible tears.

Liechtenstein didn’t say a word, instead just pointing behind her. The Swiss raised an eyebrow, unsure of what she was getting at.

She gave him a heated look.

“Apologize,” the girl hissed—actually hissed—at him.

Oh.

Switzerland turned back to the stove, pointlessly adjusting the kettle of water. What his sister didn’t know was that he had been hiding in the kitchen for as long as possible, busying himself with cleaning up his mug accident and making a fresh pot for the household. He didn’t think it was a good idea to face the Austrian again so quickly after what had happened, not after what he had said.

Not while his heart was beating like hummingbirds wings.

He heard his sister huff again. “Look, I’m not going to force you,” she began, “but please at least go and apologize for whatever you did or said to Mr. Austria. He’s really upset.”

Ah. So the Austrian had confided in the girl. Switzerland adjusted the blanket around his shoulders and leaned his hands on the countertop for support.

Leave it to fate for that damn aristocrat to voice his thoughts the same day that I’m finally discovering these things for myself.

Liechtenstein marched impatiently over to the bigger country and pulled on his arm, effectively turning him to look at her. Her anger halted the moment she saw his face, cheeks painted red and looking quite embarrassed. Her expression of annoyance slowly fell and the threat of crying left
her.

“Wait.” She paused in her ranting, trying to make sense of the sudden change in the situation.

The man turned away to face the counter again.

“So, wait. You . . . ?”

His blond hair bobbed slightly as he nodded, and he shyly tucked a few strands behind his ear.

The girl blanked. She just stood there in shock a few moments as she watched her brother take down three mugs from the top cupboard and set them upon the counter. She’d been fully prepared to scold her brother thoroughly for whatever he had done, even if she’d never really yelled at him before.

But this was a surprising turn of events.

Switzerland just cleared his throat as he scooped coffee grounds into the cups with a spoon. “It was so sudden,” he said quietly. “I accidentally dropped one of his mugs from the shock of it.”

Oh. So that had been the loud crash she’d heard earlier.

“I didn’t know what to do,” her brother continued slowly. She knew talking about his feelings was hard for him. “I just kinda focused on cleaning up the mess, wanting for a moment alone to process what exactly he—what he said.”

Liechtenstein ‘ahh’ed in acknowledgment, relaxing her arms back to her side.

“I don’t know exactly how I feel about any of this.” He turned back around to face his sister, seemingly under control of himself once again. “I don’t hate him—I’ve known the idiot for too long to hate him.” He gave a soft chuckle. “And I definitely don’t want him to die, of course. I don’t quite know how to say how I feel.”

“So you’re not angry? Or upset with him?” the girl asked carefully.

“No.” He shook his head. “No, I’m not angry. I didn’t—I didn’t mean to . . . ”

She tipped her head in understanding. So he hadn’t meant to upset poor Mr. Austria at all.

“You know me,” the Swiss huffed out in a half joking manner, giving her a sheepish smile. He fretfully tugged the wool blanket around his shoulders. “I’m not exactly the, um, romantic type.”

He’s just bad at this sort of thing, she thought.

“Well, time to fix this,” she said and dutifully spun on her heel to return to the living room. She felt a hand grab the belt of her robe, effectively stopping her. She glanced back to see her brother shaking his head at her.

“No, no, I’ll fix it. You’ve done enough, Lilli.”

The tiny country looked at him with uncertainty for a moment before finally conceding. It was probably better if they talked it out face to face anyway. While her brother wasn’t very good with voicing his feelings he’d always felt it was best to face problems head on, and that was probably the best course of action for this sort of thing. Keeping her mouth shut on the subject she made her way back into the living room.
The Austrian was where she had left him, reclining on the couch in front of the television. He had the remote in hand, switching back from the weatherman to the paused movie. He glanced over when she sat down beside him again—and the girl could swear that if she didn’t know any better she would have assumed he was the same old aristocrat as he always was. Not a trace of heartbreak or sadness showed on his face or posture and he even gave her a sweet smile, tucking the quilt back around them both.

“I just checked the news,” he was saying, his voice sounding oddly normal. “That bit of thunder we heard is the edge of a different storm, just some small rain in the area. Nothing to worry about so far, dear.”

Liechtenstein had felt a tad uneasy, but the storm had been pushed to the back of her mind by the more pressing issue.

She looked up at him when he put a kind arm around her and she automatically returned the hug. Her hair barely mussed against the silk of his nightshirt and she squeezed him just a bit tighter, trying her best to keep the pieces of him held together until the Swiss arrived to smooth things over.

She heard quiet laughter reverberate through the musician’s chest. “It’ll be fine. If anything happens, I have a cellar we can go into,” the man said.

_No, no, I’m trying to comfort you, idiot_, she heard her brother’s voice in her head say and she had to bite her lip to keep from giggling. She’d definitely lived with Switzerland for too long; she was even starting to think like him.

She looked up once again and saw that the man’s glasses were missing.

“Where are your glasses?”

“I needed them to read something.”

Austria and Liechtenstein both looked up at the same time to see Switzerland joining them in the living room, carrying a tray with three steaming cups of coffee on it. The girl blinked in surprise and she saw that her brother did indeed have the spectacles on his nose and she felt silly that she hadn’t even noticed.

She did, however, notice the sharp, little intake of breath from the man beside her. His arm tightened around her slightly.

_Ah, there it is._

“I forgot to hand them back. Sorry about that,” the Swiss said, balancing the tray against his chest with one hand as he took the glasses off and handed them back to the brunet. Austria hesitated, not quite making eye contact as he took his specs back from the other country. He put them on and muttered a quiet thanks.

They each took a hot mug of sweet smelling coffee from the tray and Switzerland sat down on the other side of his sister. Liechtenstein sat up a little straighter, still hugging the Austrian, but now she felt like she was in the way.

_Should I excuse myself to go change or something?_ she thought. _I don’t want to them to feel like they can’t talk to each other while I’m here_. But she couldn’t bring herself to leave the two men alone as the tension in the air had risen to an obscenely uncomfortable level, neither of them brave enough to speak quite yet. Plus, it seemed that the musician was wholly relying on her to separate himself from the Swiss, using the girl as a barrier between them.
A few more words were spoken back and forth between the three of them, mostly from Liechtenstein, but then they all just settled down to finish the movie she’d put in. The tension slowly faded over the next hour or so, and by the time she’d put in another film the atmosphere in the room was easygoing and relaxed. The two larger countries were chatting casually about the end of the previous movie, and the green and white quilt was now wrapped around all three of them as they lounged comfortably on the sofa. If it weren’t for the fact that a bit of thunder was still rolling in the distance and how the Austrian still didn’t fully look at her brother in the eye she could have swore she’d dreamt up all the drama from earlier.

The clouds outside started to gather a bit more as the sun got closer to the horizon, casting violent oranges and yellows against the encroaching storm clouds.

Austria noticed about halfway through the second film that the girl beside him had fallen asleep. Awhile ago she’d adjusted herself to lie down across the couch and he’d grabbed a pillow to set on his thighs for her head to lie on while she stretched her legs out across her brother’s lap.

The aristocrat tucked the blanket around the small country, rubbing her shoulder gently. He felt his stomach begin to gradually sink again like it had been earlier, and he felt himself drawing nervous patterns on Liechtenstein’s arm with his finger. In his peripheral vision he saw Switzerland lean forward to snag the remote, turning down the volume of the television.

All of the nerves throughout the Austrian’s body suddenly tensed up and he prepared himself for a lashing.

“Yes.”

The music man flinched at the sound of the Swiss’ voice, internally scolding himself for it. He paused, confused at the one word statement. Austria forced himself to finally look up and meet the gaze of the man for the first time that evening, seeing the fair-haired man looking back at him with those . . . lovely emerald eyes of his, not looking in the least bit angry with him.

“‘Yes’ what?” he said, mentally slapping himself for the little squeak his voice made.

“Yes to your question earlier,” Switzerland murmured, tucking a strand of his hair behind his ear. Like he does when he’s nervous.

“So he’s saying . . . what I think he’s saying?”

“I care about you, too,” the Swiss continued, and the brunet ‘ahh’ed in his head.

“But as a friend,” he said, eyes falling down to the snoozing girl. “I understand.” Of course it wouldn’t be as anything more.

“No. Not in a friend way.” Austria’s head snapped back up and saw the blond give a small shrug, casually lifting his arm up on the back of the couch. The man gave a heavy sigh and looked back up, their eyes locking once more. “People have been saying we’re friends a lot lately and it never felt right to me. To be fair, neither did the term ‘enemies’ so I’ve been a little confused as of late.”

“You’re not . . . disgusted with me?”

Switzerland’s eyes widened at the aristocrat’s words, and he instantly reached his left arm over to
grab the Austrian’s hand that was resting on his sister. His other arm reached across the top of the sofa to give the man’s shoulder a strong squeeze. If his sister wasn’t asleep between them on both their laps he would have slid over to hug the coffee-locked man once more.

“Why would I be? Because you said that you, uh, well—” He glanced down at their hands in hesitation. The Swiss made himself look back up, his voice barely audible. “When you said that you love me?”

This can’t possibly be happening. This can’t, this can’t, this can’t . . .

“Ja, das.”

“Nein, ich hasse dich nicht. Not even close.”

Austria twined their fingers together, his crestfallen expression slowly changing to a more wistful one. He didn’t dare hope for anything more than that.

He took the arm extending over the back of the couch and their joined hands as a way for the Swiss to show his acceptance of the Austrian’s revealed feelings. The musician could barely contain the emotions welling up inside him. His throat felt tight and he had to look away. His free hand fell over his mouth to cover up the small choking sound that escaped him as abrupt tears began to stream down his face.

And the rain started to patter down.

Chapter End Notes

Danke - Thanks
Bitte - Welcome
Ja - Yes
Ja, das - Yeah, that
Nein, ich hasse dich nicht - No, I don't hate you

The next couple of chapters are going to be kind of a whirlwind!

Also, I promise aliens won't become a thing in this story haha...*sweats*
Tempest & Troubles

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the love confession between Austria and Switzerland turns out to be a bit more turbulent than anticipated.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rubbing his hands all over his face, Switzerland took a moment to breathe.

The Austrian had escaped the room.

He'd held on as long as the man would let him, doing his best to hold together the fragile pieces of the musician as much as he could from across the couch. The sky had opened up outside, booming loudly as the rain bucketing down was whipped against the windows at a fierce pace. The storm seemed to echo the swirl of emotions that had been flowing around the room that evening.

The blond man couldn't swallow the lump in his throat at seeing the aristocrat actually cry.

It had been . . . so, so long since he'd last witnessed the other man truly weep. The Austrian always put on a brave face—staying stoically elegant, dignified, and the perfect picture of sophistication at all times. He would rather appear charming and haughty than ever show another his vulnerabilities, weaving around himself a thick armor of nobility. Even defeated in battle he still kept up appearances, unnerving his enemies and making them feel like their win was cheapened by not seeing the Austrian get upset. The Swiss hadn't seen actual tears from the man in many, many decades.

Not since they'd separated.

And even then it had only been a single, scornful tear.

So the blond couldn't help but also be choked up at the sight. Austria's shoulders trembling, breath catching, eyes shut against the torrent of tears spilling down his cheeks. He loathed admitting it, but Switzerland knew he was the more emotional of the two, at least outwardly. He did his best to hide away his feelings from others, but ultimately wore his heart out in the open and had always had trouble keeping calm, no matter the situation. So seeing the usually controlled aristocrat breakdown made his own eyes prick and burn.

The Swiss wished he could do more for the other than just hold his hand.

He knew he should be feeling awkward or upset or even spiteful towards the Austrian at the moment, but he wasn't. He couldn't.

He just confessed to me.

The chocolate-haired man whined softly into the hand over his mouth, breaths hitching.

He really . . .
Switzerland gripped their entangled hands together firmly, sliding his fingers better through the musician's slender ones. The other held on tightly, as if he was about to be washed away.

_He loves me._

The Swiss felt his chest swell, and he couldn't help the little flip his stomach did at the thought.

_Roderich loves me._

_Me._

And, in a way, he had sort of confessed back.

He opened his mouth to say something—anything—but the man suddenly ripped his hand away from his grasp. Austria smoothly moved the girl from his lap and pulled away from the hand on his shoulder, standing up swiftly. The country hid his face and all but ran out into the hallway, disappearing from sight.

Switzerland gave a heavy sigh, wiping at his burning eyes, and couldn't help but shake from the emotional exhaustion running through him. He knew the Austrian was faring much worse.

He spent what felt like a long time just sitting there, reclining on the couch and listening to the thunderstorm outside. Various thoughts were running through his head, his mind having trouble sticking on a single one.

The blond couldn't help feeling a little unsure of the Austrian's confession—even though he knew that was wrong of him to think in that moment. He knew full well how the man's past love interests and relationships had begun, and subsequently ended. The gentleman had dated many, many, many people and countries throughout his lifetime, after all. He'd been married, divorced, married again, gotten kicked out, back together, divorced, married once more, and on and on. The Swiss wasn't blind to the aristocrat's promiscuity, nor the reasons for the majority of it. Whenever the country was weak or in need of protection or got into some kind of trouble, he would marry a well off country—usually Hungary—who would quickly sort out his problems, and then he'd claim his strength in independence and break it off with them.

And Switzerland knew for an absolute fact that Austria loved Hungary. He and the woman had always been close, and he was sure the two of them had been heavily romantic at one point. They'd been happily married for many years and were still very intimate with each other, but more in an older sister/younger brother sort of way nowadays. Again, though, their long relationship as allies had begun from her defending the musician.

Then currently with the crisis Austria was now facing, the Swiss couldn't help the little thread of doubt worming through the back of his mind as it seemed he was the one now in the defending position.

He did his best to squash that idea before it had time to weave around his thoughts more, scolding himself. _No. Don't._ This was different. The Austrian hadn't said anything regarding the merging of their countries, let alone _marriage_. He'd even been reluctant for the Swiss and his sister to come stay with him at all.

_He doesn't have anything else to gain by saying he loves me except for . . . me._

And it's not like he himself had had any ulterior motives when he decided to fill Hungary's request by looking after the brunet. The Swiss had done it because . . . Well, if he was being honest, it was because he cared. The blond country had always been like that. Despite constantly declaring
neutrality and doing his best to stay out of the other nation's problems, he would step in if someone was truly in need of help. *Solidarität.* Like when he saw Liechtenstein dying on the street and took her in despite not being in a good place himself. He didn't expect her to pay him back, or serve him, or to give him her land so he could take it over. He did it because it was the right thing to do, and he knew his conscience would eat him alive if he did anything otherwise.

That's exactly what this was, him being at Austria's house. Or, at least, what it was supposed to be. He didn't expect anything in return from Liechtenstein, but had gained a loving little sister whom he adored. And he didn't expect anything from the Austrian, but had received... a man who loved him.

His thoughts returned to the sight earlier of said man sobbing while holding his hand, and his eyes were wet again.

A small groan grumbled out from him as he fought to control his inner turmoil.

The small feet on his lap stretched and curled, catching his attention. Switzerland looked over to his right to see his little sister peeking over the knitted blanket at him, her eyebrows furrowed. Her small voice was muffled by the quilt as she spoke, "That went a bit better than I thought it would, to be honest."

His brain took a moment to process her statement, realizing she meant his conversation with Austria before he bailed. "Were you, uh—" the Swiss attempted to clear his throat, still feeling a bit blubbery, "—not sleeping?"

The little girl shook her head, her jade eyes looking concerned. "I wanted you both to have a moment to yourselves. I was hoping you'd leave me if I pretended to be asleep and go talk somewhere else, but I guess not..."

Ah.

The blond man couldn't help feeling a tad impressed by his sister's craftiness.

Switzerland muttered to himself at his obliviousness and rubbed at his eyes yet again. He felt the cushions beneath him shift as Liechtenstein sat up; removing her legs from his lap and placing a small hand on his arm. The man wasted time hiding behind his palms, debating whether or not to talk to her more about what had just happened. She was there, she'd heard everything. She'd witnessed how overwhelmed the musician was. How he'd actually been crying and shaking. She knew.

"Are you all right, big brother?"

The man finally removed his hands from his face and looked to her with blurry vision that wouldn't clear no matter how many times he blinked. His voice came out in more of a gasp than he intended it to as he said, "You saw him, too."

"Roderich really means it."

The well within him was beginning to overflow in a show of emotion he'd never quite shown the little country before, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to cap it off anymore.

"He was crying."
He was supposed to be her big brother and stay strong—not get all sensitive over his lovesick neighbor. His body was betraying him, though, and he just tilted his head down in defeat, closing his eyes as tears finally blazed their way down his cheeks. The Swiss couldn't help it. All the old worries and concerns from the past he'd spent with the Austrian just gushed out of the recesses of his memories—all the tenderness and endearment he used to shower Austria with spilling over. He'd finally allowed himself to run a figurative thumb over his old soft spot for the man that he'd kept buried all these years, and he wasn't quite sure he fully approved of the old sentiment filling him.

Not that he could do much about it.

"He was crying so hard. I-I can't . . ."

The mix of feelings from the current situation and his nostalgia were a potent mix—they had officially gotten the best of him. He couldn't help feeling guilty towards the young girl he was responsible for.

Warm lips pressed against his wet cheek and a pair of arms wrapped around his shoulders tightly, his sister's small voice in his ear. "Brother . . . Please don't cry, too."

"I-I'm sorry, Lilli," he choked out, burying himself into her embrace. "I have not been a very good brother. It's just . . . so easy to get swept up by him."

"Don't scold yourself like that! You're the best big brother . . ." A pause. "Though I don't want you to feel like you have to return Mr. Austria's feelings because you think it's what I want you to do. If you feel the same way, that's great! And if you don't, then that's fine, too! I just—I . . ." He heard the girl falter a moment, huffing a bit before she spoke again, voice quieter than before. "I want you to be happy, Vash."

Switzerland returned her hug wholeheartedly, grateful for the small girl and her support. He clutched at the back of her pink robe and did his best to just focus on the rain tapping against the sliding glass doors behind them.

He flinched at a loud clap of thunder and let the girl hold onto him a little while longer.

…xXx…

A long while passed, the two blonde countries not having heard or seen anything of their host. Liechtenstein glanced at the nearby grandfather clock and decided to go start preparing dinner, giving her brother another quick hug before scurrying off. The Swiss had finally collected himself and stood to go in search of the Austrian, to make sure he was safe more than anything.

The storm outside had officially escalated into a full on typhoon, with tumultuous clouds blacking out the evening sky. Wind was blasting around the old mansion, making the aged wood and brick creak and groan as the rain pelted down with such fervor that it sounded like hail—and it might've been, but neither of the countries could see to tell despite the constant lightning strikes illuminating the uproar outside, thunder always following.

Liechtenstein pulled down a few plates from the cupboard, attempting to focus on the meal she was going to make instead of the windstorm going on. She felt a bit wary about using any of the electronics at the moment and figured she'd put together some sandwiches for the three of them. Her eyes kept darting to the bay window over the sink at nearly every beat of light, several close ones in the yard making her cringe.
The young girl had barely gotten any of the ingredients out on the counter when the hair on the back of her neck stood up and a piercing strike hit right outside the window. She jumped back with a yelp, and covered her head instinctively as the air crackled and boomed around her. Shaking with fright, the small country glanced up just in time to see a smoldering scar on one of the nearby oak trees in Austria's yard; a newly broken branch swinging precariously in the wind.

Switzerland jolted at the raucous sound of lightning ringing throughout the large home, stopping on his way down the wooden steps. He'd went to put on some warmer clothes, including socks and a pair of cotton drawstring pajama pants. He still left the blue silk shirt the Austrian had given him on, but he did grab a light cardigan to wear over it.

The man tilted his head back towards the kitchen area where his sister had disappeared to, pausing once he reached the grand hallway. His ears were buzzing and he caught sight of a few more close strikes illuminating around the house, the light flashing through the skylight above him.

The Swiss repressed a shiver at the unsettling storm and continued his way down the hallway towards the master bathroom and study.

The yellow-haired nation first wanted to check the bathroom to make sure the Austrian hadn't had another attack—what with all the stress going on at the moment. He knocked, opening the door when he didn't hear a response. He was greeted by the dark porcelain and marble interior, a low nightlight glowing beside the sink, and nothing more. The Swiss left and walked further down the hallway to the study door, proceeding to knock. It took him a moment of listening through the rumbling storm to hear anything, and then he opened the door as quietly as he could.

A soft singing greeted him, and Switzerland peeked through the cracked door to see the target of his search perusing one of the many bookshelves lining the room. A large mahogany desk adorned with many papers, pens, and a stained glass lamp, with a burgundy leather chair sat off to the left of the door. Nearly every wall was a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf, packed with many different types of novels and journals and binders of sheet music, being held neatly upright by elaborate bookends. Some other shelves held pictures and various knickknacks, snow globes, figurines, and vases of flowers. Only one section of the wall was shelf-free and instead held a large, beautifully ornate glass window. The spot was pushed outward; a cubby nestled snugly between two shelves, and was inhabited by a plush window seat with a mound of pillows upon it.

The little lamp was the only light on in the room and cast beautiful shades of fuchsia and lime around the homely den.

He spied Austria pulling a book from the shelf he was inspecting, taking a moment to flip through it. The man's hushed melodic voice lilted pleasantly through the room, the noise softened somewhat by the plethora of books surrounding him. The Swiss didn't quite recognize the song, it sounded like some type of lullaby, but he opened the door fully so he could enter the room.

"Little Robin,
"What are you doing,
"Out in the cold tonight?"

Switzerland leaned against the door as it quietly clicked closed, not wanting the musician to be aware of him just yet. Instead, he nestled himself in the corner between the wall and a bookshelf, and patiently listened to the brunet man's voice.

"Come on over,
"To where it's warmer,
"There's no need to be shy."
Austria put the book he was handling back, taking a moment to straighten a nearby picture frame. From where he was standing the Swiss could vaguely see the photo, seeing several obscured people in what looked to be a portrait of some kind.

"My web is cast,
"And it shall last,
"Until the morning light."

The aristocrat brushed his fingers down the frame, the blond noting a slight tremble in his hand.

"So little Robin,
"What are you doing?
"Come out of the cold tonight."

The man's voice faded off, giving way to the noisy rain pattering against the window. Switzerland saw his shoulders visibly shake as he took in a deep breath, exhaling it in a long sigh.

"Which one am I, the robin or the spider?" the Austrian mumbled to himself, pulling away from the photograph. "I wonder."

Switzerland pushed off from the wall and gave a light huff to alert the other to his presence. "Perhaps the spider," he murmured, stepping forward.

Austria didn't seem surprised at hearing him speak, his only reaction a small tilt of his head. The brunet gave another sigh and began running his fingers across the line of books yet again. He decidedly kept his back to the approaching Swiss.

The blond didn't mind, calmly sauntering up beside the other to peruse the selection of hard covers. Neither of the two gave the other a glance as they continued the conversation.

"I see. I guess the spider does seem very fitting." The Austrian pulled down another title to look over. "After all, it seems I've trapped you in my web."

Switzerland laughed quietly, scoffing at the idea. "It's more like the song, silly. You've offered your web as refuge against the harsh world outside." He gestured to the storm beyond the window. "If only to snag you 'til morning."

The quiet statement made the Swiss finally look up at his companion, catching those lavender irises in a fleeting glance.

Austria seemed tranquil—all signs of his earlier breakdown either no longer there or hidden by the dim lighting. Those mauve eyes held his own, not shying away this time. He noticed a certain hardness to them, surely provoked by their previous discussion, and his chest squeezed at the sight. The wall was erected in place once more, and the blond man didn't know whether or not he should be relieved or a bit irritated. If he looked close enough, though, he could catch the slight redness rimmed behind those delicate spectacles.

The Austrian finally looked away from the other, his gaze dropping to the floor as he maneuvered around the Swiss to walk over to the far left wall of shelves. The brunet began to pick through the journals and binders, seeming to ignore the other and humming again once more.

Switzerland couldn't help peeking over at the portrait the man had been looking at earlier. He noticed it was an older black and white photograph of some of Austria's closest friends and family, and he couldn't help feeling nostalgic as he remembered when it had been taken.
Austria himself sat in the middle of the photo on the bench in front of his piano, wearing a very crisp, white suit—the Swiss taking a moment to recognize the older Imperial style of which the man wore. A dark, thick mente was draped over the man's left shoulder, his dolman snug at the waist with all the loops and buttons fastened tightly. The front of his coat and the tops of his boots were heavily embroidered with eccentric knotting patterns. His legs were crossed and his left hand sat neatly in his lap, his right holding both hands of the woman beside him.

A very elegant looking Hungary sat next to the musician on the bench, the huge flowing skirt of her traditional looking gala dress spread in front of the group in a subtle arc. Her hair was styled with many jewels and flowers to match the tulips and carnations embellishing her costume, and her eyes were slightly hidden by a translucent, lacy veil. A silk shawl clasped around her arms and fell off to the side, sporting many similar flowers and jeweled patterns.

Opposite her on the Austrian's left sat a certain smiling Italian. Whom of which was leaning happily against the man's fur mente, staring full into the camera. Italy wore something similar to the Austrian, if a bit less ornate and darker in color, a small fur cloak of his own wrapped around his shoulders. A large bouquet of lilies, roses, edelweiss, carnations, and hyacinth sat in the aristocrat's lap, the leaves and petals cascading off to the side and partially obscuring the legs of the two men beside him.

Standing behind the Italian and to the left was a shorter, younger looking Germany. His stance was stoic and uncomfortable as usual, but that could have been from the stiff military garb he wore. High collared with a sash, garnished with many buttons and medals, the man stood rigidly with his studded cap under one arm, his other hand resting upon the decorative blade that hung around his waist.

The last to stand on the right of the picture was none other than Prussia. The silver-haired man stood at attention beside his younger brother, this being one of the rare pictures proving that he was once taller than the more serious blond, and wore a similar looking uniform. The material was pure black, lined with a lighter color—the Swiss recalling it being a vivid red—and his vest was decorated with many of his own medals, buttons, sashes, and embroidery. His favored feathered cap sat securely atop his head and he balanced his polished sabre in front of him, both gloved hands proudly resting on the hilt.

Switzerland reached out his hand and carefully plucked the photograph from the shelf, cradling it in front of him. The country gave a sigh, zoning out to the sound of the rain tapping against the window and the Austrian's humming as he continued studying the picture in his hands.

Standing on the far right of the portrait was France in all his elaborate glory. The Frenchman wore a suit like the rest of them, surprisingly not too flashy for once; high-waisted tight pants, and a short vest with a long flowing coat, a large cravat tucked under his chin. A long ribbon was tied around his waist in an elaborate bow, cascading down beside his legs. His hair had its usual curl and the front sides were tied back in a small bun. The man's eyes were creased with joy, his buttoned chest proudly puffed out with his left arm slung around the waist of the man standing beside him.

That man just happened to be the Swiss. Standing between France and over the Hungarian woman's shoulder, he was wearing much simpler clothing than his counterparts, though still in the same style for the era. It was one of the few times he wasn't in his military uniform, instead going for a double buttoned great coat—and he remembered it being made of white wool with a dark green collar and piping. A much plainer officer's sword hung on his hip, a cursive inscription engraved along the scabbard. *I still have that sword somewhere, I believe*, he thought, briefly remembering the scrawl read off some vague Latin idiom for victory.
Switzerland's eyes raked over the old figure of himself, slight warmth filling him when he remembered that, at the time, his smile had been completely genuine.

It was a time before he'd taken in Liechtenstein, and before he'd had his falling out with the Austrian—a time when he'd still been very close to the other. He'd continued to live both in his own home and with Austria of his own choice; Hungary and Italy still staying with the man, as well.

The Swiss gripped the photograph a little tighter as many memories came flooding back, and the shorter man leaned his shoulder against the shelving as he heaved a heavy sigh. A sudden bolt of lightning snapped him out of his reverie, causing both him and Austria to look up in surprise. The other's tune halted as he cleared his throat before continuing to mutter the soft song he was singing.

The blond fully faced the man opposite the room from him, finally tearing his attention away from the photo and back to his original reason for being in the study. "You still sing when you're nervous," he pointed out, hoping to start up a conversation.

The aristocrat's head nodded as he slowly turned to face the Swiss. He made momentary eye contact, violet irises flicking to the other's emerald ones then to the side. "Hmm . . ." He cleared his throat, voice a little unsteady. "I've always done so, I suppose."

"Indeed." The Swiss stepped away to sit down in the cozy book nook, appreciating the lush, velvety lounge. He leaned and adjusted himself into the pillows until he was comfortable, patting the cushion beside him. He looked back to the picture in his hands when the other didn't automatically move to join him, fiddling with the metal frame. "Maybe you're actually the robin; singing your songs, reluctant to enter the spider's web," he teased gently.

The Austrian couldn't help the small chuckle that left him and ran a hand through his disheveled hair, smoothing one side back. The brunet gave in and crossed the room to sit beside him, holding a book in his hand that he had plucked from the shelf. It looked to be a small photo album with a dark leather cover, thick with clear plastic sheets. The tension in the air was still taught and crisp—like a violin string tuned too tightly.

"Should I talk about . . . us?"

"So," he began, "you really—you feel . . . that way about me, huh?" *Great, you sound lame.*

The aristocrat twitched at the shift in topic, staring down at the photo album he held in his lap intently. He almost imperceptibly curled in on himself, but the Swiss caught the miniscule movement. "We do not have to talk about it," the Austrian said quietly. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

"It's not—" The blond paused, taking a steadying breath before continuing. "You're not making me uncomfortable, Roderich."

Austria didn't reply, stubbornly remaining silent. *I guess he doesn't want to speak about it right now.* Switzerland hesitated, scrambling his brain for something else for them to talk about as a particularly strong roll of thunder shook the window. He wanted the aristocrat to speak to him like he normally would—fearing that the man would close off from him again like he'd done in the past. A small voice in the back of his thoughts reminded him that he had also pulled away from the other, closing himself off in his neutrality, and he sucked back the wave of remorse that hit him.

As Austria lifted his head to look at him he caught sight of the usual spectacles hiding those violet eyes, and decided to gently pluck them off his nose for the second time that night.
"So your glasses really are just for show, aren't they?"

"I suppose."

"Ha, I knew it."

Austria licked his lips, his eyes crinkling slightly. "Oh?"

Switzerland sniffed lightly as he held up the glasses to the multicolored light radiating from the antique lamp across the room, inspecting the normal glass for all it's worth. "I've had a running bet with Luxembourg for awhile now. I had a feeling they were fake, but I could never bring myself to ask you outright," the blond said, handing them back. "You've worn them for quite a long time."

The Austrian adorned his face with the wired specs, scooting them up his nose into a comfortable position. "I was required to wear glasses for a play I was performing in as part of my attire, and I guess I just took to them. I liked the look and feel of them, so I've worn them ever since."

"You would wear them for aesthetic and not necessity."

"Of course, my dear. How do you think they ever got popular in the first place?" Austria sent the glasses flying upward by the backs of the handles once more—just like the other had done to him earlier in the kitchen—and gave a big, sly grin. "For fashion aficionados such as myself."

The Swiss couldn't help the gush of laughter that escaped him at that, a few snorts following suit. The brunet let his glasses return to normal and continued smiling at his chuckling counterpart—who, despite everything, was indeed trying to control his fit of giggles.

It seemed most of the pressure had been temporarily cleared between them and so the two now sat beside each other in contentment. Both were glad that the stress between them was beginning to clear away, and the Swiss was particularly grateful that there were no more tears in the aristocrat's eyes.

Switzerland settled down after a moment, his laughs fading away, and he turned his gaze to door, thinking back to his sister. The little blonde must still be in the kitchen and he wondered what she was cooking.

"She really seems to like it here," he muttered quietly.

Austria smoothed the one side of his hair back yet again, giving the other a brief confused look before he understood who he was referring to. "Lilli? She certainly has made herself quite at home—spent most of the day yesterday cleaning, even though I told her she didn't have to." Austria followed his stare, and continued with, "I'm glad. I don't want either of you to feel awkward here. Or . . . unsafe." He shrugged at the look the Swiss gave him. "I mean, more than usual."

The other country grunted, rolling his eyes. "Awkward—sometimes. Unsafe—definitely not." His eyes reflexively searched the room, glancing from the door to the window for any sign of danger as he spoke, the brunet catching his gaze as he did so. The Swiss noticed the slight worry budding in the man's violet eyes and said, "Force of habit."

"Vash—"

"Roderich." Switzerland's low grumble of the name cut him off. He fixed Austria with a steely jade stare, his eyes more sincere than scathing. "There's no reason for any of us to feel unsafe here, especially you. Nothing is going to happen to you while I'm around."
Austria let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding, a rush of emotions flowing through him at the man's statement. Lightning struck even closer outside the ornate glass and the entire inside of the room flashed bright white with stark black shadows. All he could see in that moment were Switzerland's eyes shining neon green against the shadow of his face and he swore that time itself had stopped to allow him to be pulled into those daring bright green depths for what seemed like the millionth time in his life.

The only thought in his mind at that moment was the quiet plead of, *Stay.*

"... ich... erich... Roderich!"

The Austrian slowly came back to reality, all color in the room gradually returning to normal.

The owner of those hypnotic eyes just looked at him worriedly. "What's wrong?" The man automatically reached out to feel the man's forehead, brushing the unkempt chestnut-colored hair aside. Austria thought to flinch away, but decided in that moment that he wanted to feel the other's cool fingers against his heated skin more than anything. Switzerland made sure to keep his face calm, careful not to show his concern at just how hot the Austrian's fever was.

He absently brushed the left side of the country's bangs back, matching it more to look like he usually kept it, and noticed a sharp, purple bruise just above the man's temple. The Swiss grimaced and fixed his neighbor with a stern look.

Before the man could ask about the injury yet another strike of lightning touched down, this one too loud and blaring, and the entire house seemed to shift as the electricity went out. The two countries sat in surprise for a moment, ears popping, adjusting to the darkness. Their only source of light now was the occasional lightning bolt outside.

Austria stood up cautiously and smoothed down his silk nightshirt. "Well, this is a predicament."

The Swiss stood as well, handing the portrait he'd been holding back to the other country. The musician took it carefully, holding it along with the photo album, and jumped a bit when he felt the blond grab his free hand.

"Come on," Switzerland muttered, beginning to lead them vaguely towards the door. "Let's go get my sister and see if we can get the power back on. You do have flashlights somewhere around here, don't you?"

"Of course I do, they're in the pantry." Austria rolled his eyes, thankful the other couldn't see his blush in the darkness. "I keep a storm kit in there, as well."

He couldn't calmly express his relief at the fact that the Swiss seemed intent on not avoiding him, having clearly sought him out earlier after their moment on the couch. The musician was so thankful that the other no longer appeared reluctant to touch him, freely grabbing his hand and petting his hair—like he used to when they were younger. Yes, he was indeed glad the other couldn't see his reassured, practically daffy expression.

Suddenly, as the two had warily crossed the room and opened the door, an abrupt gust of wind sailed into the house with enough force to make the mansion sway with a noisy groan, bowing one side of the windows inward. Austria was staring worriedly up into the rafters when a loud crash sounded down the hallway, making both men jump as the gale from outside suddenly swept into the house. A shrill shriek sounded from the other side of the home and Switzerland instantly broke
into a blind sprint, his grip tightening on the Austrian's hand and dragging him along.

Worry blossomed between them both and the brunet quickly stepped in front of the other, leading them expertly down the darkened hallway towards the kitchen. Upon crossing the hall they stepped under the kitchen archway and stopped in shock at the sight before them.

A fat, wicked looking tree limb had impaled itself deftly through the large bay window above the sink, having easily smashed through the thin glass, and its sharp branches currently now occupied most of the area of the kitchen.

Switzerland felt his blood run cold when he spied a dark lump beneath the tree, a small pink robe being illuminated by the next few light flashes. The man dashed forward, not caring about the rain and hail whipping in from the wind or the glass shards underfoot as he immediately knelt beside the fallen figure. He tried reaching in between the thicket of branches to pull her out, but there simply wasn't enough space. Instead, he quickly changed his stance and began lifting the giant branch up off of the smaller blonde. He gave a small gasp from the surprising weight of the wood, the sharp bark digging painfully into his shoulder—not that he really cared. It took him a moment of steadying himself against the branch and the gale force winds before he could finally begin to lift it.

Austria ducked down at once, his arms reaching between the intricate grove of twigs and branches to grab hold of the small girl. The Swiss gave another push, involuntarily crying out with effort as he lifted the tree limb up some more so the other could safely retrieve his sister. The aristocrat secured the girl in his arms and swiftly crawled back out of the tangle of branches, scooting as far away from the horrors of broken glass and splinters and hail as he could.

As soon as the two were clear of the branch the blond man let the heavy bough drop back to the tile floor. He was instantly at his sister's side, reaching out to make sure she was okay. "Lilli!" he called out, shaking her small shoulder to try and wake her. His eyes had slightly adjusted to the dark and he could see that Liechtenstein was curled tightly in the Austrian's arms, unconscious, and both men did their best to block the strong rain from soaking her any further.

Before they could attempt to further rouse the young girl a deafening roar of wind coiled and wound its way into the house once more, thunder and air shaking the mansion violently. The branch shifted and slid further in through the window and a surge of glass and hail buffeted the trio. The storm was a turbulent cacophony of wind and debris and lightning, sounding like a squealing freight train was crashing through the home.

The Swiss' eyes snapped open when the body he was hunched over suddenly moved, springing to his feet as the hazel-haired man dashed out of the room and into the hall. He found a hand clasped tightly around his wrist and stumbled in the darkness after the man. Austria shouted something at him, his voice too faint over the sound of the windstorm, and quickly pulled the blond down the hall towards a door beneath the main staircase. The man opened the door quickly and looked back to him, desperately trying to urge the Swiss forward. Realizing this, Switzerland stopped and before the Austrian could question him he pushed the two through the cellar door.

The brunet wobbled on the first few steps, steadying himself on the railing. The rush of air ceased and the raucous of sounds were abruptly muffled as the door quickly closed behind him. Left in even heavier darkness, the aristocrat shifted the girl in his arms and stood a little straighter, turning to look behind him. He couldn't even see the door he was just shoved through.

"Vash?" he cried, reaching out to grasp at air and silence. "Oh!"

Oh no, no, no, no . . .
The mantra ran through his head as he panicked, torn between going back through the door for the Swiss and furthering down into the basement with Liechtenstein. Why didn't he follow them?!

Despite beginning to lose his nerve, the unconscious girl weighed heavy in his arms and won out his split second decision, and he carefully began to make his way down the wooden stairs.

It took him a tedious few minutes of slowly feeling his way down the steps before he finally reached cold carpet. Exhaling in relief, Austria stepped his way into the dark depths—mentally mapping out his basement to carefully plot his footfalls. His fingers itched to fretfully run through his hair as the storm echoed in the darkness above him. The brunet gave a small curse as his toe connected with the edge of something and he jostled the small country in his arms slightly, shaking out his foot. It had been awhile since he'd been in his cellar, and his memory wasn't quite perfect so he was bound to hit a box or two.

Or three, or four.

Austria clutched the girl tighter to him as his shin bumped into the soft edge of a couch; the particular one he'd hoped he was correctly heading to at the back of his basement. He leaned down and reached out a hand to make sure, sitting down in relief on the old plastic covered cushions and laying the girl across his lap. He cradled her head in his left elbow, resting against the arm of the couch.

The Austrian did finally run his fingers through his hair, pushing his bangs back out of his eyes again and took a moment to try to settle the knot in his stomach.

Squinting through the darkness to try and see, well, anything, he ran his hand gently over the girl's face and head, checking for any wounds. His right hand brushed through the girl's smooth locks and came upon a spot of something warm and wet. The man hissed in concern, and very, very delicately pressed the sleeve of his silk shirt to the gash to try and sop up the blood.

He looked down towards the vague figure in his lap and tried to wake the young girl; his heart sinking when no reply came. The brown haired man held the blonde closer, murmuring into her hair, "Bitte wach auf, Lilli."

The musician didn't noticed just how much he had been shaking until that moment, curling evermore protectively over the small country in his arms. This was the first time the girl had been injured while in his care and he couldn't help the hollow feeling of dread in the pit of his belly. He was a bundle of nerves already from the other events that day and didn't like that he was now left alone in the dark with the hurt girl while Switzerland was trapped upstairs with a deadly storm raging above—and his thoughts turned dark.

It's all my fault, he couldn't help thinking. It's my fault that she got hurt. I shouldn't have thrown that fit earlier! If only she hadn't been here. She shouldn't even be here . . .

He shook himself from that line of thought, feeling immediately guilty. The Austrian couldn't help the line of thoughts that followed, though, as he berated himself over and over for ever letting such a thing happen.

The country sat still in the dark for a while more, counting the seconds to distract himself, and he listened to the howling wind and rain hitting the floors above him. A sudden loud bang of the cellar door opening with the harsh breeze and an intense light shining down the steps in the distance caught his attention, calling out "Vash?" There was a grunt and a heave and then the door closed, cutting off the basement from the thunderstorm again. The light waved back and forth a moment as it descended, shining out over the sea of boxes and antiques; searching until it landed upon
"Are you both all right?" a breathless voice echoed out to him.

"Oh, Vash, thank goodness," he breathed out in relief. Austria's eyes blinked at the new light source, seeing the dark shadow of the Swiss slowly weaving his way towards them, a couple totes in one hand and flashlight in the other. He felt his body relax at the man's presence, glad that he'd finally escaped the hellish storm upstairs. The brunet cleared his throat as the other reached the small living space and stopped beside them. "Are you okay?"

"Nein." Austria sighed for the umpteenth time that night and motioned for the Swiss to come closer.

What he didn't expect was the man to practically throw his bags down and pounce on him. Switzerland stuck close to him, gripping him around the shoulders as he hovered cautiously over his sister—petting her face and hair gently. He found the Austrian's hand that was pressed against the girl's head wound; recoiling a moment before very, very gingerly pressing into the cut between the brunet's fingers with his own. Austria breathed in the thick, soggy aroma of rain and leaves from his clinging companion, feeling wet drops press against his cheek from the damp hair. All three of them had been thoroughly drenched by the storm and reeked of its after effects, but it seemed the Swiss had gotten the worst of it. The man could feel the sopping form of Liechtenstein in his arms more than ever now, as well; her nightgown and robe heavy despite her actually being quite light. He could feel the equally dripping body of the Swiss pressing against him, smothering him just a bit under the weight.

He paid it no mind.

Austria cleared his throat of the mysterious lump that had found its way there as the golden-haired man pulled away. Switzerland knelt down in front of the two, redirecting the flashlight he picked back up from the floor to the small girl in the musician's lap. Illuminating just how much blood was still seeping from under the man's sleeve nearly made the both of them die of fright. The Swiss was flitting about in a panic, turning her head to the side, pressing his hand back over the other's again, and trying to dig into the bags just slightly out of his reach for something while juggling the flashlight. The brunet gently removed his arm from beneath the girl's head, moving slightly out of the way, and took the light from him—opting to hold it while the other dealt with her injuries. The blond glanced at him gratefully.

He managed to secure what he was looking for—the first aid kit—and allowed the Austrian to remain putting pressure on the wound while he pulled away to dig through it. Pulling out a few small sponges, some antiseptic, and a sterile bandage pad he returned his attention to his sister. Impatiently, he shooed the man's hand away and began to work cleaning up the blood spilling down her temple and matting her light yellow hair. He was getting increasingly more and more frustrated that the blood wouldn't stop even though he kept steady pressure against the gash, and he couldn't help his breathy complaint, "Why do head wounds have to bleed so much? I mean, it's just ridiculous."

Austria's heart skipped at the break in the man's voice, and he pretended not to notice.

"There's no reason there should be this much blood. Honestly." A gasp as Switzerland reached for another sponge, discarding the soaked one. "It's just a small cut, so small. She should be awake by now. Any minute now. She should . . ."

He listened to the man's anxious rambling, keeping his eyes more on the Swiss now than the girl in his arms. It was starting to dawn on him that he needed to be the steady one in that moment and he
tried getting the man's attention. "Vash, listen to me."

"It'll heal in no time, süß. I promise. It's just a small cut—"

"Vash." The blond man tore his eyes away from his sister and looked up into the musician's serious expression. Austria's violet eyes were scalding as he reached out to cup the Swiss' cheek, holding his gaze. "Calm yourself. She's going to be just fine."

Switzerland just stared back, his eyes wide and wet. He opened his mouth to reply but bit his lip instead, looking back down to his sister.

The next few moments passed in anxious silence as the two continued their care for the girl, Austria holding the flashlight and lifting her head up carefully, and the Swiss continuing to dab at her temple. They made do with the dim lighting and limited supplies, very grateful when it seemed the cut finally did stop bleeding. The Swiss reached into one of the bags he'd brought down to pull out a bottle of water and a small washcloth, pouring some water on the cloth and dabbing it over her forehead, thoroughly cleaning away the drying blood. After lac ing the small gash with antiseptic he then placed the sterile bandage on it, pressing it securely over the wound.

Both men finally seemed to relax just a bit. Switzerland tried using the still damp washcloth to wipe down the bit of blood on his hands, pissed that he was shaking. Austria leaned over him to set the flashlight down on the floor, pointing it upward so the light reflected off of the stone ceiling and illuminated the whole area dimly. He moved aside to allow the Swiss to shed his cardigan, balling it up and placing it under Liechtenstein's head carefully.

A low groan from her caught both men's attentions and they looked eagerly to see the small figure on the couch slowly sitting up.

"W-Wha . . ?" Liechtenstein croaked out, blinking around at her dark surroundings.

"Whoa there, Lilli, not so fast," Austria murmured, steadying the dizzy girl with a firm hand on her back. "Take it easy."

"Where am I?" the small girl asked, clearing her throat. She looked around the basement, squinting at the dark outlines of nearby boxes and furniture.

"In my cellar," the aristocrat answered quietly, smoothing down the girl's damp hair. "What's the last thing you remember?"

The small blonde stared at the light spot on the ceiling for a second, thinking. "I was going to make us some sandwiches, but then there was a bunch of lightning and wind and—" She stopped, whipping her head around to look up at the brunet man with wide eyes. "Oh! One of your trees had a branch broken by the storm; it was so dreadful!"

A choking sound made both countries on the couch glance down to see the blond man kneeling before them covering his mouth with his hands. Staring at the girl with utter relief, his dark, emerald eyes were thick with tears. Switzerland reached out and pulled her into a strong embrace, trembling with the effort of trying not to cry.

"Es tut mir so leid, Lilli," he whined into her neck, his arms curling protectively around her. She easily hugged him back—a little surprised at his actions—but willingly slid off the Austrian's lap into her brother's to better do so. "So, so leid . . . Bitte verzeih mir."

"It's okay," she squeaked, a little unnerved at seeing the Swiss worry over her like this. She blushed heavily at the treatment, not used to the man being so openly touchy feely with her twice in one
day. Patting his back lightly she asked, "What did I miss?"

"That branch you saw crashed through the window and into the kitchen," the musician said quietly behind her, and she could feel a warm hand rest on her shoulder. "It knocked you out. Scared us to death, it did, seeing you lying on the floor like that. We're just grateful you're awake now. You were out for some time."

"Too long," the Swiss grumbled, finally pulling back a little to give the girl a small, endearing peck on the cheek. His eyebrows were furrowed deeply as his fingers brushed against the bandage on her head, the threat of tears still in his eyes.

Liechtenstein's hand came up to feel the dressing herself, blinking in shock. She looked back up at the worried Austrian and to her brother once more, fretting, "Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to worry you both so much! I—"

Whatever she was going to say next was cut off by another tight squeeze from her brother. He hushed her quietly, calming her worries and explicitly making her understand that it wasn't her fault that this happened, that it was just a frightening accident. The young country continued to fuss, though, her hands running over his disheveled, soaked appearance, spying a scrape on his cheek and scolding him for not being more careful. She especially laid into him when she noticed the tear in his shirt shoulder and the bruising there, her little arms waving with alarm. It took no time at all for the two to begin shushing each other over who should have been more vigilant of these sorts of things.

Austria sat there, quietly watching the two on the floor in front of him squabble with worry. He was torn between smiling over the sweet, refreshing sight of the both of them being all right, and letting his eyes wander over their injuries; feeling the dread from earlier continue to hollow out his stomach. He'd almost lost Liechtenstein to the freak storm overhead, and if that had happened . . . he didn't know what he'd do. Probably never forgive himself, for one—as cliché as that sounded. Over the course of the last week he found he'd grown rather attached to the charming young lady, seeing her as someone he began to really care for. Not just because of his love for the Swiss, but for her—admir ing her little mannerisms and honesty, her kindness to him.

Staring down at them, the realization of just how much he'd become attached to the pair of blondes filled him with mix emotions. His heart swelled with adoration and how much he wanted to keep them around, but then his stomach sank as he heard the storm raging above. He felt as if it was a sign, foreboding, warning him of the consequences if he did.

His chest turned cold, and he rubbed his hand against his breast in a halfhearted attempt to warm it back up. He couldn't stop his mind from growing darker than it already was, and he let the chill seep into him from the black basement around them. The scene of the two siblings before him seemed to dim and stretch further and further away, out of focus.

*I'm not going to be able to keep you, am I.*

The thought wasn't so much a question, but a particularly loud clap of thunder seemed to answer him anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Bitte wach auf - Please wake up
Okay, yeah so lots happened in this one. Hoo boy... *sweats*

Thanks a bunch to all those who stuck this far - Old and new readers, welcome! You're support really does help me kick my butt into gear over this story and I'm happy to announce that the next couple chapters are gonna be quite the wild ride as things begin to spice up.

The fashion they were sporting in that old timey photo Switzey was looking at was mostly based on the Imperial fashion of the Habsburg era, as I wanted the photo to take place around the time photography was first really popular – about the 1850’s. Not much else to note here I guess. The little lullaby Austria was singing was just something silly I made up on the spot, pay it no mind.
The trio take refuge from the raging wind and rain above. However, it seems the storm has followed them even into the comforts of the cellar.

A bit of a blood warning for this one, by the by!

Countless hours ticked by. The bestial storm continued through the night, wind and rain pelting down across all of Austria and parts of neighboring countries. Damage from hail and flash flooding were reported in areas of the country that hadn’t been affected by power outages. It had been years since there was such a storm of this scale anywhere in Europe, and many people were caught off guard by the sudden severity of it. Some were trapped in their homes by uprooted trees or high waters and rescue crews were having a difficult time coming to the aid of those injured.

Emergency officials and radio broadcasters across the country certainly had their work cut out for them that night.

Switzerland sat in the dark, listening to the quiet emergency radio he’d set up a few feet away on the floor—keeping an ear out for any severe changes in the weather. The old house above him was creaking and rocking against the howling wind storm, the rain tapping like pebbles against the siding. He was the only one currently awake, huddled under a few towels he’d brought down along with an old fleece blanket he’d found lying nearby.

Liechtenstein was snuggled into his left side, his arm wrapped around her waist to keep her close. The Austrian man was seated on his right, leaning away from him onto the arm of the loveseat. His legs were pulled up onto the cushions, bare feet tucked between them to keep warm.

There was an amusing moment when he and the young girl had finally calmed down from worrying over each other, and stood to sit on the lounge. He’d motioned for her to sit beside the Austrian, who was moving to the opposite side of the couch; preferring the other end apparently. But the small blonde just shook her head at him.

The girl sidestepped her brother and pushed him down onto the center of the cushions first. She took her seat on the other side of the Swiss while straightening her robe and quietly muttering, “Oh, no. I’m not sitting between you guys again, so I hope you’ve sorted everything out. That way you two can get cozy over there without me in the way.”

Needless to say, the men nearly choked on their stuttered words of embarrassment. Switzerland couldn’t help his nervous laughter, scratching the back of his head and glancing at the Austrian who was groaning into his hands.
In the first hour or so of them settling down the three of them had kept close to share warmth. The Swiss was grateful that he and his sister had finally dried off, but it left them both cold and clinging to the shortage of towels. Few words were said between them for the next couple of hours; the three countries nestled on the couch spending the time focused on each other’s presence.

Their breathing and the quiet chatter from the radio were the only noises in the cellar, and both were easily overshadowed by the loud ruckus above them.

Switzerland’s mind was too cluttered to let him sleep like his companions. He was initially worried about the storm, intently listening to the weatherman tracking the storm and giving out warnings. Then he fretted when his sister first dozed off, his heart beating a little too fast from concern about her head wound. It didn’t seem like she had a serious concussion, but he knew the dangers of sleeping during even a minor one.

Despite that, he wouldn’t have been able to keep her from curling up next to him if he tried. She had been speaking just fine, and her eyes weren’t dilated so it was probably safe to let her sleep. He did make her take some painkillers before she fell asleep and kept her close to him; that way he could keep an eye on her injury, keep her warm, and to satisfy his own anxiety. Having the small girl beside him, body soft and breathing, helped soothe his frayed nerves.

Now the aristocrat beside him was causing the exact opposite reaction in him.

It was easy at first for them to settle down. Easy to relax now that they were out of the line of fire from the raging storm and every one of them seemed ultimately okay. Easy to huddle together underneath the towels and blankets and nest into a comfortable silence.

However, once Liechtenstein had fallen asleep that silence seemed to grow heavier. The storm even picked up some more, impossible as that seemed. Nothing had particularly happened between the two men, but the blond could tell something was off. As the quiet dragged on, he could begin to feel a slight tremor in the brunet beside him. He didn’t notice it at first, simply enjoying the shared heat between them as the Austrian and him leaned heavily into each other. When the other shifted into his present position, he was initially a bit disappointed to lose the warmth. He could feel the legs brushing against him give a violent shake, a jolt that startled him into straightening up. The Swiss looked over at the shadow silhouette of the man as he sank back down into the deep-set loveseat, a quiet sigh escaping him as his joints cracked with relief.

The blond understood his discomfort. The lounge they were on was made more for ornamentation than for sitting on for long periods of time. And the fact that they were stuck in a cold, dry cellar didn’t help either.

What unsettled him was that the shaking didn’t stop once the other curled up. Not a violent jerking like before, but he could feel the man’s body trembling beside him. At first, he thought it was from the chill around them, and that Austria had lost some of the heat from moving away as he adjusted himself. Switzerland did his best to pull up the blanket and tuck it around the man, over his shoulder and under his toes. He felt satisfied to hear another sigh of relief from his companion.

A few moments later, however, when the shaking did not let up, the Swiss turned his attention back to the musician. **Maybe his muscles are sore,** he thought, reaching out his hand again. The other was curled tightly into a ball, his head resting on his arms on the side of the couch, seeming like he was trying to make himself as small as possible—perhaps unconsciously trying to give the other two more room.

Switzerland pressed his palm against the man’s shoulder blade, feeling an intense heat seep up into
his hand through the silk shirt. His breath stuttered in his chest.

He did his best to stop the immediate thoughts of, Was he this hot earlier? and, Did he take his medicine this morning? Shit. I didn’t bring his medicine down here, and, Maybe I should take some of the covers off him if he’s so warm. Then he could feel the trembling for himself beneath his fingers and decided against it. Austria’s breathing seemed deep and unhindered, so he tried not to fret too much too quickly.

*It must be from stress. I can’t blame him, really.*

So the Swiss sat there for a while, quietly rubbing the aristocrat’s shoulders and backbone. He did his best to knead away any tension he found along the man’s spine, the brunet moaning quietly under his fingers. A lump settled in his throat as he felt the many raised ridges of stitches underneath the silk shirt—being overly gentle as he ghosted over them.

*I should check his wounds later, he thought. The stitches may be ready to take out.*

He went between massaging and tenderly scratching the other’s back, resting his hand every so often on the Austrian’s side; feeling his abdomen rise and fall and quiver.

The blond man gave it a break and finally felt relaxed enough to doze off himself.

*...xXx...*

The Austrian gasped, curling more in on himself on the crowded couch, having suddenly been awoken by a sharp pain in his stomach.

*Why is it so hot?*

He loosened the towel tucked up under his neck, allowing his sweaty skin to breathe. Nothing but black greeted his eyes once he opened them; the basement still shrouded in stuffy darkness and the cool air felt wonderful on his damp skin.

*Too hot, too hot.*

The brunet man attempted to move, to stretch, but stilled when his foot brushed up against someone. Damn. He didn’t want to wake his sleeping companions over something as trifling as getting comfortable. Who knew what time it was or how long it had been since the three of them had finally succumbed to sleep, and he didn’t want to take the much needed rest away from either of the blondes.

His stomach lurched again, however, and he couldn’t help his pained gasp. Perhaps it was because of how he was laying, after all—a delusion he told himself frequently.

Slowly, carefully, the aristocrat sat up, grateful to set his feet on cold carpet as he arched his back.

He felt something on his hip, and Austria looked down to his left. He just barely made out the murky, gray form of the Swiss beside him and the hand gripping his shirt ever-so-slightly. The man allowed himself a moment of quiet indulgence, a different kind of warmth flushing across his skin as he stared down at the hand holding onto him. He covered said hand with his own, simultaneously rejoicing and feeling a prick of worry at the temperature difference between them.

That’s when he noticed the shaking—the tense, sporadic spasm worming its way throughout his limbs. The Austrian held the blond’s hand a little more firmly, hoping to stave off some of his shaking. After a moment of running his thumb over pale knuckles his body seemed to calm down
—at least in the trembling department, his muscles finally settling. He would have almost given a sigh of relief at that.

If his gut would let him have a moment of peace, that is.

The brunet lurched forward once more in pain, tasting bile and blood rising in the back of his throat. His head was pounding, his breathing nothing but short, hard-won pants. Even his thoughts were weak as well; all he could think was, No, no, no. Not this again. Not now. He instinctively clung to the hand now trapped between his abdomen and his thigh, despite wanting to pull away from the other.

But he didn’t want to drag the Swiss into his pool of agony, or wake him up.

Austria quickly forced himself to sit up, ignoring the tearing in his belly, and let go of the man’s hand. He struggled against his pain to slide down onto the floor after that, bunching up the blankets that were on him and tossing them back up onto the lounge.

Heat was now pounding in his veins, rocking him in the darkness, throbbing through his gut. The air around him was stifling and for just a moment he lost his mental footing, mind reeling and ears buzzing with a high pitched tone. Austria vaguely felt his body sway slightly before the floor inevitably rose to greet him. Vile blood caught in the back of his throat once more and he choked on it, curling on his side as he tried his best not to get sick everywhere. His thoughts were a mess and could think of nothing other than, don’t puke, oh god, not this again, don’t puke, please don’t puke, not here, not now . . . But that line of coherent thinking didn’t last long.

The dark haired nation felt cool hands touching him and did his best to focus on them through the pain. Much to his horror, he couldn’t quite anchor himself.

If felt like hot coals were being stoked in his stomach, rolled over and over again and then stabbed right back into him. A particularly sharp pang made him cry out and swiftly bite back the vomit filling up his throat. His whole body was racking with the intense shocks of pain shooting up and down his spine—from the backs of his eyes all the way down through his toes. His lungs seized for a moment and he couldn’t breathe, his mouth opening and closing uselessly in a desperate grab for more air, any air.

It was at that moment the Austrian had a hard time recalling the next set of events. He vaguely remembered being pulled upright, his head lolling from side to side. Even though the pains shooting through him were keeping him from moving or breathing properly, it was the dizziness that he fought against the most. To clear his head, to gain back control over himself. He knew that even if the basement were fully lit he wouldn’t be able to see anything but the dull fuzziness clouding his vision.

He blacked out.

...xXx...

Bile rising, lip curling, stomach swaying.
Fingers digging into skin, into meat.

Why? Why now? Why ever?

All air, any air. Useless. Empty.
Bleeding, bleary, staring.

No? Don’t look, don’t see.

Hate, fear, hate again. Screaming—no, silent.
Thumping above, around, through.
Teeth grind like stone.

Lost. So lost.

Cold a seeping, slithering snake.
Slim, sloping through words. Melted.
Suddenly taut, catching, scraping. Anguish.

Make it stop, make it stop, make it stop . . .

...xXx...

Switzerland held the sick man securely against his chest, rocking them both gently.

He’d awoken as soon as the brunet had slid off the lounge, hearing the man gasp and groan as he tried to steady his breathing. By the time he’d slid onto the floor next to the man Austria had curled on his side tightly, twitching and squirming.

Once he heard a loud strangled noise the Swiss rushed to lift the other up, straightening out his gut and making sure nothing was obstructing the man’s throat. He did his best to support the delirious Austrian, paying no mind when his head snapped back into the blond’s sore shoulder or when he got an elbow jammed into his ribs. It was obvious that the writhing man wasn’t cognizant at the moment.

The Swiss’ heart squeezed with anxiety.

The last time he had to deal with someone this sick and fevered was many decades ago during war time. Several memories of wounded soldiers writhing on sweat and blood stained cots, limbs twisted in agony while they vomited up the nonexistent contents of their stomachs. This experience was nothing new for him to witness, and yet it still felt horrible to watch; especially since it was happening to someone so dear to him.

He did his best to hold on.

...xXx...

Austria was unsure of how much time had passed before he regained some form of consciousness again. His body still roiled and squirmed and he felt an odd sort of detachment from it all; he felt suspended, floating, just out of reach of himself yet too close for comfort. Like he wasn’t in control of what was happening—and he wasn’t. So, he waited.

If he’d been fully sensible at the time Austria might have pondered how he must look to someone watching him.

It felt like the storm from outside was now inside his body; rain sloshing back and forth inside of him, lightning striking down his limbs. The ringing in his ears reminded him of a high-pitched harpsichord, and was loud enough to shatter his skull—and he was continually amazed it hadn’t yet. Why, oh why, did he have to wake up to this?
Chest quivering and stomach dry heaving in desperation, head pushing backwards too hard into a shoulder. Arms and legs distorted, rioting against the rest of him, contracting and going limp in tandem as he grasped at everything within reach; the carpet, the cushions, a shirt, a thigh, ripping at the thin silk fabrics—anything and anyone to help ground himself.

The mix of blood and the contents of his stomach pooled on the back of his tongue, getting caught and burning its way up his nose to drip carelessly down his face.

And were those tears stinging his eyes, or more blood? He couldn’t quite tell.

There was a vague shape of a bag thrust in front of him, hands grabbing his own and moving them to hold it open in his lap. A miniscule task he could just barely manage. One of the hands moved to the nape of his neck and pressed a firm palm to the back of his head, tilting him forward towards the bag. Just in case, he presumed.

Oh, the brown haired aristocrat wanted nothing more than to just heave and be done with it. Get all the bile and blood out of his lungs and stomach so he could just breathe again. It hurt to do anything; to move, to swallow, and even to tremble involuntarily as he was.

Desperate in his aching state, he tried to force a cough to expel the clot on the back of his tongue, but ended up inhaling a little too harshly. His body immediately convulsed from the effort of trying not to suffocate, a wave of new hot tears erupting from his eyes. His mind was being pulled away from him again; the fear at losing consciousness making his heart race at the thought of passing out in such a state. This time was more terrifying than the last—he didn’t want to fade off. He was worried he might not wake up again.

Fingers intruding in on his throat suddenly ripped him away from the haze. A strong hand snatched his jaw to keep his teeth from clamping down, nails biting into his skin. The long digits quickly pushed in deep and made him gag, and he retched almost immediately.

The man couldn’t even spare a moment to feel relieved as he hunched over the bag in front of him and finally threw up.

Anguish rode him for the next eternity. A blanket of heat had enveloped him, oppressive and claustrophobic, drooling all over his skin. The gush seared his mouth and throat, but he thankfully no longer choked on it.

Unsure of when he had blacked out a second time, Austria slowly came to. His mind wasn’t as foggy as before, muddled with an overflow of stimulation. His body was sore and still trembling—not as violently as before—and he gave a careful swallow; making sure nothing else was obstructing his throat. His tongue tasted like iron and sand of all things, and he still had the bite of acid on his taste buds. And while his esophagus was incredibly raw and his face was still hot, he felt better than he had in hours.

A soft, relieved sob bubbled up in him and he slumped in exhaustion.

The tears from the strain of it all began flowing freely down his cheeks, and the muscles beneath his skin quivered as he came down from the high of his attack. The body beneath him was moving slightly, one arm reaching forward to press a cold, wet cloth to his chest.

It was then that he realized he wasn’t wearing his pajama shirt anymore, appreciating the cool crisp air of the cellar around him. The Swiss must have removed his shirt, maybe to help cool him down,
or perhaps it had been covered in blood and ruined. He couldn’t bring himself to care either way, instead just focusing on the wet cloth trailing up and down his skin to help steady his breathing.

He took his time assessing each of his senses as they came back to him one by one.

The brunet had yet to open his eyes so he made the attempt to do so. The effort it took was excruciating; his eyelids heavy, aching, a few tears clinging to his lashes. He was angled to stare up at the ceiling, and winced at the bright beam of the flashlight that was pointed upward to illuminate the world around them. It was too harsh too soon, so he blinked rapidly, squinting as he turned his head to the side away from the light source. His nose brushed against a warm neck and he felt strands of feathery hair tumble over his face. The Austrian’s sensitive eyes refused to adjust so he closed them again and just breathed in deeply. The thick scent of wet grass and an earthen musk accompanying the stale cellar made his heart flutter nicely and his back muscles relaxed.

Eventually the tears stopped, too.

His breath now even and measured, the man let out an easy sigh as he felt the cool cloth still on his stomach.

Austria would have felt mortified if he had been in anyone else’s arms—maybe he should be more so, considering it was the love of his life—but he couldn’t spare the energy at the moment. The feeling of the blond man’s body pressed against him held his focus above all else, above the aching pain and jitters. His own body moved to the steady rise and fall of the solid chest beneath him and the recurring movement comforted him greatly.

“Bist du wach?”

Tentative, whispered words against his cheek startled him, and he peeked through his eyelashes momentarily. Dim light filtered through the locks over his face, yet all he could see was pale skin and yellow hair. A cheek pressed itself against his forehead and he gave another sigh, sinking into the embrace even more. The Austrian didn’t trust his voice so he gave a simple nod, nestling into that warm neck.

A pleased huff was his only response and the washcloth returned to its work on his skin.

Austria wanted to talk to the Swiss, to thank him at least. He wasn’t sure if his throat could quite handle speaking just yet, so he took a few quiet moments to get a feel for his thoughts.

He really was grateful. He was. Nearly every attack he’d been forced to face over the past several months he’d had to face on his own—worried that he could swallow the wrong way or black out in an inconvenient place, like the top of his stairs, and that his body would surely give Hungary quite the fright when she inevitably crept over. It was very comforting to him, indeed, that someone was there with him this time, like he’d been in the supermarket. The brunet could focus on pulling through the painful bouts of coughing and choking reassured that there was someone beside him, supporting him. That they would be there when he—when he . . .

Not ‘when,’ the musician scolded himself, If.

Thinking positively was much harder to do when he felt like he’d been hit by a train. And the reality of what just happened seemed to finally dawn on him—that he had lost so, so much blood, and his fevered writhing had caused him to fall repeatedly in and out of consciousness. His muscles were still quivering, limbs shaky and overwrought, and he was relying on another to support him. To clean him up and steady him.
The corners of his mouth pulled down in a grimace.

Thankful that the blond couldn’t see the flush across his skin in the dim lighting, now from belated embarrassment as much as his fever, the Austrian focused on his breathing some more. He just listened to the rain pitter-patter down overhead and enjoyed the pleasant scent of the other man. The storm was much calmer than before, the wind having died down to just barely gust against the house, and the thunder was just a low, constant rolling.

The brunet was suddenly aware of the fresh washcloth that continued to wipe along his torso. The cool cloth made slow, languid strokes over his ribs and under his pectorals, trailing down his abdomen and dipping into his bellybutton as it passed along its way to his naval. The rag stopped at the top of his drawstring bottoms and he swallowed hard, ignoring the stab of pain that caused.

The other free hand wrapped around his middle gave a squeeze, fingers fiddling with the edge of his waist band, before lifting the fabric some and moving the washcloth just underneath the hem. Austria froze.

The wet cloth sloped down and hesitated, then sensually slid side to side from each hipbone, soothing the skin under the edge of his silk drawers. It massaged back and forth several times, the chill fabric doing nothing to dissuade the heat smothering his skin.

But just as quickly as it came the rag left, tracing back up his stomach and coming to rest over his heart.

The Austrian didn’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved.

A heavy sigh blew across his chin and he could feel the sentiment deep in his bones. Of course he wouldn’t do anything, the brunet man thought to himself. He let out a sigh of his own. Now’s hardly the time for such things.

It was then that the aristocrat finally felt like pulling away from the Swiss. He attempted to sit up, scooting back a tad so he could straighten his spine. His body still felt too heavy, and just as soon as he leaned forward, he fell back. He attempted it once more only to get the same result. The arm around his waist held him tighter to prevent him from trying that again.

A touch of humiliation filled him, and he buried his nose into the other’s hair once more.

A low hum rumbled against him. The hand with the washcloth pulled away slowly, reaching off to the side out of sight. Austria spied the beam of light jostling a moment before turning off with a click, shrouding them in complete darkness. The arm then returned to him, sans cloth, and draped over his chest. The man gave him a strong hug.

“Besser fühlen?”

Ja. He was feeling better than a few moments ago indeed, and was ever thankful for it. The brunet then retracted his earlier shame, unable to help the small smile pulling at his lips. The Swiss must have been so worried for him, and who knew how long he was out of it for.

He still couldn’t speak, nor did he dare to with the state of his throat, but he wanted to express his thanks to the Swiss.

The Austrian lifted his right hand, trying to reach up to the other, but it felt as if he was pulling through molasses instead of air. He felt one of the hands on his chest move to catch it, bringing them both to rest against his abdomen. He did his best to try and tangle their fingers together, threading them between the blond’s and squeezing that hand as tight as he could.
The rain acted as a steady backdrop to their shared silence. There were many things left unsaid between them, the possible words flowing over Austria’s mind like the heat on his skin. Exhaustion and the stinging pull of his trembling muscles kept him from uttering a single word, however.

He was spent.

Closing his eyes, he felt the man's other hand brush against his temple, pushing some of his hair out of the way. Vaguely registering the absence of his glasses, he made no move to lean away from the touches. His body was sagging, relinquishing full control over to the other man—letting him support him, letting him do absolutely whatever he pleased.

The Swiss could have thrown him off the side of a cliff in that moment and he wouldn’t have resisted.

He pressed a soft kiss to the man’s warm neck, nuzzling into that smooth skin and relishing the way the strands of golden hair tickled his nose. He hoped his gratitude was being clearly expressed, but just in case he kissed once more—and once more. Again and again and again, forcing his left hand to reach up and cup the other’s cheek. *If he would just lean down a little further...* 

Soft fingers moved from his locks of brown hair to trace underneath the musician’s jaw, thumb running across his chin and over his bottom lip in between the latest of kisses. A quiet moan rewarded his effort—music to his buzzing ears—and the man’s neck was pulsing and shivering against his lips.

And, *Oh no, please God,* why was the darkness pulling at him yet again? Not now, not when he was finally allowed to taste that creamy skin again and share an intimate moment with his Swiss. Not that anything substantial would have come from it, not when he was so weak, but he wanted to take what he could get.

However, that heaviness did begin to creep up from the back of his mind, no matter how hard he fought against it. He felt the momentary strength leaving his limbs, his hand falling from the blond’s face back into his lap. Biting back his displeasure, the Austrian leaned his head heavily into the crook of the other’s shoulder after giving a final, light kiss to the skin there.

Before he succumbed to the deep sleep pulling at him, that whispered voice was at his ear once more.

“Bitte.”

...xXx...

Switzerland stayed awake and vigilant throughout the night, not daring to sleep or even doze off.

He’d come close to sleep several times; once when they’d been clustered on the couch, and a few times after holding onto the Austrian after his attack. He’d eventually lain the heavy musician down on the cool carpet, covering his shirtless form as best he could, and leaned over to turn on the small radio again. It had been kicked during the frantic fuss and he was surprised it still worked after that.

Quiet, easy rock echoed around their safe space and helped his mind stay focused.

The blond man leaned up on the couch cushions on his right elbow, blinking the dryness from his eyes. The basement was dimly lit up by the foggy gray light pouring through the small windows,
lazy dust motes floating through the air. The weather outside was a gloomy drizzle now, interrupted every so often by a small tumble of thunder.

The large basement was filled with boxes and crates and bags, sheets covered mountains of furniture and artwork, and he could even spy some larger instruments tucked away along the walls. Another piano and harpsichord, a few large harps, and another that looked like a stack of bowls turned on its side—glass harmonica, his mind supplied for him. Of course the Austrian would have such an outdated and dangerous instrument.

Eyes skirting back to what was nearest to him, he straightened himself up.

Austria was lying on his back on the carpet; head on a rolled-up towel with several more covering him like small blankets. The man’s chocolate hair was tangled and brushed out of the way of the small cloth lying upon his forehead. Pale cheeks were flushed and his breathing was deeply labored. His fever had spiked again soon after he’d passed out, and over the past few hours the Swiss had been doing his best to keep him cool with the wet washcloth—switching between pouring the bottles of water on the cloth and tipping small drinks down the man’s throat, making sure he swallowed.

He needed to do something and his sister wasn’t waking up either, her soft breathing a rhythmic loop. It felt like he was completely alone, stuck in time in this dusty basement.

He had to kick himself into action.

Switzerland stood and stretched, popping his joints and cracking the small of his back. Sitting for too long on the floor definitely put a crick in his spine.

The radio caught his attention before he set out, the soft rock switching to a weather report. The weatherman sounded tense, going over the daily outlook with stern conviction. The rest of the day was going to be nonstop rainy, as well, with more chances of severe weather later on. Many of the valleys and lower parts of the country were flooded, with rivers overflowing, and even a few mudslides had occurred overnight. That fact was more than a little disconcerting, considering the Austrian’s own home was situated on top of a high valley in the Vienna countryside—a small forest and sheer rocky cliff on one side, sloping hills on the other. The large estate was alone for miles, with a view of hilly grasslands and rivers and distant Alps.

The rain picked up outside as the radio cut over to commercial, and the Swiss could swear he heard the telltale tick tick tick sounds of hail hitting against the house.

Switzerland took one last look over his sleeping sister, brushing a strand of hair out of her face, and the Austrian, flipping the washcloth on his forehead so the cool side pressed against his skin.

He grabbed the flashlight and flicked it on as he headed back through the basement. The light was still too dim streaming in the tiny cellar windows, and he was reminded that the power was out. The blond weaved his way around stacks of buckets and furniture, heading towards the stairs and walking past it once he reached them. If his memory served him right then the power box should be along the adjacent wall.

He spotted the black box and walked over to it. It took him a few minutes to get the power back on, checking and double checking to make sure none of the fuses had blown before flipping them off and on again. He heard the mansion above him creak and hum, the sump pump chugging to life in the far corner. The poor thing certainly had its work cut out for it.

Switzerland shut the box and locked it again before heading back towards the stair well. Now that
the power was on he was free to go and check on the rest of the house. Aside from the obvious mess in the kitchen, he needed to make sure there were no other windows broken, or if any bulbs had popped when the power shut off.

At the bottom of the stairs he glanced back over his shoulder to the distant couch at the back of the basement. The small figure of his sister was still curled up on the plastic covered cushions, and the noise from the radio echoed over the sea of boxes to him.

_I need to help them first,_ he thought, squeezing and releasing the flashlight in his hand several times—the only giveaway to his present anxiety.

Making his way quickly up the wooden stairs, the Swiss started making a list in his head of all the things he needed to do.

To begin with, he had to get his phone and check to make sure the landlines were okay. He needed to be able to contact the outside world if anything happened that he couldn’t handle himself, whether it was to call emergency services or to get a hold of his own government officials. He vaguely wondered if anyone from his government had tried to contact him overnight, and made a mental note to call his assistant.

Secondly, he needed to bring his companions back upstairs—if the weather was safe enough for it. The cellar was too cold and musty, and they couldn’t stay down there forever. The blond figured he could get Liechtenstein up into bed easily, just having to wake her momentarily or even just carry her. She was so light, he didn’t mind much, even though his bruised shoulder was really starting to smart now that he’s had time to settle. The silk over his left shoulder was torn and marred with a bit of red that had bled from the scratches on the skin there, but he was more concerned with the others first.

Thinking of carrying the Austrian made him hesitant. He didn’t see any way he could possibly wake the aristocrat up and have him walk, not with how unwell he was. And it wasn’t as if he couldn’t pick up the man, as well, because he was certainly strong enough, but he was more concerned that the man might be jostled awake and fall into a fevered fit while in his arms. If he was on the stairs when that happened—

He stopped his train of thought there, unwilling to think of the sore possibilities.

Thirdly, if he was able to get his sister and the musician situated then he would have to go around the huge estate, inside and out, to clean up any damage. He’d set about cleaning up the mess in the kitchen first, and block off the broken window. The Swiss could probably find a spare tarp around to block off the window, and a handsaw to cut up the branch with so he could move it easier. So he had to grab the toolbox and broom, the vacuum, a mop, look around for a tarp and some nails, a hammer . . .

Switzerland reached the top step and opened the door, flipping on the cellar light as he went.

Freezing air greeted him along with a steady breeze and the strong smell of wet earth. He shined the flashlight on the dark hardwood floor, tracing a small trail of stray leaves, and looked around as he stepped out into the hallway.

The house was still mostly dark from the storm clouds blocking out the early morning light and the mansion seemed hollow. The grand hall arched high above him, the gold and marble carvings casting severe shapes in the shadows caused by his flashlight.

They loomed above him like menacing, Cimmerian spirits; judging every step he took.
Switzerland quickly took a left and another left, going around the corner into the living room and heading for the stairwell. Nothing looked to be particularly out of place, except a few more wandering leaves drifting on the intrusive breeze. It was slightly surreal seeing the stray frondescence skittering across the hardwood surface, bumping into the legs of furniture and spinning around each other. The foreign foliage made everything else in the dark, empty room seem strange.

It was utterly bizarre. The whole house felt off.

A sense of pressure filled him and he bounded up the stairs two at a time.

The upstairs hall was darker than the living room; the only source of light besides his flashlight being the gray, filtered beam streaming in from the window by the base of the stairwell. The blond suddenly remembered that the power was back and decidedly flipped the hall light on, eyes squinting against the harsh, artificial overhead lamp. He made his way to the guest room he’d barely been occupying during his stay and made a beeline for his suitcase, which sat beside the four post bed on the floor.

The Swiss didn’t remember putting it there—yet again the last couple days had been a bit of a whirlwind. Austria must have moved it there after taking him to bed.

Switzerland dug around in the few front pockets and came up empty. Where had he put his phone? The device had been glued to his hand during his travels, to take notes and make calls and await any updates from his sister regarding how she and the Austrian had been faring without him. Maybe it’d been in his coat or pants pocket, because it certainly wasn’t anywhere in his bag.

While he was there, the blond nation quickly changed out of his pajamas. Shrugging on a white t-shirt, jeans, and pulling his hair back into a small bun with a hair tie, Switzerland felt more comfortable taking on the rest of the day. He slid a thin silver cross around his neck, the familiar weight of the metal chain comforting him somewhat.

The Swiss stepped across the hall in search of his previous night’s clothes.

The door to the master bedroom creaked open under his fingers, his silhouette stretching outward from in the hall light shining behind him. The bed was in the disarray he’d left it, with blankets and sheets bunched up and thrown around. He spied his previous day’s outfit folded neatly on a dresser to his right, along with the aristocrat’s own; unusual since the other man usually just tossed his clothes to the side. He went over and could smell the fresh detergent on the clothes, feeling the clean material. Lilli must have done laundry, he thought. Considering that he was positive she wouldn’t have washed his phone, he looked elsewhere.

He spotted his cell phone safely on the bedside table and walked over to it, snatching it up. He checked the time—5:23am. Another cell sat beside it and he figured it must have been the Austrian’s phone and so he grabbed it, stuffing it into his pocket.

Switzerland checked his missed calls as he made his way back downstairs. There were over a dozen and about half as many voicemails, plus a plethora of text messages sent to him since last night. He listened to each of the voicemails carefully.

The first was from his assistant, Julian, giving him the summary of everything that had happened after he’d left. The man had been very astute in his note taking during the meetings, and was handling the expected backlash from the Swiss’ haughty behavior towards his boss with practiced ease. The blond was going to thoroughly thank him later for that.
The next was from Hungary, letting him know that she was going to be leaving Japan on the first morning flight out. She expressed her concern at not being able to call the house phone, or reach his sister—unaware of the storm. Switzerland checked the nearby landline on the wall as he stepped off the landing, relieved to hear the dial tone.

The rest of the voicemails were from Germany. The first one was him letting him know that he was staying in a nearby hotel in Vienna, due to the talks happening between him and the Austrian’s boss. The second detailed some of these talks and how the situation along the border was going. Fire crews were out in full force and the sudden rain was simultaneously helping and hindering putting out the wildfires.

As he listened, each one made him increasingly nervous as he came to a stop at the top of the basement stairs.

Germany had also expressed concern at not being able to reach the house phone, and was getting more and more panicked that even the Swiss wasn’t answering his phone. Several short voicemails were him simply asking for the country to call him back as soon as he could. A few hours passed between those and the last one, which was the gruff man letting him know that he would be heading over to the estate soon, whether they wanted him to or not.

Switzerland checked the time stamp on the last one and immediately dialed the German.

The phone barely rang once. “Verdammt, Schweiz! There you are!”

Any apologies he could have offered fell short on his tongue and the Swiss just sighed. “Here I am.”

“Where have you been? I’ve been trying to reach you all night.”

“The storm hit us hard and knocked out the power. We’ve been in the cellar.”

Germany’s tone shifted, becoming softer. “Is everyone all right?”

“Not really,” he answered honestly. He wouldn’t be able to hide anything from the German for very long, anyway. “Everyone’s injured.”

“How bad?”

“A tree crashed through the window and hit Lilli over the head. I’m sure she has a concussion, but she was responding well last night.”

“Scheisse.”

“Roderich, on the other hand—”

Switzerland cut himself off, wondering how he should word it. His thoughts raced as he flash backed to when the man in his arms had been unconscious and writhing in pain. Blood oozing out of his mouth and nose, limbs thrashing, head snapping back and forth violently as his body fought against itself. Even though everything had settled down after awhile, the Swiss was sure the other should be seen by a doctor.

“Schweiz?”

He rubbed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose briefly. “He needs a hospital.”
The man on the other end gave a heavy sigh. “That’s not going to be possible.”

“Oh?”

“Yesterday, the Wien KAV made an announcement: A warning that people should stay home if they’re extremely sick, or under a certain age. Over half of the hospitals around here are still without power, and nearly all of them are full up and under quarantine.”

“Well, fuck.” The Swiss grit his teeth and began making his way down into the cellar again. “Do you know how to contact his personal physician?”

“Nein, but I can find out.”

“That’s a start then. Have you left the hotel yet?”

“Ja, I’m about twenty minutes out, but it’s slow going. There’s lots of emergency traffic, and downed trees and power lines.”

“Are there any hardware stores open?”

“I can check.”

“Danke. We might need—”

A groaning sound and screaming made him snap his head up. Switzerland stepped off the bottom stair just in time to be barreled into by the smaller form of his sister. Large wet, green eyes looked up at him in panic.

“Bruder! Mr. Austria is—!”

Another shriek drowned out the rest of her sentence, echoing loudly from the far back of the cellar. It was shrill and hoarse, sending a cold shock of dread down his spine. He didn’t hear the next things Germany said to him and he just shouted for the man to hurry before hanging up.

Switzerland rushed past his sister and all but ran towards the back lounge.
go mad! Very spooky~ In reality, it was mostly poisoning from the lead glass they were made from—a dangerous instrument, indeed!

On a side note, I went back and edited some past chapters since they were bugging me or the site formatted some things weird. I also changed some of my past (atrocious) writing in chapter 7; getting rid of the didados and replacing it with an actual description of Switzey’s song, and fleshing out Austria and France’s conversation a tad more. If you don’t know what I’m talking about, then don’t worry about it!

EDIT: Fixed a dumb discrepancy where I totally forgot that Lilli did the laundry so when Swiss goes into the master bedroom he finds Neatly. Folded. Clothes. NOT a haphazard pile. Austria is not a stickler for folding anyway. My bad~
Heart & Matter

Chapter Summary

The siblings get a closer glimpse of the effects of Austria's illness, much closer than they ever intended. Switzerland makes a discovery, and Liechtenstein comforts.

Chapter Notes

Again, this chapter has some darker themes and blood, so full warning. There's lots of translations and FUN FACTS in the looooong after note, so yay! This chap's a bit all over the place emotionally with flashbacks to difficult times, so I hope it comes out okay.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I wish he would just stop.

Liechtenstein buried her face into her knees, hiding her crying eyes as she gripped her robe tightly. She'd never heard such pitiful wailing in all her life. Sitting next to the open basement door, the young girl could do nothing but sit and listen.

Listen to the tragedy playing out downstairs.

She'd jumped awake when the Austrian had let out a loud choking sound, as if his tongue had caught in his throat. Seeing that her brother was absent, she'd immediately knelt beside the man to try and help.

The brunet was lying on his side, fingers digging into his scalp as he pressed his face into the carpet. His shirtless form was curled in on himself, and she could see the horrific cuts and stitches across his skin clearer than ever. Jagged, angry red lines crisscrossed over his spine and ribs; with thick, black thread straining to hold the skin together as he bent over, pulling them taut.

The girl reached out to turn him over—unwilling to look at the wounds any longer and to make sure that he wasn't, indeed, choking—but that didn't go over well.

As soon as she touched his shoulder the man whipped his head around and gave a hoarse shriek. She couldn't help but scream herself, heart nearly jumping out of her throat with fright at his reaction, and the sight of a waterfall of blood streaming down from the aristocrat's nose. The thick liquid poured down his chin, dripping onto his chest and the cream-colored carpet.

Liechtenstein hastily grabbed a nearby towel and leaned forward to wipe at his face, but the Austrian just flinched away.

His violet eyes were wide, staring straight at her—no. No, he was staring straight through her. His pupils were extremely dilated and unfocused, and they kept flicking back and forth frantically from her to something behind her. Liechtenstein glanced back, just in case, but nothing was there aside
from boxes and antiques.

The girl tried to move towards him once more with some calm, comforting words, but the Austrian just quickly scrambled backwards. He knocked himself against the lounge, holding his hand up as if she was about to hurt him. The words he shouted at her were coarse and in a twisted dialect the girl didn't recognize; it certainly wasn't any kind of German she'd ever heard before. She wasn't even sure it was German.

Every time she would try to move closer to him he just screamed, and shrieked, and shouted; tears mixing with the blood that was making him choke on his words. The man's back slammed into the stone wall and he threw a washcloth at her, looking around the room hysterically.

He looked like a trapped animal.

It was when he'd quieted down, hands moving to cover his eyes, that the girl finally decided she was way out of her league for dealing with . . . whatever was happening. Then it was just luck that her brother had chosen that moment to come downstairs at the same time she'd ran off to look for him.

*Please, let him stop,* she prayed quietly, sniffling. *Let him rest.*

Liechtenstein lifted her head from her lap and leaned her back against the wall, glancing to the open basement door. Light was shining bright out into the dark hallway, and she could hear her brother's quiet voice in the distance. An occasional wretched cry could still be heard from the Austrian, but then her brother would pipe up and immediately calm him down for a few moments.

The girl rubbed at her eyes with her sleeve, unable to stop the tears from falling. She never could have imagined the older gentleman ever making such noises, or looking like . . . like *that.* She never wanted to.

But she no longer had to imagine.

The proud, elegant musician had looked half-crazed and in pain—and he didn't even recognize her! He was yelling and coughing and wouldn't even let her get close to him, not he even if he was choking—

A small sob hitched on her breath.

The country was glad her brother couldn't see her like this. She wanted to so be like him; strong-willed, brave, ready to face such awful circumstances head on. She'd tried to keep it together, *oh,* how she tried, but seeing the other man like that seemed to have unhinged her resolve. She was too shaken up to move, let alone help in any meaningful way.

Her fingers moved up to fiddle with the ribbon in her hair, only to find it missing. *Of course.* She'd have to look for it later. Her hand instead pressed against the bandage on her temple, letting the bit of pain help to clear her thoughts.

"I need to snap out of this," she blubbered, straightening out her back. She smacked her cheeks, sniffing away the threat of more crying as she shook her head quickly. The soft constant of her brother's voice in the cellar helped to soothe her, as well.

The blonde girl rubbed at her eyes some more, finally catching her breath. Pausing to relish in the feeling of just resting her face in her plush robe sleeves, she heard a muffled crying start up from the basement. It was the Austrian, of course, and his moaning was broken and ragged, but still much more peaceful than his previous wailing. The girl felt her eyes begin to burn yet again with
fresh tears at the sound.

Why? Why is this happening to him? she thought, struggling to control the feelings swirling around inside of her heart. It's not fair. He doesn't deserve this.

A melodic chime rang out through the great hall, making her look up.

Liechtenstein slowly got to her feet, wiping at her face one last time. Her confusion began to mix with alarm as the doorbell rang a few more times before whoever it was outside started to bang on the door. The small girl peeked into the bright cellar one more time before making her way down the long, dark hallway towards the front door.

"Who on earth . . ." she muttered, tying her long robe securely around her against the frigid wind that still blew into the house. She refused to look into the kitchen as she passed by, carefully stepping over some leaves that strayed out into the hall.

The mansion was mostly dark and grey, looming large around her, and the harsh knocking on the door sent chills up her spine. The black clouds outside let no early morning light through and even as she glanced into the peephole she couldn't see anything on the porch outside. It wasn't until a gruff voice called through the old wood that she finally relaxed.

"Hallo? Da ich bin! So öffnen Sie sich! Hey! Can you hear me?"

Germany! Liechtenstein let out relieved breath and hurried to unlock the door. Her little heart was racing and her hands shook as she struggled to undo the deadbolt and turn the knob, having to swiftly catch the door as it blew open from a gust of wind.

A large hand caught the door just above hers and she looked up to see the familiar German man standing drenched on the porch. Another strong wind threatened to rip the door away from them and the small girl ushered him quickly inside, shutting and locking the door once more.

Liechtenstein huffed as the lock slid closed and she leaned up against the door, breathing a sigh of relief. "Mr. Germany! What are you doing here?"

"Your brother called me," the man said, shaking out the rain from his hair. He knelt to untie his boots, and the girl stepped around him to go fetch a towel out of a nearby linen closet. The larger country's presence comforted her greatly, and his deep voice was a much welcome one in the dark. "I tried calling the house earlier, and when I couldn't get a hold of anyone I decided it'd be best if I came over. Then Schweiz finally got back to me and said that I should get over here as fast as possible."

Liechtenstein returned to the country as he stood up, carefully tiptoeing around the wet spots caused by his boots. She handed him the towel as he shed his coat, hanging it on a wall hook, and he began drying his hair and face. The blond man looked around the dark mansion, noticing the skittering leaves and inner breeze coming from the kitchen threshold. "Are you still without power?"

"Oh!" The girl glanced down the hall towards the shining light from the basement door, realizing that the cellar light was, indeed, on. "No. I suppose we got it back now."

Germany felt along the wall for a minute before flicking on the foyer light, blinding them momentarily. They both blinked, squinting at each other and around the hall. Liechtenstein felt herself relax even more from the light source as she looked the burly German up and down—the man was there. Really there. She wasn't just hallucinating in the dark.
Liechtenstein shook her head quickly, her hair swishing back and forth, and stepped over to the larger country. "Are you all right?" The blond man asked, holding the towel around his neck. His blue eyes looked her over, and he grimaced as he spotted the bandage on her head.

The girl glanced down at her hands, twisting her sleeves around in her fingers. "I'm fine, but—"

"But?" Germany smoothed back his damp hair, waiting for the smaller country to elaborate. She didn't. Instead, she just slumped forward and leaned her head against his chest, reaching out to hold onto his polo shirt. Germany just nodded to himself, understanding. He looked back towards the basement, resting his hands on her small shoulders and giving a squeeze. "Are they still downstairs?"

"Ja."

The German sighed, unsure of what to do for a moment. He wasn't good at comforting people, and he tensed when he felt Liechtenstein's shoulders start to shake. The girl suddenly pulled back, straightening up and taking a deep breath. He was surprised to see no tears in her eyes.

"Okay, then." Germany gave her shoulder a reassuring pat and started making his way towards the basement. "I'll go deal with the others. Could you light this place up a bit more?" he asked, flipping the main hall light on as he walked. "The fireplace and such."

Liechtenstein agreed and set off to turn on some more lights around the house. She was also thankful that the man hadn't said anything about her momentary reaching out. She watched the German disappear down into the cellar as she stepped into the living room, and she felt a bit more refreshed.

*Germany will know what to do.* He was frequently looking after Austria, one way or another, so dealing with him was probably nothing new.

The small country ignored the tiny voice in the back of her mind whispering that this was different.

She clicked on the three lamps in the room, pausing as she glanced towards the fireplace. She stepped over and threw some logs onto the pile, grateful for the stockpile in the corner so she wouldn't have to tread outside. As she fumbled with the lighter, the girl could hear multiple pairs of heavy footsteps stomping up the stairs. Germany was muttering something and she could hear her brother speaking softly in German, and an even quieter, hoarse voice answered him.

". . . be okay. We're just taking you to get some rest."

"Wait . . . please wait."

Liechtenstein turned around and stood as the three men entered the room.

...xXx...

". . . Warten Sie mal . . ."

Austria was being held firmly in Germany's arms, the Swiss walking close beside them. Green eyes were intent on the sick man, scanning him all over and keeping an eye on his face. The aristocrat tried to hold his gaze, head lolling to the side as his eyes squinted in concentration. Germany readjusted him in his grip, hiking the man up as they stepped into the living room and headed for the next staircase.
Switzerland didn't even notice his sister across the room, his attention entirely on the brunet. He wiped another droplet of blood from the man's nose as they walked carefully up the stairs. A weak hand reached up to grab his wrist, and the blond's throat constricted at hearing the man's beautiful voice reduced to sounding brittle and broken.

"W-Warten . . ."

"Hush. Everything's all right," the Swiss replied in their shared German. He deliberately stepped up the stairs sideways, his back sliding against the railing as he stayed out of Germany's way while he carried the Austrian upwards. "Try not to move, okay?"

He could tell that Austria was completely consumed by his fever. He had been ever since he'd regained consciousness this second time, babbling nonsense in a multitude of languages. When he'd gotten back to his side the man was muttering something to himself in some form of ancient Celtic—a dialect he hadn't heard in over a millennium. It took the blond a minute to recognize the words, his mind rushing to translate them, and they stabbed him directly through the heart with every syllable.

"Please, God, let me die. I don't want them to see me like this. I don't want this pain anymore. Everything hurts too much. I want to leave. I want to go away. Take me away."

The Swiss was brought back to the present as the fingers around his wrist tightened, and he glanced up at the aristocrat's face. Violet eyes stared at him a moment, narrowed and tired, before widening somewhat in recognition.

"Vash? Is that you?" Austria whispered, voice gravelly and a few octaves deeper than usual.

"I'm here." Switzerland let out a breath, forcing himself to look calmer than he felt. "No need to worry."

They reached the top of the stairs safely and the Swiss stepped ahead to open the master bedroom door, flipping the light on. He pulled down some of the messy covers strewn over the large, four-post bed, and moved aside to allow Germany to gently set the man in his arms down onto the mattress.

The German went to lift the blankets up around the musician and straighten out the sheets and comforter. Switzerland stayed by the bedside, allowing his hand to be held once again. He knelt and wiped at some more blood dribbling out of the Austrian's nose.

The brunet reached out and cupped the Swiss' cheek, his other hand squeezing his wrist shakily. He looked slightly more focused as he gasped out quietly, "I missed you so much."

Switzerland swallowed the lump in his throat, unable to say anything as guilt stabbed him in the gut.

Then the man spoke again.

"Why must you leave Brigantium tonight?"

"What?" The blond's eyes widened in confusion. Brigantium? "But that's—"

Austria ran his thumb under an emerald eye, his voice dragging on. "So soon . . . You just got home."

Oh. Oh. Realization finally dawned on the Swiss, and he nearly vomited from the force of it.
He's hallucinating. Of-fucking-course he is.

It certainly explained why he was acting so strangely, and speaking in long forgotten dialects. The blond thought it must have been just from his fever, but perhaps something else was going on. Something serious—especially since the Austrian seemed to think they were both back in time and under Rome's rule. Back before Brigantium was Bregenz, when the Swiss had been a mercenary for The Empire, and long before the two of them had gone their separate ways.

Back when the battles they fought were simpler.

Switzerland blinked away his thoughts, deciding not to dwell on them. He laid his hand on the aristocrat's on his cheek, forcing a smile. "Don't worry. I've decided to stay."

"Really?" The Austrian's face lit up with a crooked smile of his own, his eyes drifting to the side, looking far away. "I'm . . . very glad to hear that."

Germany sat down on the edge of the bed, staring between the two warily. A loud clap of thunder caught them all off guard, rumbling fiercely around the room as the rain steadily picked up once more. Austria flinched and pulled his hand back, leaning up to frantically look around. He noticed the bloody rag in the Swiss' hand, eyes furrowing in distress. "You're hurt? Are we under attack again?"

The man's words were slurring and every wobbly syllable just continued to break his heart more and more. He dutifully kept his guarded smile in place, though he wasn't sure how he managed. "It's just a bit of thunder. Nothing to worry about, so get some rest."

Austria's voice began to fade as he slumped back into his mattress, eyes bleary and trying to focus on the blond as he croaks out, "I'm so sorry I couldn't help more. I fought as long as I could."

Switzerland just shushes him softly and pulls the covers over the aristocrat's shoulders.

The man was unconscious again in seconds.

...xXx...

Germany shut the bedroom door behind them quietly as the two men stepped into the hallway. The German turned slowly to the Swiss standing across from him, his blue eyes wide. He looked speechless. Well, nearly.

"What. The fuck." Germany gestured back at the door, shaking his head in disbelief. "What was that?"

Switzerland couldn't look the other country in the eye, instead fiddling with the bloody rag in his fingers. Right. Germany hadn't experienced the Austrian's attacks yet, nor his memory lapses. Frankly, the Swiss hadn't had to deal much with the latter, either, and he couldn't help the shake in his fingers. He completely shared the German's appalled sentiment.

And he sighed, speaking slowly to keep the tremble out of his voice. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"He seemed fine the other day. I mean, how long has he been like this?" Germany grit out, sounding more dumbfounded than angry.

"Puking up blood or acting stark raving mad?" The German crossed his arms and the Swiss glanced up to see his displeased expression. He looked back down at his hands with a grimace. "Right."
Switzerland took a deep breath and leaned up against the opposite wall, tilting his head back to look up at the high ceiling. "He's been like this all night. Since about midnight, I think?" He checked the time on his phone. 6:11am. "I don't remember when the lights went out."

"Was he like this before the power went out?"

"No, he was—" The smaller blond cut off his words, tapping his fingers on his arm in agitation.

He couldn't help the way his mind whirled at the memory of the Austrian accidentally letting his feelings slip loose. Then the way the aristocrat had fled from him afterword. That practically just happened, yet now . . .

The Swiss cleared his throat, squeezing his eyes shut. "He was fine. We were all watching movies together, and Lilli was just about to make dinner."

"And the babbling?" The German felt the tension in the air, proceeding mindfully with his words. "Why was he going on like that?"

Switzerland held up a hand, saying, "That's new. He started getting sick last night when we were down in the cellar." He rubbed at his eyes with his palm, tucking the rag in his pocket. "I was up all night looking after him. He coughed up a lot of blood, a lot. He finally started to calm down a little while ago, and I thought he was going to be okay. Guess I was wrong."

Germany glanced down the hall, listening to the muted crackle of the fireplace downstairs. The man stood quietly, his face showing his contemplation as he thought through their options of what to do next.

The large man heaved a sigh. "You should get some sleep, then. You and your sister. I can put a patch over the window for tonight and we can deal with it later." The country started to walk towards the stairs, running a hand through his damp hair as he passed the other blond. "I also have been awake all night, and would appreciate a nap, at least."

The Swiss frowned, but followed him downstairs. He looked across the living room, spotting Liechtenstein kneeling in front of the fireplace, stoking the burning logs carefully. Stopping on the landing, he watched as Germany stepped across the dark hardwood flooring to sit in one of the plush armchairs by the piano, slumping in obvious exhaustion. His sister looked up and stood from the fire, leaning the poker against the grey stone.

"Mr. Germany? Are you all right?"

"Hmm." The man nodded his head at her, rolling his shoulder. "Ja, just a bit frustrated."

Switzerland zoned out of their mild conversation about how the German was up all night lugging sandbags to help the hotel staff keep the lobby from flooding. Instead, a muffled whimpering caught his ear and he glanced up toward the second floor. The sudden urge to run back up the stairs and throw open the master bedroom door gripped him tight; and he had to cross his arms and ankles, leaning up against the railing, to keep himself from doing exactly that.

This isn't fair, he thought, grinding his teeth.

His—admittedly—annoying parental-type instincts were eating at him, and he couldn't help it. He'd spent a large portion of his immortal life taking care of the troublesome Austrian, and despite them having been separated for quite some time now, the urge to go and fix any problem the man was experiencing was still strong within him.
Not to mention the love confession thing, that small voice in the back of his mind nagged at him.

Switzerland tried distracting himself from the distant, pitiful moans, trying to focus back on the quiet conversation between the other two nations across the room. Germany was still muttering quietly, using the towel around his neck to further dry his wet hair.

For some reason the other country's presence felt off. Despite the whole fact that the Swiss knew he was coming over, had even agreed to him coming to help out at the mansion, and yet it felt as if the younger man shouldn't be there. That he was intruding. Green eyes glanced around the room, almost half-expecting a certain silver-haired asshole to come barging out of the hallway at any moment—an unwelcome tagalong to most of his brother's dealings. His absence made the blond's skin crawl with uneasiness.

Where is he? He looked back towards the German, eyes narrowing. Prussia is supposed to be at his side. He's supposed to be looking after him.

Liechtenstein must have somehow sensed the dark cloud of mistrust growing around him, and glanced over in confusion. "Brother?"

Switzerland raised his voice finally then, tilting his head in Germany's direction. "So, why are you here?"

A blond brow arched upward at him. The other country almost looked surprised. "I already told you over the phone. I came to check on you—"

"No." The Swiss stepped off the landing, leaving the stairway of temptation behind him as he crossed the room and flopped down on the couch opposite the German. "Why are you here? In Vienna. You were heading back to Berlin the last time we spoke."

"Well, my boss gave me permission to stay over considering all the fuss going on." Germany's steely blue eyes met his head on, still looking a bit confused.

Switzerland stretched an arm over the back of the couch, leaning back into the soft cushions. "You told Hungary that you couldn't look after Roderich. Which is pretty much the whole reason I'm here in the first place instead of you."

Germany was giving him a very skeptical look, and his sister wouldn't meet his gaze. The Swiss sighed and softened his stance a bit, staring into the blazing fireplace as he tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. "Okay, fine. That's not the only reason I'm here, but don't dodge my question."

"What is your question, exactly?" Germany puffed, tossing the towel on the coffee table as he straightened his hair.

"You weren't supposed to be here, yet here you are. And you were supposed to be keeping a certain someone away during all this. Shit job at that, might I add."

The German's scowl deepened at the Swiss' crass insult. He raised a hand and gestured around the room. "Do you see him anywhere?"

Switzerland rolled his eyes, his tone deadpanning. "I'm thoroughly impressed he hasn't jumped out of the chimney yet to argue with me. He's been following you around the entire time you've been here."

"You try keeping him locked up in a hotel room alone."
"That's what you're there for."

"Well, unlike him, I have actual work to do. Then Italy got called back home because of all this nonsense; not that he was much help containing mein Bruder, but still..." Germany cleared his throat, tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair. "His company was welcome. To be honest, everything was fine until that fire broke out and involved me in this mess."

Switzerland had to agree there. He wasn't blaming Germany for the fire, of course, nor for following his boss' orders to get in contact with Austria. Just for being a bit of a pushover when it came to his brother. "Where's he now, then?"

"Back at the hotel, sleeping off a hangover," Germany said, stretching out his legs, the joints cracking. "He got pissed last night and completely slept through the storm. Haven't seen him that drunk in awhile, so I doubt he'll be bugging dein kranker Aristokrat any time soon."

"Good. I don't need any more problems. I already have enough to worry about with that walking woe magnet upstairs." Liechtenstein let out a small gasp, standing beside the German in appalment as she looked his way.

"Ain't that the truth." Germany huffed, nodding his head in a resigned manner. "That time a few decades ago was the worst; he nagged at me to do every single little thing. Be thankful you've only had to stay with him for a little over a week."

Switzerland just stared at him blankly, raising a single eyebrow. "I never took you for an idiot, Lutz, so don't start acting like one."

"Oh." The German blinked, looking over his companion with a renewed light. "Oh, right. I keep forgetting you grew up with him. I don't know how you put up with it, honestly."

Switzerland chewed the inside of his cheek a moment in thought. "I'm used to carrying burdens. I don't mind so much anymore." The Swiss let up his interrogation, his attention caught by his sister as she walked between the two men, heading for the staircase. "Lilli?"

The girl stopped before the bottom stair, but didn't turn around. Her arms were crossed tightly over her chest and she was ducking her head down, her blonde bob of hair hiding any expression she could have been making. Her voice was quiet, yet it seemed to carry loudly in the room around the two men.

"He is not a burden."

With that, she walked up the stairs and out of sight.

Both of them stared after her, wide-eyed. Switzerland immediately felt guilty. He wanted to run after his sister and tell her that he didn't mean what he said—but he knew that'd be a lie. He was frustrated and tired beyond belief, unable to process half the things he'd experienced that long, long night. He rubbed at his eyes, leaning back into the couch. He heard the German man curse under his breath and sigh again, and he agreed with the feeling, thinking, \textit{Verdammt. I just want to sleep for an age.}

Wind picked up outside and the house shifted, thumping and settling in on itself as the power blacked out again. Both of them groaned.

The Swiss lowered his hands and stared back into the harsh light of the fireplace.

...xXx...
Liechtenstein shone her phone light on the cool, wood floor to make sure her footfalls fell safely. Creeping around the end of her host's four post bed, she carefully made her way towards the window by the corner. The Austrian was sound asleep behind the closed dark canopy drapes of his bed—well, as much as he could be. His breathing was labored, but deep, and the occasional cough or whimper escaped him. Her heart bled with empathy, beating heavily and aching in her chest.

The bubble of anger she'd been suppressing in her gut flared up as she leaned a knee on the daybed under the window, peeking around the velvet blinds. I can't believe him! she thought, wincing at a close lightning strike. I can't believe he would think that of poor Mr. Austria! He can't help it that he's sick.

The small country moved away from the curtain and grabbed a nearby decorative wicker chair with a small embroidered cushion on it. She lifted it up, having to put her phone back in her robe pocket as she waddled over to the back corner of the room as quiet and gingerly as she could in the dark. Hiking up her leg, she hoped her weight wouldn't bust through the thin wicker seat as she stepped up onto it, lifting out her phone light again to shine above her.

Liechtenstein stared into the dim, reflected lens of the camera for a moment, balancing carefully. The power had burned out again, but the red dot on the piece of tech was still shining brightly. Batteries. She looked for one more moment into the lens, shaking her head. I don't think Ms. Hungary should see him like this. She knew that the whole reason she agreed to put the cameras up was so the other woman could satiate her need to always keep an eye on the Austrian. However, looking back over her shoulder as the man moaned softly, Liechtenstein was sure it was wrong of anyone to be a voyeur to his pain.

The small country quickly dismantled the camera and untacked it from the wall. Honestly, she didn't understand how the aristocrat didn't notice the tech standing out against the white and plum accented walls. She had to admit that this room was probably less fancy than his old room in the main palace, but she had no idea how. The Austrian's master bedroom was very large and opulent, if sparsely furnished. The stately king bed was easily the centerpiece as soon as you walked through the door, with four high, dark wood posts and a tented luxuriant, roped canopy. Thick, ebony curtains with white inlay were usually tied up at each of the posts with white tasseled rope, revealing the lavish comforter. Obsidian with white fleur de lis type patterns embroidered across it, various decorative pillows laid across it, and deep eggplant colored sheets and pillowcases. The curtains were loose and pulled closed around the bed, though, and the décor pillows were stacked neatly against the end of the bed. The two nightstands had beautifully ornate ceramic lamps on them, with an alarm clock on one stand and a few books stacked on the other closest to the window.

The girl carefully stepped down from the small wicker chair, wobbling a bit with a whoa-oh! and set the camera down on the cushion. Stepping over to the stand, she picked up the top book curiously. The book cover was red cloth with a wide black grid on it, a small thin branch of leaves shaped in an S in the middle. She turned the book over in her hands, the back of it blank, and on the binding were the words, The Robe, Douglas, Grosset & Dunlap. She opened up the inside of the cover and moved her phone light a little closer, seeing a picture of an old printed map of Europe across it titled The Roman Empire In the First Century, and it was exactly that. Right with the labels for The Empire and it's cities like Rome, Massilia, and Rhegium; then Germania stationed above with the Rhine and Danube rivers. Italy is kind of accurate, and so is Spain, she thought. It was interesting to see how the world looked back then to everyone, way before she was born. The lands seemed stretched out and some of the borders were wrong, but that was to be expected from old maps.
Liechtenstein spent a moment looking over the offbeat depiction, trying to place in her mind where all modern states were located. Then she opened the old book further, turning the thin, weathered pages carefully to where the tasseled bookmark sat.

She picked a random line and read a small snippet of the text, which went as:

"If, for example, he became firmly convinced that all times and everywhere water seeks a level, there would be no use in coming to him with the tale that on a certain day, in a certain country, at the behest of a certain man, water was observed to run uphill. He had no time for reports of events which disregarded natural laws. As for 'miracles,' the very word was offensive. He had no tolerance for such stories and not much more tolerance for persons who believed in them."

Her heart sank a little as she gently closed the book and set it back down on the nightstand. Was this where the Austrian got his pessimistic view on life from? From reading material like this? She had to disagree with whatever protagonist was disbelieving in such things as 'miracles.' Austria would definitely get a miracle, for he and his people deserved one now more than ever in this crisis. Even if she, her brother, Taiwan, and the others had to work hard at it, he would get a miracle. She knew they were real, and could happen at any time. Switzerland finding her at just the right moment, when she'd given up all hope, and taking her in. He saved her life, and for that she was forever grateful. Thinking back to that time of when she'd gone from half-dead on the street to being nursed back to health in a soft bed, the girl felt a thread of guilt worm through her.

Maybe I shouldn't have acted like that, she thought, tapping her phone screen to unlock it. She walked around the end of the bed, glancing at the closed doorway ruefully. Had she acted childish? It wasn't often she got angry with the Swiss—he meant too damn much to her. She was just upset with what he said. "I'm used to carrying burdens. I don't mind so much anymore." Was she so sure he was just referring to the Austrian?

The girl pawed at her phone, absentmindedly checking the weather as her thoughts raced. She was starting to get a bit of a headache. Things had been peaceful at home with her brother for quite some time now, or she thought so. Was there something else going on that he wasn't talking about with her? Usually Switzerland just went to brief meetings or press conferences, then spent the rest of the time with her. Having tea, or tending to his garden, playing with their goats.

A drop of water hitting her touchscreen made her jump. Quickly realizing it was a tear, she just froze as a creeping thought seized her.

Have I been a burden all this time?

The phone screen went dark as she stood there in silence, astounded. She instantly straightened up, blinking quickly as she took several deep breaths. No. That's stupid. That's beyond stupid. Vash doesn't think of me like that. He would never. She flicked her phone flashlight back on and shone at the tall bed, puffing herself up brazenly as she listened to the aristocrat's soft breathing. And he doesn't think that of you either.

Liechtenstein turned around and decided to explore the quarters some more as best she could with the small light from her phone, feeling silly at her thoughts. I can't believe I would ever doubt him like that, she scolded herself. Then a warmth began to fill her like it usually did whenever she thought of her brother, and she smiled to herself. If anyone can give Mr. Austria a miracle, it's Vash.

She hadn't been too much farther in the room past the bed and first dresser beside the door. Following the wall were a line of dressers and paintings hanging on the wall leading straight back
into a private master bathroom. The whole wall from the restroom door to the adjacent corner was covered in sectioned mirrors, which she deduced as closet doors. Either that, or the Austrian was extremely vain. She glanced upwards with her light at a beyond ostentatious chandelier.

*Okay. Maybe he's a little vain,* she thought, a small giggle escaping her into the quiet night air. Though, she had to admit that her own brother's mansion could be just as showy. She snickered to herself. *Old money.*

Liechtenstein toed softly over to a plush looking chaise lounge near the mirrors. The floor was a nice hardwood, darker in color to match the rest of the house—though, to be fair, everything was darker in color considering the lights were out. A wide, lustrous wool rug covered this part of the floor. It had a rich, pastel tree of life design with doves flying around the branches, and it was well-worn and cushy to tread on.

"It's a Khorassan."

The girl jumped to high heaven at the voice that came out of nowhere.

Heart pounding, she whipped around and shone her phone back towards the bed. A ghostly face lit up from between the curtains, violet eyes reflecting back at her. The aristocrat was stretched out on his stomach, having moved the black material out of the way, and had grabbed one of the decorative pillows to rest his head and arms on. Glowing pale from her light, he looked like a very sleepy spectre.

Liechtenstein pressed her hand over her chest in relief as she stepped over, exhaling her words in a rush. "Jesus, Austria! You nearly made my heart stop!"

"Apologies," Austria croaked out, shifting the pillow underneath him. His voice sounded absolutely ragged. "But I noticed you staring."

"What?"

"At the rug. It's a Khorassan. Sadik gave it to me some years ago, said it was a spoil of war. I don't doubt it."

The small girl stood in front of the man, illuminating him in all his tired glory. His injured back proudly showed itself off under her scrutiny, his unkempt brown hair in wild tangles. The Austrian squinted at the brightness, but gestured back behind her at the rug. He didn't seem fully awake yet, and she was honestly surprised he was cognizant at all after what she'd witnessed earlier.

But he was just murmuring to her as if nothing had happened. "Your brother should have a matching one. A green hunting rug with elk and such. Does he still have it?"

She recalled her brother keeping something like that in one of the estate's sitting rooms. Verdant with delicate elk and rabbits running from huntsmen on horseback and hounds. "Ja, I think he does."

"Mmm, good." Austria cleared his throat and sank onto the bedazzled throw pillow more, casting his eyes downward. "The wood is Shedua, too, in case you were wondering. Shedua for the bedrooms, and walnut for the halls. Darker colors soothe me."

Liechtenstein slowly sat beside the man, the edge of the mattress dipping beneath her. She couldn't help but reach out and press the back of her hand to the other's forehead, brushing away his messy bangs. Austria recoiled from the surprise touch at first, but quickly relaxed. He was still burning up, and she was going to tell him so, he just grumbled out before she could, "I know, I know."
The Austrian pushed himself up with some effort into a cross-legged position, hugging the pillow to his chest. He almost didn't meet her gaze, only glancing up once as he cleared his throat again. "Lilli."

She perked up. "Ja?"

"Could—" He coughed a few times into the pillow, turning his head away from her. "Could, ah, you get me a shirt? I feel a bit . . . exposed."

"Oh!" The girl flushed, her eyes flicking over his topless form. She hadn't considered the other would be shy at such a thing, especially when he was sick. Cold, maybe, but not shy. She stood quickly, straightening out her robe. "Ja, klar. Where—?"

"First dresser, second drawer down," Austria mumbled hoarsely through the thick pillow. "Danke."

Liechtenstein walked over to their right and fetched one of the man's pajama tops. He thanked her again as she came back and handed him a light, cotton shirt. The Austrian leaned down to set the pillow back on the floor, and began to slowly slide on the pajama shirt. She helped him slide the sleeves on as he had a hard time stretching his arms back, groaning in pain at his sore muscles, and he allowed her to button up the front. She didn't mind helping, though the man's eyes were downcast in defeat. The girl straightened his collar neatly, giving the aristocrat her sweetest smile.

"Would you like some water?" she offered.

Austria opened his mouth to reply, but quickly turned his head, coughing roughly into his elbow. He managed to nod through his fit, though, and she began walking towards the door. She would have to figure out a way to get a glass down from one of the cupboards, and maybe she'd have to put on some boots to climb over the tree branch and glass. Or she could ask her brother to get it for her, if he wasn't too angry with her. Maybe Germany instead.

"There's paper cups in the bathroom, dear." Liechtenstein hadn't realized she'd stopped walking until the man spoke up. She glanced back with her phone at the sleepy Austrian, and he was covering a yawn. "If . . . ah, if you'd rather just go there instead."

"Right." The girl relaxed and made her way back towards the restroom. She knew it was silly, but she was thankful she didn't have to go back downstairs any time soon.

The fair sized private bathroom reflected back at her brightly under her phone light. It had a large, walk-in shower with a frosted glass door, and a nicely sized porcelain bowl half-bath off to the left of it. Her bare feet appreciated the spongy lavender rug over the marble tiling. The girl quickly found the stack of paper cups on the corner of the sink counter, and filled one up as she eyed a tall bamboo stalk on the opposite side of the counter. It had a delicate lace ribbon tied around the top of the thin pebble vase.

*Maybe Mr. Japan gave him that,* she thought as she treaded back over to her host. *Or maybe he just likes it. He does have a greenhouse and plants everywhere.*

Austria quickly downed the water she handed him, and she went to fetch another glass—which he proceeded to do the same with. *He must be parched.* After two more glassfuls, the man finally just sipped at the last one she handed him, mumbling gratefully. "I guess it's a good thing you didn't have to walk all the way to the kitchen and back for this. Vielen Dank."

"Bitte."

Despite the dim light from her phone, the man must have noticed her pensive look because he
spoke again quickly—despite the fact she knew it must seriously pain him to do so. "I really hope you won't be afraid of my kitchen for very long. I'd love to bake with you sometime."

Liechtenstein smiled at his words, happy to hear him talking about the future positively. Even if it was just a small wish. "I'll be okay. So, what woke you up?"

"I heard laughing and I was making sure it wasn't a ghost. I'm glad it was just you, my dear," Austria sighed, carefully scooting back on the bed with his water and sliding under the sheets once more.

The girl shed her robe and laid it on the décor pillows at her feet. She sat on the bed and followed him after closing the curtains at the foot of the bed once more. She faced her phone light up to bounce off the canopy and illuminate all around them. The Austrian raised his eyebrows as she slid into bed next to him, clearly not expecting her to get cozy with him.

Liechtenstein intended to stay with him the rest of the night, that way she could keep an eye on him and be at his beck and call, or at the very least so he wasn't alone.

"A ghost?" she chirped, puffing up the pillow behind her. "You don't really believe in such things, do you?"

"Of course I do," Austria said confidently. He finished off his water and reached around the curtain to set the glass down on the nightstand. "One even frequently cleans up around the house. I mean, I live alone and I certainly am not doing it. I keep things tidy, but you know."

"Whoa, spooky."

The Austrian slowly lowered himself onto his back, exhaling in satisfaction. Liechtenstein grabbed her phone to turn off the light and curled on her side, facing him as she got comfy. Perhaps they both should go back to sleep, what with him still running a fever and her with her most-likely-concussion from earlier. Sleep would be the best, no stimulation of any kind, but she would make sure to wake any time the aristocrat needed her.

A hand reached out towards her in the dark, and she blinked in surprise as the man gently brushed against the bandage on her head, petting back some of her hair behind her ear.

Austria felt around for her hands, clasping them tightly in his. "Forgive me, Lilli. I haven't been kind to you."

What? She blinked. "What are you talking about? You've been so kind—"

The man cut her off, continuing to whisper regrets. "The last few days, maybe. The last few centuries, though . . ."

Is he . . . Is he talking about my birth?

Back when she'd first been founded as a separate territory, she distinctly remembered Austria being furious with her. Well, not her exactly, but the fact that her founder, an Austrian noble, had gone against his wishes and paired up with Holy Rome to make a deal. Afterwards, she remembered the Austrian didn't speak to her for quite some time, but after being passed around and supervised by much larger nations, the aristocrat had acted more amicably towards her. The last many decades he was downright delightful to be around, even if she wasn't around him too often. The man would try to take her and her brother out to lunch a few times a year, his treat, and was always very polite at meetings and parties.
Liechtenstein shook her head, squeezing his hands firmly. She couldn't believe he lamented over the past—and it was just that to her, the past. "I've put it out of my mind, and so should you."

"I understand," Austria croaked wistfully, releasing her hands and pulling away. For some reason she felt that he was trying to separate himself from her not just physically. It felt like he was about to close himself off from her.

The girl's heart fluttered in a panic and she impulsively slid forward to throw her arms around the aristocrat. No, Don't pull away, she wanted to shout at him as she gave him a hearty squeeze, and she spoke as emphatically as she could. "Everything will be just fine, sir. Vash and I aren't going to leave you. It'll be all right."

Austria was stiff in her arms. After a moment of her whispering that surefire promise again and again until she knew he felt her sincerity, the man melted. The Austrian wrapped his arms around her tightly and hugged back earnestly, burying his face into her shoulder. She could feel him shake with exhaustion, and maybe a sob, and she could only hold him tighter as his arms gripped onto her for dear life.

"Ruf . . . mich bitte . . . a-an . . ." Liechtenstein could feel his lips moving against her skin and could just make out the throaty German words that were be muffled by her hair. Her heart raced that much more.

"Please call me Roderich."

Chapter End Notes

Hallo? Da ich bin! So öffnen Sie sich! - Hello? It's me! So open up!
Schweiz - Switzerland
Ja - Yes
Warten Sie mal - Please wait
Warten - Wait
Mein Bruder - My brother
Dein kranker Aristokrat - Your sick aristocrat
Lutz - A very cute nickname for the name Ludwig! (it's adorable, ok?)
Verdammt - Dammit
Ja, klar - Yes, of course
Danke - Thanks
Vielen Dank - Thank you very much
Bitte - You're welcome
Ruf mich bitte an Roderich - Please call me Roderich

Alezheia (Mr. Roderich) made a lovely picture to go along with the last scene so please check it out here!

~A BIT OF HISTORY AND FUN FACTS~

The language Austria was shouting in at Liechtenstein was Celtic, hence Switzerland recognizing it but not her. It was an older dialect, one that was spoken around the region before the country was a "country" or under Rome's rule, and still just a collection of Celtic/Germanic villages.
So there's a bit of headcanon of mine (and maybe actual canon?), that the main countries were still around wayyy before they were made into sovereign states, as they're forms belong to the land and people. Not the people's constructs of them. And YES, Liechtenstein IS on the same land, but wasn't "born" until the Holy Roman Era. So like there's "original" country entities that spawned from the land itself, and "new" entities birthed from people making borders. Ehhh specifics~

The Celtics had a camp named Brigantion, that got taken over by the Roman Empire and renamed Brigantium, and is now known as the town of Bregenz, Austria. A town on Lake Constance that used to be a seat for Roman municipality. It had a fort and worked as an army camp until Rome literally abandoned everything north of Italy to defend it's capital. Leaving it open to be retaken by the native and northern tribes.

The Robe, by Lloyd C. Douglas, is a book that I actually own! And the quote I took from pages 380-381 in my copy. I own the version printed in 1945 that used to belong to my grandma, so it's super old. It's about a Roman who wins Jesus' robe in a gambling match and it brings him lots of trouble, I think? The protagonist is not a big fan of Christ and doesn't believe in his "so-called miracles" very much. I thought it was kind of a cool parallel with how Austria's mindset lately is very disbelieving that his own miracle will come. I also just kinda dig the quote, as well, yeah \_(_V_)_/\n
And honestly, I chose for Austria to have a Khorassan rug because 1. Please believe that he'd have antiques from all over the world, and 2. Khorassan in my mind sounds a lot like Coruscant from SW which actually is a word for "dazzling" so I guess that works for my nerd self. Look up photos, they're gorgeous antique Persian rugs!
Chapter Summary

Switzerland assesses the damage done to the manor and his companions, but not before being faced with a tough decision posed by his sister.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is brought to you by Swiss Cleaning Services! If you've got an Austria-sized mess, you can count on Swiss Cleaning Services to be there to clean it up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The power eventually renewed itself not too long after Liechtenstein had left the room. The few lights flickered on from the hall and the lamps, harsh and bright, startling Switzerland from his reverie and jolting his companion from his dozing.

Neither of them had spoke much after his sister had headed upstairs, both too exhausted and content with the silence between them. That’s one thing the Swiss enjoyed about the German—he was okay with silence. It was probably one of the biggest differences between him and his mouthy relatives, the man was perfectly fine with not filling the quiet with constant chatter. Whenever he and the German were in the same room there was always an unspoken agreement between them to try and not blather on about unnecessary things.

Germany had insisted again that they get at least a few hours of sleep, that any work to be done could wait for better daylight. The Swiss tiredly agreed and told the man that he could use the spare bedroom, since he’d barely occupied it during his stay, anyway. He paid no mind to the odd look the man had given him after he’d said that. He went upstairs to move his suitcase; telling himself it was so it wasn’t in the German's way, when in reality he knew it was just an excuse to go and check on his host.

As he walked towards the stairs, Germany began heading back out into the hall and towards the kitchen. Presumably, it was to keep good on his earlier word to close up the broken bay window before any more rain could leak into the house.

Switzerland stepped into the second spare room on the right, flipping the light on. The cream-colored comforter was all done up, everything as neat as he left it when he’d prepared to go home. His suitcase was right where he’d left it earlier, atop the bed, and he made sure it was zipped closed before snatching it off the mattress and rushed across the hall.

He paused at the door to the master bedroom, hesitating. The blond glanced over his shoulder at the closed door of the other spare bedroom, his heart feeling hollow. A bit of nervousness bore into him, and he wondered if his sister was still upset with him. He decided it was best if he were to stay away for the moment, to give her some space. They’d all been through a lot that evening, and he couldn’t really blame either of them for the words that were said.
"I'll talk to her later," he thought, turning the doorknob as quietly as he could. *Hopefully she's getting some better rest now, and her head isn't bothering her.*

Cracking the door open slightly, the Swiss peered into the darkened room.

The room was nearly black, only illuminated by the stream of light from the hallway. Switzerland opened the door further and moved his case off to the side. The bright hall light poured into the room, and the blond stood silhouetted in the doorway, staring at the closed curtained canopy bed. He could hear reserved, deep breathing from within.

The Swiss shut the door behind him and leaned up against the cool wooden frame, allowing a moment for his eyes to adjust. The rain pattering down outside felt like it was flooding his gut; overwhelming and churning. Cold crawled up his spine, curling and weaving its fingers between his ribs and seizing around his heart.

He was overcome by immediate and unavoidable trepidation.

The feelings of dread had been creeping up on him throughout the night; and only now, in the dark, alone with the musician in his room, did his anxiety finally consume him. It seemed that his night-long adrenaline high was now finally crashing. Jitters were beginning to start up in his fingertips and calves, and even his insides felt like they were trembling.

Suddenly, it wasn't enough to just be in the same room—he had to see the other. He had to sit beside him, watch him breathe, make sure he was still there and tangible. He *had* to. Before he didn't have anymore strength within him.

Switzerland lurched forward, legs taking a few long strides before he was at the bedside canopy. His eyes were still adjusting, but his hands easily found the thick cloth as he reached out and pulled it aside. The interior of the canopy was somehow even darker than the rest of the room, and it felt like an open void before him. Empty, and impossibly filled with anything but more and more darkness.

Yet, as he sank down onto the edge of the mattress, the air was toasty and comforting. The rain outside was muffled and gentle thunder rolled around the old manor, harmless. His eyes caught sight of movement beside him, and he reached out, resting his hand on the figure in the darkness. A soft fabric could be felt under his fingertips, and a warm arm beneath that.

Switzerland's eyes were now fully adjusted, as much as they could be, and he slid up the bed to sit beside the other. He leaned down, perching himself on the pillows above the man's head with his elbow, and reaching out to gently run his fingers through dark brown hair. The sensation calmed him, his heart rate slowly returning itself to normal as his shaking hands steadied themselves. He laid his head in his palm and just gazed through the night air down at the man in front of him, petting his feathery locks languidly.

He was startled to realize the man wasn't alone in his bed. More movement caught his eyes and a small head poked itself out from under the Austrian's arm. His chest squeezed at the sight, and for just a moment he felt like his heart would throttle him at the wave of tenderness that flashed through him. He puffed out a stream of air, reaching over the musician to brush against his sister's hair.

The girl tilted her head and looked up at him, her eyes glinting in the dark. "Bruder?"

"I'm here," Switzerland soothed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. He felt a small smile tug at his lips. "And so are you, apparently."
Liechtenstein nodded and scooted upwards, careful of the arms still wrapped around her. She plopped her head on one of the large pillows with a small *ooof!* and stared up at him, settling back into the sheets. "I wanted to stay with him."

His smile grew at that, and he couldn't help the endearment he felt towards her. *She's too kind-hearted.* He cleared his throat, gesturing at the man's arms enveloping the poor girl. "I feel like I should have warned you," he murmured, "He's quite the cuddler."

"I've noticed," his sister hummed and patted the Austrian's shoulder. "I don't mind."

The Swiss found himself breathing more easily, the shake officially gone from his limbs. Exhaustion had finally set in, though it wasn't as heavy as he thought it would be. Seeing his two favorite people huddled together, safe and warm, was enough to reinvigorate some energy back within him.

*Favorite, huh?*

The smaller country seemed to hesitate a moment before whispering, "I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to act so childishly."

"No." He just shook his head, moving his hand back to lightly caress the brunet's hair again. "No, you're fine. I apologize for what I said. It's been a long night, hasn't it?"

"Vash, we can't leave him."

Switzerland froze, his hand stilled. He squinted through the darkness, his sister staring at him with her large eyes imploringly. What could she possibly be talking about? Of course they weren't going to just—

Green eyes widened in realization.

There was no way they could stay with the Austrian. Not like *that.* Not like how *they* were, brother and sister. Not permanently.

As soon as Hungary returned, there would be no need for them to be there any longer and they could go home. His breath hitched. Austria would be fine without them. He would. He had been in the past, and he would be in the future.

The man just grimaced, trying to speak in his best stern tone. "We'll have to eventually. We can't stay here forever."

Liechtenstein sat up more, her whispered words desperate. "I promised him we would, though."

The Swiss gasped. "You spoke with him about this?" He looked down at the man beneath him, knuckles brushing down a pale cheek. Had the Austrian wanted them to stay? He immediately shut down the flutters in his stomach, feeling himself start to get agitated. Why would he talk to his sister about this, but not him? If he truly wanted them to stay so badly he would think the man would have enough courtesy to ask *him.* He grit his teeth. "What did he say?"

"He mostly cried," the girl admitted quietly. Her gaze drifted down to look at the man between them, words thick, "I hugged him and told him we'd stay, and he just cried and cried." She sniffled, sounding a bit choked up as she joined him in petting the man's chestnut-colored locks. "And here we are."

"You should stop making promises you know we can't keep," the Swiss scolded, perhaps a bit too
harshly. But really, what had she been thinking? Saying such things so thoughtlessly.

The girl reeled back a small bit, a guilty look crossing her face. Her protest was quieter than before. "But he's so sick!"

"He'll get better." Even as the words crossed his tongue, he couldn't quite make himself trust them.

"You took me in when I was sick," Liechtenstein murmured, her eyes not meeting his. "Does that make me a burden, too?"

Switzerland sat up straighter in shock, mouth agape. How could she—?! He reached out and gripped her shoulder hastily, trying to catch her full attention. "No! Of course not."

"What about taking him in then?" she asked, still not meeting his gaze.

"It's—it's more complicated than that." His own words felt forced, and he could do nothing against the remorse beginning to fill him. Why couldn't she understand?

"How so?"

"Well, he's much larger than you are," he began carefully, not wanting to offend her. Though, he'd never known the girl to get angry over being a smaller country than most. "Plus, things are different nowadays. I can't just take him home like I did with you." He wished she would just drop this.

"It still took a lot for you to take me in," Liechtenstein continued, her tone soft and pleading. "And we're already here, looking after him. So, how is he any different?"

The Swiss went silent. For some reason, any arguments he could think up just seemed to die on his lips. He knew there was no logical reason for him to stay with the Austrian, not really. They had their governments and bosses to worry about, as there was no way either of them would be able to stay over at the other's house for very long at a time anyway. The only reason he was here now was because he'd managed to take time off, and if there was any urgent work to get done his assistant was supposed to call him. They were separate, neutral entities; not tied together by treaty, nor marriage, nor . . . friendship.

But he couldn't help the flip his stomach did at the thought of bringing the Austrian home with him, even just for a day. The blond couldn't remember the last time the aristocrat had came over to his actual house. He only seemed to travel to Switzerland for meetings, and to occasionally ask him and his sister out to lunch. He could remember being grateful for such a thing, relieved that he wouldn't have to entertain the pompous man aside from political get-togethers.

And now, now he felt shameful for ever having thought that way. Switzerland slumped forward, resting his forehead against the top of the Austrian's head, and threading his fingers through the man's chocolaty hair. He inhaled deeply, smelling the familiar scents of coffee and cologne beneath those of iron and sweat.

I'm really done for, aren't I? he thought in defeat. He was completely overcome by sentiment, and newfound—newfound . . .

Whatever this infatuation was.

Switzerland realized that his sister was patiently waiting for him to answer. He fully relaxed into the mattress, wrapping an arm around the breathing man pressed against him. Austria hummed in his sleep, leaning his weight back onto him; and the miniscule, heavy movement seemed to settle
his heart on the matter. He buried his face into the other's hair, squeezing him to his chest firmly, and breathed in deeply.

"I'll think about it."

...xXx...

Everything was green, supple, and soft. The grass blew in hypnotic waves over the field, lazy clouds drifting through the bright blue sky. The earth was warm, basking in the gentle sunrays of the midday light.

He breathed easy, unhindered, feeling almost as if the wind itself was flowing through him. A red cluster of petals flew in front of him as he sat up, leaning back onto his elbows. The meadow stretched as far around him as the eye could see, dotted with patches of poppies all around. Pale shapes of mountains rose up on the horizon, and a babbling brook echoed somewhere nearby.

Standing from his napping spot, he glanced around him for the stream. The grass came up nearly to his chest and he wouldn't be surprised if he easily got lost in such a place. He pushed aside the walls of waving green and headed towards the sound of water running over stone.

He found the rushing water easily enough. The brook ran from one end of the field and disappeared towards the other. Suddenly, his tongue was dry and he was parched, the inside of his throat feeling like a desert. He knelt down on one knee and cupped his hands, dipping his hands into the stream and taking a drink.

The cold water felt like a luxury. Like ice melting through him, a pleasant numbness hitting the back of his throat. He took more drinks to fill him, not noticing how the brook began to widen in front of him. The waterway splashed against the smooth stone bed a little quicker, a little harsher. By the time he looked up the small stream had grown into a full river before him and the sky had begun to darken.

The sun trailed low in the sky, casting striking, dramatic red fiery streaks over the fast encroaching grey clouds. The meadow around him was bathed scarlet in the new light, all of the vibrant green being sucked away towards the mountains.

He trembled at the quickly changing landscape and felt something cold kiss his ear. He glanced upwards and saw snow begin to fall down from the dark clouds. His gaze followed a flake downwards until it hit a small poppy beside him, and instantly the flower withered. All around him the world was turning from darker green, to crimson, to grey, grey, grey.

A crunching noise made him turn back towards the river. Standing opposite him on the other side of the tumbling water was a large male elk, a bull. Its nose was dipped into the stream and its impressive rack of antlers rose high into the air, cutting through the dark backdrop like strikes of pale lightning.

He was frozen to the ground beneath him, even as the river began to grow again, soon enveloping his and the elk's legs. The once refreshing water now biting into his skin with a malevolent chill, ice worming its way into his veins. The current began to pick up as a gust of wind gathered, chopping up the surface. He glanced around him, and his whole world had become filled with water as the meadow behind him was swallowed up. The sun was gone now, and the only light was that of the elk radiating bright white before him.

Suddenly, a loud and furious roar echoed over the landscape. The piercing sound rattled his bones, and he whipped his head to the right to see a massive wall of black rushing towards him from
upstream, as large as any mountain. The edges of the shape swirled and writhed, like a mass of raging serpents, and a gust of wind blew a harsh, freezing spray into his face.

Fear seized his heart, and he looked back over towards the bull, trying to cry out towards the creature. Surely, they were about to perish!

The elk slowly raised its head from the violent water and looked across the sea towards him.

Its eyes were a sharp, glowing emerald.

...xXx...

Switzerland jolted awake, eyes snapping open.

It took him a moment to realize where he was, trying to peer through the dim light around him. Thick, black curtains enclosed the space around him, and he felt a weight lying on his arm. Glancing down, he spied a brunet head resting atop his shoulder.

He hadn't meant to doze off.

Austria was lying on his back, using his arm as a pillow, and Liechtenstein was curled up on the other side of the man, her back to them.

The Swiss rubbed his eyes, letting himself wake up a bit more. He was warm and comfortable, and felt like he could easily fall back asleep. He shouldn't, though, if he wanted to get any work done.

Groaning quietly, the blond had to wiggle a bit as he fished his phone out of his pocket. Blinking, he peeked at the time. It was a little after nine, and there was already a few more messages alerting him on his lock screen.

Well, time to move, I guess, he thought.

Switzerland spared another glance to the man lying on him. Austria was sleeping soundly, his breathing no longer hindered by gasping or choking, and his face looked relieved and peaceful. It felt almost wrong to have to move him, but he attempted it nonetheless. Carefully. Not wanting to wake the man now that he was finally getting some rest.

The Austrian rolled onto his side and reached out to him, though, and clung around his middle as he sat up. A rumble sounded in the musician's throat, deep and gravelly, as the man nuzzled into his hip. The Swiss flinched, the feeling of the brunet pressing into his waist sending ticklish vibes up his spine.

A blush rose up on his cheeks and he looked down at the man in a chiding manner, scolding him inwardly like he were speaking to him.

No, the Swiss thought. He poked the musician's nose gently, as if he were reprimanding one of his goats. No, you let go of me.

Switzerland tried scooching over to the edge of the bed, but just ended up dragging the Austrian with him part of the way. He did his best to unwind the arms around his waist, and he stood wobbling on his feet. Austria remained stretched across the mattress, half out from under the sheets, and the blond quickly replaced himself with the pillow he'd been using. The aristocrat hummed again in his sleep and just hugged the pillow tighter to him, and for just a minor moment the Swiss felt at a loss.
I am not jealous of a pillow!

The Swiss straightened out his shirt and jeans, retying his hair back into a neater bun. He tugged his cross necklace out from behind his shoulder to rest over his heart. He pulled the curtain closed behind him and walked over to his suitcase, kneeling down to unzip it. Rummaging around, he pulled out a black paper box and lighter, tucking it into his breast pocket. He felt guilty about even bringing it in the first place, but at the same time he was just craving something different, something calming.

Spying a bright yellow bag inside his case, he pulled out the pack of flower-shaped gummies he'd bought at the market several days ago. He plucked them out and stood, opening the bedroom door. A sugar rush would help keep him going.

Switzerland stepped out into the dimly lit hallway, which was no longer illuminated by the bright overhead light, but from the grey outside light filtering in from the windows downstairs. The door across the hall was partially open and he could see Germany sprawled across the bed. He truly looked exhausted, and the Swiss couldn't blame him. He decided to let him sleep awhile longer before waking him, and headed for the stairs.

All right, let's get moving, he thought, cracking his knuckles as he reached the landing. He went and tended to the dying embers in the fireplace in the hopes of keeping some warmth flowing through the house.

Switzerland started first with the mess they'd left in the basement the night before. He threw out the bags and empty water bottles, and put back together the open first-aid kit. He collected all the towels, washcloths, and blankets, and brought them upstairs to the laundry room. He found a bottle of white vinegar on the shelves there and proceeded to blot out the stains on the fabrics. He was particularly grateful for the lack of blood on his cardigan, but decided it best to clean it anyway, just in case. Managing to clear out the red splotches, he finally put everything in the wash.

The blond man grabbed the bottle of vinegar, a bucket of a soap and water, and headed back into the cellar to attempt to clean up the blood splatter that was the horror scene upon the cream-colored carpet.

It took him some time, but the Swiss was eventually able to scrub the pristine white color back into the flooring instead of a very soggy pink. He was counting his lucky stars there was a plastic covering on the lounge they had sat on, and that the puddle of blood where the Austrian had lain just missed soaking the legs of a nearby 18th century tabouret. He didn't really feel like adding "antique restoration" to his to-do list for the day.

To be fair, doing housework on the old manor would probably count as restoration anyway, but this section of the mansion was quite modernized compared to the rest.

Relieved to get that out of the way, Switzerland gathered up his cleaning supplies and was just about to go back upstairs when he spotted a familiar pair of glasses under one of the cabriolet legs of the stool. Bending down and grabbing them from the floor, he hooked one of the wire arms on the collar of his t-shirt and began heading towards the stairway.

The Swiss decided to take a small breather and munch on his candies. He chewed the sour gummies slowly, pleased that they seemed to stave off the gnawing hunger in his gut.

Really, I should clear out the kitchen next, he thought. That way we can at least have room to cook again.
He padded up to the second floor as he quietly munched on his snack. Switzerland saw that the German was still sleeping soundly and made a left into the master bedroom.

He placed the Austrian's spectacles on the bedside table, on top of the other's phone. Resisting the urge to check on the two sleeping within the tent of the four post bed, he swiftly retreated back downstairs.

Switzerland stuffed the last gummy into his mouth and crumpled up the bag, pulling out his own cellphone. 10:18am, and he still had the messages icon hanging at the top of his screen. Deciding to distract himself for the moment, he checked them.

There were three texts, all from Hungary, and he figured she must have given up on trying to call him. He opened the thread and frowned.

6:02am: Hey, Svájc! The only flight I was able to get was from Tokyo to Budapest, and there's going to be a ton of layovers! Ugh! :( But I trust you to take care of Rod and all, of course. How is he?

8:56am: Stuck at a layover, so now's a good time to talk if you can!

9:37am: Can you call me? It's urgent.

Switzerland sighed and dialed the woman, figuring it'd be best to stop her nagging. He headed over towards the window and checked to see how the weather was doing as the phone rang patiently. Looking up at the sky, he was relieved to see that the rain had finally stopped and sunlight was beginning to leak through the clouds, turning all the surrounding valley a muted sepia color.

Good. He allowed himself a moment to relax, thinking, I'm glad the storm has finally let up.

Then Hungary picked up, and her voice sounded like static. "Halihó! I was worried you didn't get my texts!"

The Swiss flinched at the woman's jovial tone, and already regretted calling her. It's not like he had to answer to her or anything.

"Hey," he said.

"What's up with the reception? Can you hear me okay?"

"It's been storming," he replied. "What's so urgent that couldn't wait another day or so until you got here?"

"I was just worried, is all," she whined, sending a puff of static into his ear. "You've been avoiding my calls, haven't you?"

The blond fiddled with the cross around his neck, grimacing. "No, I haven't. I was just a bit indisposed last night."

"Oh?" The Hungarian's tone perked up and he almost wanted to smack himself when he heard her try to whisper conspiratorially. "How so? Are you and Austria just waking up? Do you want me to call back later?"

"Not like that!" He couldn't help his cheeks heating up as he quickly turned away from the window, hiding his blushing reflection from himself.
As he made his way towards the kitchen, Switzerland filled the woman in on all the chaos that had occurred during the night. He tried to answer her frantic questions as well as he could, stepping into the dining room. It seemed Germany had closed off the door to the kitchen; the stained, sliding glass wall portraying colorful floral patterns a surefire way to hide the disaster within.

Cautiously sliding the door along its track, the Swiss steadied himself before the sight that greeted him.

The large tree branch that had so crudely entered their lives still sat in the center of the kitchen. It was pulled farther in than it had flown last night, and the bay window was covered with a tarp taped to the wall. The long limb spread its way from the kitchen sink and counter, down to the floor, and across almost to the closed hallway door—and it's lucky it hadn't crashed through the painted glass lest there be an ever larger mess to clean up. Its many smaller branches and leaves stuck out to fill up the space, and they seemed to have knocked everything off the surrounding countertops.

"What?! There's no way a tree came in through the window!"

"And yet it did." Switzerland just shook his head, despite the fact that he knew the woman couldn't see him. He pulled his phone back to snap a picture and hit sent. "It's just a branch, but it's going to be a major pain cleaning up."

"I bet," Hungary said, sounding distant for the moment. Then her voice came back clearer and louder than before, "Eh?! Poor Liechten dear! Are you sure she's all right after getting hit with that?"

"She's sleeping off a concussion, but otherwise she's fine." The Swiss scowled at the glass covered ground, staying firmly on the dining room side of the door track.

"Good, good. You said Germany was there with you?"

"Ja, though he's sleeping."

"That's unlike him," she said. He could hear lots of people chattering through the static in the background. "Isn't it late morning there already?"

"He's had a long night, too. I thought I'd let him sleep."

"You're too nice, Svájc."

"Huh." He couldn't help feeling like the woman was patronizing him, and he continued to glower at the floor as he made his way around back out into the hallway to fetch his boots. "Well, if you're quite finished interrogating me then I'd like to get back to work."

"I'm about to get on my next flight, as well," Hungary said, sounding like she was out of breath. "You should really wait until Germany wakes before trying to remove that branch."

"Noted." The Swiss hung up.

...xXx...

Outfitted with his boots and a new sense of vindictive purpose, Switzerland began to work on the kitchen. Lucky to find a toolbox in the cellar, complete with a small hand saw, he headed back up the stairs. He set up the small radio he'd listened to during the night on the bar in the far corner of the kitchen space, and flipped it on to a random music station.
He had to admit that he was just as motivated by songs as the Austrian, and the noise helped to quiet his loud mind.

There were a couple of small potted plants knocked over into the sink or thrown on the floor that had once sat within the bay window's alcove. The blond stepped gingerly around the extra branches of the limb to rescue the poor things. An English ivy had tipped over into the sink along with a terrarium of a little spider plant, but both seemed rather unharmed so he set them on the counter and straightened out some of their leaves.

Plucking a small aloe vera plant from the shattered remains of its pot on the floor, however, broke his heart. He cupped the little leaves in his hand with all the dirt he could scavenge from the crash site and quickly looked around.

Standing on his tiptoes, the Swiss reached up into the cupboard nearest him and pulled down a teacup. He tenderly placed the aloe into the cup, taking some excess dirt from the ivy's pot to fill in around the leaves so they were standing firmly upright once again.

"You're quite the lucky fella, aren't you," Switzerland murmured to the succulent, wiping the dirt crumbs off of the outside of the teacup. "There's nothing to be frightened of anymore. You're safe now."

He gently set the aloe down beside the other rescued plants and gave them all a small drink from the faucet. At least that's not broken, he thought in relief as he turned off the tap and moved the plants all over next to the radio.

The bar top would quickly become his hoarding spot for all the objects he gathered from in and around the invading tree branch—several glasses that had survived the fall, the tea kettle, magnets and pictures that had slid off the fridge. He also discovered the photo album and frame that the Austrian and he had looked at the night before in the study; the musician not having had time to set them down proper before helping him save his sister from the storm.

Saving all that he could plainly see, the Swiss began to break off as many smaller branches on the wooden limb as he could, piling them into a trash bag in the corner. Beneath one of them he found a small, violet ribbon lying on the tile that he had missed during his original search. He brushed off the wood dust and set it on the bar beside the aloe teacup, then stepped back around the island to begin sawing.

Switzerland zoned out. Completely enveloping himself in the repetitive back and forth motions of his work, and just listening to whatever casual rock songs played from the radio. The light outside stayed a neutral amber, with the occasional drizzle falling down, and cast a surreal glow around him.

It didn't take him long to reduce the large oak branch to several smaller, manageable pieces. He slipped out of his boots at the edge of the painted threshold, so as not to carry glass through the rest of the house, and began taking the armload of wood into the living room. At least the branch could repurpose itself and act as fuel for the fire, since there was no reason to waste good wood. The pile of thin branches he'd snapped off would be thrown out into the tree line, and then he could finally begin sweeping up the marble tiles.

Switzerland slid open the glass patio door, and stepped outside into a light mist. The air felt cool and crisp, with a low fog ghosting over the grass, and he breathed in deep lungfuls of the refreshing smell of rain and nature. The low sound of music from inside the mansion followed him out into the yard, and he took his time walking over to the trees. Smaller twigs and leaves were strewn all about and he could spy a few downed trees back in the forest. Many orange and yellow leaves had
been peeled away from the treetops, leaving most of the dark branches bare against the cliffside and grey skies.

The mountainside had been boldly hit with the straight-line winds that swept through the valley, and it was no surprise that the forest would have taken the brunt of it. He was rueful as he dumped the excess branches out of the bag back into the trees. It wasn't their fault. The trees were as much victims to the raging storm as the manor had been. He could only wonder how the wildlife was doing, if they were all still hidden in their homes for sanctuary.

The nation could sense it. Even though this wasn't his land, being a natural entity himself allowed him to still feel and be affected by the goings on around him. He had a stronger connection than some of the others, due to his love of everything green and living. Flourishing life was so important to him, because he knew what it was like to go without. To be barren and unyielding.

Right now the world felt heavy to him; cold, wet, and shaken. The sky may be clearer now, but the land was still reeling. Streams were roaring with runoff, like angry blood pulsing through veins. The soil was full and cumbrous with too much water, unable to contain it all with the bedrock below. The mountains were aching, raw and weather-beaten, and the trees groaned in just the minor breeze now afflicting them.

Everything around him seemed fearful to allow a moment of solace.

The blond knelt down, pressing one hand into the soggy grass. He allowed himself a moment to reach out, tendrils of his heart and being reaching across the space around him, across borders and valleys; and he did his best to feel, to try and calm the anxious earth.

*It's all right now.*

He made sure to put every drop of warmth into his thoughts. Pushing the sentiment and power into the soil, he soothed the land like he'd soothed the tiny aloe plant.

*You're safe, and all is well.*

It almost felt as if he could dip his arm into the earth and wrap his fingers around the knot of gnarled tension, and so he pictured himself doing just that. His palm pressed harder into the dirt as he ran his mind's thumb over the knot, straightening the tangled roots as he continued to use his thoughts as a balm.

*I'm here to help. You can let go now.*

The air around him squeezed, squeezed, and *squeezed*. Then suddenly it popped, almost with an audible *ah*, and he could breathe. The mass of pressure fell easily through his grasp like a handful of water.

The Swiss exhaled slowly, the mist condensing from his breath. He was suddenly aware of the goosebumps along his arms and the wet stains soaked into his jeans.

The man retracted his hand and pushed back onto his feet, if a bit shakily. It had been awhile since he'd last reached out like that, down into the crevices of the earth—let alone not in his own territory. He usually didn't bother if he wasn't in his own home, but it felt like the right thing to do at that moment. It felt important. The earth was now calmer beneath his feet, humming with energy, and the nearby undergrowth began stirring.

A high-pitched whistle called from above him and he glanced up to the sky, spotting a red kite gliding overhead.
A thank you.

Switzerland turned around and headed back inside.

...xXx...

Footsteps coming towards him made him look up from his scrubbing.

"Guten Morgen," he called out from around the island, before the figure reached him. It was still technically morning, though noon wasn't too far off now. He returned to mopping up the shards of glass and dirt with his sponge as Germany appeared in the doorway.

"Morgen," the man's deep voice called out, still sounding groggy with sleep.

Switzerland paused and looked up once more. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Bitte," the German said, rubbing his eyes as he leaned against the door frame.

The Swiss stood and took a step over to where he had the kettle roasting on the stove, and began making the man a cup. He glanced over his shoulder as the country stepped into the room, relieved to see he was wearing slippers. Pink ones, at that. "Be mindful of the glass. I haven't finishing getting it all. Cream?"

"Black." Germany just took a seat in one of the stools at the island and thanked him when he handed him his mug. He hummed in satisfaction as he smelled the brew, taking a grateful taste of the steaming liquid. "Danke. How long have you been up?"

"Since nine," he replied, taking a sip from his own cup of coffee. Sweet, sweet caffeine had been his savior earlier after the incident in the yard had him drained. He drained his mug and went to refill it, putting lots of cream and sugar into his own drink.

The blond could hear the German groan behind him. "I didn't mean to sleep so long."

"It's fine, there's still plenty to do." Switzerland took a gulp of hot coffee and knelt down to return to his cleaning. "We need to go and get a new window, otherwise I'll never hear the end of it. Hopefully there's a few hardware stores open. Today's . . ."

"Thursday." Germany supplied. He turned around and gazed through the doorway and out the sliding glass door into the yard. "At least it's stopped raining."

"That it has."

"Though, the greenhouse looks blasted half to hell. I suppose that's just one more thing we'll have to fix."

"It's—wait, what?" Switzerland froze, eyes widening. He whipped his head around and fixed the man with an accusing stare. The German gestured towards the window, taking a sip of his coffee. The Swiss sprang to his feet and dashed towards the door.

He craned his neck to look through the glass to the right. Sure enough, the greenhouse was in ruins. Nearly every single glass panel had been blown out, and even some of the metal and wooden beams had crumpled into the broken mess of greenery, crushing all the rows of pots and troughs. His chest gave a painful throb as his hands flew up to his hair, pushing back his bangs.

"Gah! Fuck!" Fingers digging into his scalp, the blond threw open the sliding door and dashed out
across the patio. He vaguely called back to the German behind him to put down some towels inside, and to do it now, and to hurry the fuck up and help him! He sprang off of the stone and into the yard, heading for the nearest plant to him—white and pink centered geraniums that were de-potted and lying ripped up across the wet grass.

_How the fuck did I miss this?_ Switzerland berated himself, trying to gather up as much of the plant's roots and viable buds as possible. He glanced around frantically for the flower's missing pot, but was just greeted with the similar sight of carnage around him. Large shards of glass and clay laid sprinkled across the grass from the greenhouse to the side of the manor. All that was left standing was the wall with the metal door and part of the back wall. Both sides of the structure had been blown out from a gust that had come down the mountainside; fired out of the clouds like a goddamn cannon blast.

"Get some bowls!" he shouted over his shoulder, making sure to salvage as much of the geranium as he could. _I was just out here! How did I not see you all? Your pain?! "Lots and lots of bowls!"

Germany and Switzerland made quick work to get all of the plants inside the house, setting them in rows on towels the German had laid out on the wooden floor. The ones missing pots and troughs were placed into a plethora of mixing bowls and cups, and even those that looked beyond repair were gently set into a nest of towels by the Swiss. Germany kept trying to get him to slow down, telling him that the plants weren't going anywhere, but eventually gave up and just went along with the other's panic. Soon, the entire open space of the dining and family room was filled with foliage—from the back of the dark leather couch to the outer wall, the dining table to the shelves along the perpendicular wall and angled fireplace.

The Swiss glanced around the yard and rubble for any stragglers, and his heart felt caught in his throat as he spotted a crumpled mess of white, wooly petals smushed into the dirt.

_No._

The country dropped to his knees, hands digging out the hapless flowers as carefully as he could. He twisted around and nearly threw the metal beam the plant was crushed under halfway across the yard in anger. When he turned back he felt his blood run cold, his hands flying up to his mouth.

_No!_

Switzerland didn't quite register that he was wailing for the German until the man crouched next to him, hands gripping his shoulder.

"Breathe, Schweiz," the man said to him, holding him steady. "They're just flowers."

"But they're _not_," he spat, eyes fixated on the dead edelweiss. Their soft petals were smeared with mud, squished and torn, leaves nowhere to be found. "They're not _just_ flowers, Lutz. Th-They're—"

"Okay, okay." Germany dug his fingers into the soil around the plants, working to uncover the blooms while the Swiss could not. He checked over the limp carcasses, gently setting them to the side in a pile. "It's going to be _okay._"

Switzerland picked up one of the flowers, cupping his hands around it and feeling the exact opposite of okay. The German would never understand. He would never understand just how much he cared about the life that was lost here. The life that was meticulously nurtured and raised, and supposed to be lived in comfort and safety, not torn apart in the blink of an eye.

"Look here, now," Germany said, setting aside a stone he'd lifted up. The Swiss slowly managed to
torn his eyes away from the beaten corpse in his palm and looked up.

 Barely as wide as the length of his pinky finger was a small bloom of edelweiss. Aside from being half buried in the dirt, the little flower looked rather unscathed.

 Switzerland gasped, dropping the dead bud and digging his fingers into the dirt beside the German's so fast it made the other man jump. Nimblly feeling around the small clump of roots, the blond cupped his hands and warily lifted the living bloom out of the ground. He anxiously brought it closer for inspection, heart racing as he astutely looked over the uncrushed plant. He swallowed hard as he brushed away some dirt from two small leaves poking up under the petals.

 "See?" Germany grunted, resting back on his heels. "One survived. Alles wird gut."

 "Get me a cup," Switzerland whispered, eyes still locked on the flower in his palm as he cradled it to his chest.

 The tiny edelweiss calmed his fluttering heart. It had outlasted the storm. It had lived.

 Germany stood and returned a few moments later with a small porcelain creamer. The pearly china had delicate, cobalt blue ink paintings of edelweiss across the side of it.

 The Swiss glanced up at the German, raising an eyebrow as the man gave a halfhearted shrug. "I thought it was fitting."

 Switzerland just took the creamer from him and began to fill it with dirt, and then the flower. He cleared his throat as he gently placed the bloom's roots into the dirt, slowly adding pinches of soil around it.

 "I wonder what Austria will say about us using so many of his dishes," the larger country sighed.

 "I don't think he'll be upset about that," the Swiss said, standing with the creamer securely in his hands. The two men walked side by side towards the house, Germany opening and shutting the glass door behind them. "I do think he'll be upset about no longer having a greenhouse."

 "Doesn't he have an indoor botanical garden?" Germany asked. He stepped over to chug what was left of his lukewarm coffee, wincing at the taste.

 Switzerland frowned, looking down at the tiny flower in his hands. "Yeah, but it's in the opposite wing of the palace. He hasn't used it in nearly a century."

 "Why's that?"

 "Too lazy to walk all that way, if I had to guess."

 The German snorted and went to refill his mug with the last of the hot water from the kettle, this time adding some milk and sugar cubes. "Still, it might be our only option right now. I don't see us being able to rebuild that entire greenhouse from scratch in a day."

 "I'll go take a look later," the Swiss said. "Until then, we definitely need to go buy soil and pots. And a window. Probably some paint, too." He shuffled into the kitchen and set the fragile edelweiss creamer beside the teacup of aloe on the bar. He flipped off the quiet radio and tilted his head back, exhaling a heavy sigh. "Let me finish cleaning up the glass in here and we can get going."

 Germany helped him sweep up the remaining glass around the marble tile, and wiped down the
short trail of mud they'd tracked in. Both of them finished their coffees and the German went to fetch some socks while the smaller blond grabbed their keys. It'd be more convenient to take both of the cars so they had enough room to get all the supplies they'd need.

They bundled themselves up in their coats and scarves, and Germany his boots. They spoke about the list of everything that they needed to look for. The Swiss jotted them down in his phone with one hand as he took the tie out of his hair, shaking his hair. He probably looked scruffy and mussed up, but he hardly cared.

Switzerland was feeling better now that he'd saved a small part of the edelweiss flower, and that he was on a mission to help the plants in his care. It felt a little weird leaving the house, now of all times, but it was necessary.

Both countries stepped out the door and made sure to lock it behind them. They made their way across the porch and down the steps, the Swiss heading for the Audi parked a few meters away out front and the German making a right towards the garage. A couple leaves and twigs clung to the hood of the violet car, but otherwise it looked unscratched. He easily brushed them away.

He stopped when he heard the larger man groan and turned to look at him.

A maple tree had fallen on the smaller building's roof.

Switzerland slowly ran a hand through his hair. He looked up into the yellow sky and sighed.

It was going to be a long day.

Chapter End Notes

*Bruder* - Brother
*Svájc* - Switzerland (Hungarian, whoa!)
*Halihó* - Kind of a cute informal way to say 'hello' (Hun again)
*Liechten dear* - a nickname Hungary calls Liechtenstein when they hang out, just an fyi
*Ja* - Yes
*Guten Morgen* - Good morning
*Bitte* - Please
*Danke* - Thanks
*Schweiz* - Switzerland
*Alles wird gut* - Everything will be fine

Red kites are a bird of prey, btw. I wasn't writing about a sentient object whistling at Switzey hoo boy.

Also, I know this chap was mostly from Switzey's POV and that there's lots of cleaning, but I felt it was really important to highlight just how much Switzerland is helping keep the Austrian together. In more ways than just physical.

!~AKA THE CHAPTER WHERE SWITZERLAND GETS EMOTIONAL ABOUT FLOWERS~!
Rough & Woe

Chapter Summary

Austria awakens with little memory of the previous night, and Switzerland comes to a heavy realization.

Chapter Notes

I had a grand time having a mental breakdown about window installation on twitter over this chapter, so there’s that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Austria used to think, perhaps a bit foolhardily in his younger days, that he was entirely and infallibly invulnerable.

Arrows and swords could sting him, water in his lungs could silence him, and the threat of fire could burn him—though, none would give him pause. He saw himself as something other, a shadow of a soul, that could walk through a blazing battlefield untouched to assure victory for his people. Fighting style honed in avoiding as many hits as he could, while fully prepared to take some in lieu of his fellow countrymen who were naturally weaker.

He would think back on his days of fragility with mixed fondness and distaste. Before he could fight, before he could hold his own against fellow nations. Back when he needed all the help he could get. And the only help he could ever get came in a ferocious, blond package.

The rising sun to his blood soaked nights.

It was like a brand new world was being born every morning that he would wake slung over a strong back, being carried to safety. The fact that he was still able to open his eyes, that his heart was still beating, meant the war had been won to him.

He fought on, again and again. Faith in his personal sunlight was all he ever needed, never doubting for a moment that he would wake in the morning.

His afterlife consisted of green eyes and straw-like hair, a quiet voice and sun-kissed cheeks. Thus, he had nothing to fear.

So he waged wars, either bravely or stupidly. He weaved among men and countries larger than him, blocked swords with his hands and cannon fire with his bones; and got up, over and over.

A blessing among his people. A maniac messiah come to martyr on their behalf, inspiring them to fight on.

And he hated it.

War took from him his passion for life. It took, and took, and it hurt, and it never once stopped.
The best, most glorious days back then for him—whenever he wasn't walking on water in his peoples' eyes—were the days he got to spend in the company of his beloved companion. Completely unburdened with the exhilaration of a battle, the time they spent just listening to birdsongs and tall tales. The time they spent pointing out shapes in the clouds and napping in open fields. Hanging in trees, playing in rivers, looping together dandelion chains that could wrap around the world an infinite amount of times in their hearts. Neither of them could ever fully contain the utter strength of the bond the two of them had shared.

Then came the new kinds of battles he would face. Ones set in parlor rooms and banquet halls, in ballrooms and bedrooms. Ones where he was forced, yet again, to put his body on the line for his people. This time in a more intimate sense. It was unnerving at first, and he'd protested thoroughly, but he'd finally consented for the sake of his people. Human trysts were the easy part; easy to distract, to please, and quick to wrap up. It was being forced to open himself up to fellow national beings that terrified him. They were immortal, they would remember. They could feel him more personally than he'd ever let someone before—not even his favorite sunrise. Feel every nook and cranny, every mountain, river, and lake. Everything.

He was passed around to so many so often that he nearly forgot who he belonged to in his own heart. That war was one his sunlight couldn't help him win, not really, nor did he want anyone else to be exposed to his rays. So he fought on, alone, not always in a bad way—it was mostly pleasurable, after all—but he would always return to his beloved. Grateful that he would always be there for him in the morning. His sacrifice was for them, for him, so his sunlight could stay untarnished by the nights, as he was.

However, he wasn't blind to the undertakings and trials his beloved faced. He didn't just put his body out there to protect him, but to ease some of the other's hardships. The Austrian was very aware that his companion struggled harder than most. That he had to sink to many lowly, dirty jobs such as mercenary work just to put bread on the table, and he knew it was even harder looking after two. His blond would always try to care for others even if he could barely take care of himself. That fact had never changed throughout the centuries. The brunet knew nothing was easy in their rural, battle-strife ridden lives; so yes, he did what he could, what he had to, for the both of them. For Vash.

They grew together, molded and shaped each other's borders and hearts. Austria found his desires for beautiful, frivolous things and tied them to the other man. He played with him, played for him—hoping to enchant the other as much as he dazzled him. He fed him and his barren lands, gave him safety within his halls, and they shared an eager warmth at night. The blond forgave him his failings, he fought alongside him, and for him, blade shining as golden as his hair in the sunlight. The two of them together could push back the entire world with their spirit.

Back then they were unbidden and free, not like they were now.

Now, it seemed as if the Austrian was constantly running. He was constantly sprinting after that fluttering, forest-green cape; unable to quite grasp the frayed edges of it.

They'd been turned against one another—not on a battlefield, but in politics. Butting heads over various petty things, one after the other, both facing a fury that they'd never had to before: the other's wrath. Too many times this happened, too many times were harsh words and misery thrown back and forth. Then the chain connecting them began to wilt into disrepair, finally snapping and rotting into the ground.

He could never hope to catch him. His savior, his brother, best friend, lover.
He would never again see his sunrise.

And he thought he would never find solace. He couldn't help himself to feel anything over anyone else. Kind and harsh words alike fell on deaf ears.


No one could call him caring. All agreed on that point which he could never be again. No, not again. He'd fell through the earth once before, and that was enough for him. He had been left exposed, naked and defenseless in the bloody night.

Roderich had had enough of life and love.

...xXx...

Phantom hands wrapped around the tangle of roots, warm and lush. Fingers weaved through them, caressing and caring.

The coil writhed and yearned, lamenting the feeling of something other, something familiar pressing against it.

The knot slipped loose, bright affection and flame filling in all the cracks and crevices.

Sensual sunlight trembled within him, pounding like a drum.

...xXx...

Austria stared at the sheets.

Everything felt false around him. The bed, the air, the world.

He took a deep breath, giving his mind time to pull back to the present and adjust into reality, as opposed to feeling out the warring inconsistencies within himself. His body felt like lead, limbs heavy with sleep and keeping him pinned down. His heart, however, was light—lighter than it had been in weeks. Beating slowly, assuredly.

The brunet took in the sounds and smells around him; the soft cotton of his bedding, the vanilla incense of his bedroom, the chirping of birds outside his window. The pillow he was holding had the strong odor of rain and leaves, and he could smell the musky earth scents clinging to his skin, along with the bite of iron and sweat.

The Austrian turned and stared up at the canopy. His mind was blank for the moment, empty.

He heard a quiet sigh to his left and looked, much to his surprise, to see Liechtenstein sound asleep beside him. The girl's hair was a nest of gold, mussed against the pillowcase. The comforter was pulled tightly up under her chin against the chill in the room.

Hadn't they been in the cellar? When had he been put to bed? And when had the younger country joined him? What time was it even?

Austria felt a gnawing sensation in his gut—the usual dread that followed one of his memory lapses. He groaned and rubbed at his eyes. At least his body felt relatively normal, if a bit drained.

Glancing down at the pillow his arm was wrapped around, he brought it up to his nose and inhaled
deeply. The woodland scents were still present, and there was something else, too. A recognizable, faint musk. The scent of fresh laundry and copper, and a pleasant smell that he constantly craved at all hours of the day, every day.

A light, crisp spice that made his back muscles relax.

Vash.

The Austrian mushed his face into the pillow. Had the Swiss lain with him, as well? Had he really? He whimpered at the thought.

I'm being foolish, the musician thought sadly as he forced himself to pull away from the pillow. He quickly pushed the offending object away from him and sat up. I need to get up and stop acting so ridiculous.

Austria spared a last glance to Liechtenstein beside him. He reached out and shooed away some tangled hair off of her forehead. A combined warmth from her being there and the lingering presence of the Swiss clung to him, and he couldn't bring himself to will it away. Not when it was being so freely given to him.

That particular weightless feeling within him, the glow of tender heat around his heart, comforting, calming, helped hold him steady.

He took the time to stretch out his aching joints, sounding about as old as he actually was, and carefully stood from the edge of the mattress. Taking cautious, calculating steps, the brunet made his way around the foot of the bed towards the window. His room was still quite dark, thankfully so from his velvet drapes, but he thought it best to pull them aside to lighten up the place.

The velvet was soft on his fingers, and the light outside gentle to his gaze. A pleasant, cool yellow light bathed the outside world—almost eerie in the stillness it illuminated. The storm had ended its attack on his home, and it felt like the world around him was passively lapping against his being.

Austria left one end of the drapes open to give him enough light to find his way.

His walk to the bathroom was a slow one. His attempt to bathe even slower.

The man took a significant amount of time to clean himself, letting the hot water beat down on his skin for a long time. It took all of his strength to stand tall in the pouring shower, refusing to lean on the porcelain seat beside him. The water felt heavenly as it burned into his muscles, kneading and massaging them into compliance. Once he could lift his arms to begin properly washing, his skin felt like sand beneath his fingertips, rough and malleable. He pushed and pulled, molding himself back into shape as well as he could.

It was something he'd gotten good at over the years.

He scraped off the dried blood along his waistline—a faint ghosting of more capable hands coming to mind. Those illusory hands feeling up his naval, around his ribs, counting along the tallys threaded up his back. They disappeared as they reached his throat, the hairs at the back of his neck tingling.

The Austrian sighed, steam swirling in front of his face. His shampoo and wash felt cool to the touch, smelling sweet and filling the shower up with the fragrant scents of pomegranates and cream. He took the time to clean himself up, letting the comforting scents soak into him as he started to feel a bit more normal.
Until he got in front of the mirror.

Wiping the condensation off of the surface, his reflection nearly spooked him. Dark circles surrounded his eyes as he stared back at himself, standing out against his pasty skin.

He looked like a frightful wraith.

Motivation to make himself presentable for himself and his guests had him moving around his cupboards and taking out all of his usual routine items. Austria spent a few careful moments rubbing apple cinnamon lotion all over himself, adding it to the plethora of scents already in the room and bringing out a bit more life to his pale-beyond-belief palette. He ran his towel over his wet hair one more time before tossing it into a nearby hamper.

Brushing his teeth took more time than he thought it would, as he had to make sure to get all the blood off of his teeth.

Blow drying his ratty mane took less effort, thankfully, and he swiftly had his locks brushed and styled in minutes. He took a pinch of his aromatic gel and rubbed it between his palms, running his fingers through his hair to help slick it back like he preferred. Even his Mariazell was acting tame and lying smooth—a rarity to be sure.

Austria leaned close to the mirror and spread a small amount of concealer under his eyes, doing his best to hide the dark circles as much as possible. He tilted his chin and spied the small blot of a bruise on his temple and decided to cover that up, too. No use having it standing out and reminding him of the hassle of the other day.

Satisfied that he was now looking more like an actual living being, he turned to the floor mirror standing behind him against the wall and observed himself fully.

A small frowned pulled at the corner of his mouth.

He was thin, much too thin. A kind of thin he would have been envious of a couple hundred years ago. He'd been loosening his corset ties over the years, having gotten complacent with the comforts of modern times. The past year he'd even gone without wearing one at all, deciding maybe it was time he finally retired that particular item of fashion. It was just luck that he wasn't wearing one when he started to get sick—he'd had enough experience throwing up in a corset, having to undo and redo all the laces, that he wasn't eager for a repeat any time soon.

Aside from his figure looking too frail for his own liking, his right arm and down his side looked a bit pinker than usual. If he focused on it, the surface of his skin burned, like he'd been rubbed slightly too raw, but at least the feeling was dull—that was a good sign.

He twisted around to peer at his backside. The cuts along his spine were thin and light red, some already fading beneath the loops of thread. They looked healed enough to be rid of the stitches, which he noted with a nod.

About time, he thought, lifting his hand to run a knuckle over a stitch above his hip. It was one of the more deeper cuts, and was still tender. These are so ghastly.

The Austrian fixed a stray hair and stepped away from the mirror. This was as much as he could manage, but at least he was feeling relatively better. He snatched a silk robe off the back of the door to his bedroom and slid it over his clean skin, humming in satisfaction. His throat rumbled with pain, and he coughed a bit to clear it as he left the room. The hardwood was cool beneath his feet, and the light sifting through the window was much paler than before.
He walked over to a dresser and picked up one of the bottles of cologne presented. Twisting off the cap, he pressed two fingers to the opening and carefully tipped the bottle. He habitually dabbed the sandalwood scent on his neck and collar, and rubbed a drop between his wrists.

Austria took a deep breath as he placed the bottle back in its place, relishing in his menagerie of aromas. He always loved mixing and matching different perfumes to impress and catch those closest to him off guard. That, and he just preferred it. He didn't care what others thought of his fragrant products, as they pleased him enough.

The aristocrat tried humming a bit more, attempting to work out the kinks in his throat. It hurt, but it wouldn't do to be rendered mute. He stepped over to the four post bed, quieting somewhat as he peeked around the drape he'd left open. Liechtenstein was sprawled across the entire mattress, face buried in the mound of pillows and blanket bunched up around her.

The Austrian sat on the edge of the bed, scooting up to brush her hair away from her temple where the white bandage was pressed.

The girl mumbled at the touch, rolling more onto her side as she murmured incoherent words. Austria's throat rumbled in amusement and his brow raised as the small blonde hummed back in response.

"Awake, are we?" he attempted slowly, barely a sound. At least whispering didn't hurt. Liechtenstein just hummed again before turning her head away, and her chest rose and fell deeply. The man just allowed himself a small smile and ran a finger down her cheek. "Schlaf, Kleine."

Austria stood, tying the belt of his robe tighter, and went towards the door. No sense in wasting his efforts on tidying himself up by staying in his room all day. He spied his glasses on the bedside table, and sighed in relief.

I wondered where those were.

He grabbed the spectacles and slid them on his nose, now finally feeling complete.

The Austrian spied his phone beneath them and picked up the device, lighting up the screen.

6:19pm. 14 New Messages. 23 Missed Calls.

Austria blinked at the screen, a shudder running through him. Oh dear.

Deciding to wait until he had at least a cup of coffee in him before even attempting to look at any of the important icons blinking at him, the brunet stuffed his cell into the pocket of his robe and quietly stepped out into the hallway.

He hadn't mean to sleep so late, but considering how the night before had went it didn't surprise him. Though, truthfully, he was having quite a hard time remembering most of the evening. The last thing he could recall was stabbing pain in his stomach and the aching relief at having the Swiss there with him, holding him as he writhed in the darkness.

Austria hesitated at the top of his darkened stairwell, heart fluttering in his chest as soon as his thoughts turned to the blond.

I wonder what he's been up to all day, he thought. Flashes of the previous night with the two of them dancing nervously around each other in the study, he being the coward that he is refusing to even meet the other's green gaze. It still felt unreal to him that Switzerland now knew his true feelings. He swallowed the lump in his throat, clutching the collar of his robe as his pulse began to race. I hope that he'll even speak to me.

And if he wouldn't, well. That was nothing new.
The aristocrat lifted his chin and forced his outward demeanor to reflect his usual etiquette, and walked down the stairs.

...xXx...

Switzerland had limited himself to only two cigarettes, and he regretted it.

He’d had one on the drive into town and one on the way back; he would have had two or three more if he could have managed in that time, but he kept it to two. The Swiss was grateful they had taken different cars, as he really wasn't in the mood for getting a health lecture from the stern German man about his ugly habits—as he rarely indulged in them anyway.

Traveling into the city was a hassle enough; trees and power lines were down everywhere, some roads were flooded, the traffic was impossibly congested as people attempted to get to and from work and their homes.

They had to scour the streets for an open store of any kind, as most were without power and a lot of them had their owners and kind bystanders helping to protect from possible flooding or clearing away debris. It took them nearly two hours to find a store and get what they needed, and nearly an hour to return back to the manor.

The first task they set to was to bag up as many broken pieces from the destroyed greenhouse around back. While Germany moved everything from the cars into the mansion the Swiss went around with a bag—and a pair of gloves that the German had forced upon him—and began picking up glass and clay shards around the lawn. He shouldered some of the heavy wooden and metal beams into a pile against the side of the house, opting to use his right shoulder when his left one burned with sudden pain at the pressure. He supposed the ache from his earlier exertion lifting the tree branch off his sister might have been a little worse than he’d originally thought.

Germany placed the tools and window pieces they’d need to install the new bay window in the kitchen and outside, before grabbing his own trash bags and helping the Swiss. Apart from vacuuming the grass, they managed to get as many scraps as they could. They left the bags tied up outside near the gate and went back to get started on the window.

Even between the both of them, the whole endeavor took several hours. The two were familiar enough with construction and carpentry to get the job done, but having to carefully measure out and cut all of the pieces took longer than they thought it would. Everything had to be just right to fit into the empty space left by the previous window, the glass included, and made sure to get the right materials to make a semi-hexagonal bay window like there was before.

Switzerland especially looked to get some more lavish window panes that would suit the Austrian man's taste and match the rest of the kitchen's aesthetic.

The middle window was a clear pane with golden frosted edges. The two framing side windows were thin picture windows with differently colored glass panels in the same autumn floral motif as the indoor sliding doors. The cut panels were a collection of small mismatched squares and rectangles, with some occasional clear and amber speckled sections thrown in. Both sides had small cranks on the inside, that way the aristocrat could open them up and let in a breeze whenever he wished.

The blond thought it was nice enough, and if the stubborn musician didn't care for the look then he could redo it himself.

He also may or may not have splurged his own money on a tiny separate piece of glass to install
himself in one of the rectangles, showcasing something he thought the Austrian might fancy.

After no small amount of effort—sawing, measuring, sanding, painting, and carefully balancing on ladders—they were finally finished. The new window and bay shelving sat comfortably in its proper spot above the sink, the pale light shining the auburn colors across the kitchen floor.

The Swiss sat on the adjacent counter, cigarette reward in hand, and leaned up against the wall. He hadn't moved since he finished staining the wood a nice, dark cherry, having cranked open the new side panels to help the stain air dry. The wind from outside was gentle and cool, filled with the bite of autumn. He was grateful for the rain having stayed off while they worked, and that it still was.

Germany had immediately moved to handle the fallen tree on top of the garage, and when Switzerland had offered to help he just waved him off and told him to take a break. He assured the other that he could handle moving the small maple himself.

The German's exact words were, "If Amerika can lift a car, I can lift a tree," before he grabbed the ladder and walked off.

Switzerland took a deep drag from his cigarette, the warmth of the smoke filled his lungs and contrasted nicely to the cool air blowing against his skin. The act calmed the shake in his tired muscles. He made sure to turn his head and puff the smoke out of the window, tapping the ashes into the crystal tray in his lap. He stretched out his feet, relieved to be out of his boots for the moment, and rolled his sore shoulder as he took another drag.

Hearing soft footsteps to his left, the blond tilted his head around the cabinet.

Austria was emerging from the hallway in a silk navy and gold trimmed robe, looking freshly washed and alert. His damp chocolate hair was neatly parted and brushed back, even his curl behaving and lying relatively flat. He was standing tall and stepping smoothly across the hardwood floor with his bare feet, the honeyed light from outside catching across his figure.

For the first time that day Switzerland allowed himself to relax.

The Austrian caught his eye as he glided into the kitchen, amethyst irises reflecting vibrantly in the caramel light. The two of them stared almost in surprise at one another, both seeming a little dazed at the sight of the other. The Swiss felt his heart flutter in his throat, barely there thoughts flitting through his mind.

He's finally awake. And he looks . . . good.

Switzerland gazed over the musician's face; over his framed violet eyes, his cream-colored skin shining pale albeit warm in the light. The man's breathing was strong and steady, his silk robe hugging his torso in a flattering matter. The blond bit his lip, and rested his head against the corner of the cabinet.

Really good.

Austria padded slowly over to him, gesturing at the cigarette in his hand. The Swiss instantly felt guilty about his smoking, and his cheeks flushed as he quickly moved to stub out the rest of it.

Long fingers gently grabbed his wrist, and oh his pulse jumped under the other's thumb as the Austrian plucked the cigarette from his grasp.

The blond had to curl his hand into a fist to stop himself from reaching out as the brunet brought the cigarette up to his lips, taking a light drag. Those thin, rosy lips parted slightly, smoke billowing out like steam from a kettle. It took Switzerland a moment to realize that he was just
staring at the man's mouth, and so he snapped his eyes up quickly and hoped that the man hadn't noticed. He wasn't that lucky.

The other's piercing gemstone irises pinned him to the spot, framed by rising smoke like the simmering gaze of a wicked dragon.

Austria took another, deeper drag, closing his eyes and taking his time to appreciate the feel of the hot smoke filling him. It'd been quite some time since he'd last had a cigarette, and it was surprising enough that his beloved was having one in his kitchen. He was still holding onto the blond's wrist with his other hand, and he curled his fingers around him more, enjoying the feel of warm skin beneath his touch.

All his nervousness at seeing the Swiss after his confession, after the pain-filled night he'd endured, it all burned away.

The Austrian turned his head to blow the stream of smoke out the open window, appraising the new fixture instead of those red painted cheeks the blond was sporting. There was a small scrape along one of those cheeks that made him want to reach out and soothe it. The man's yellow hair was tussled and tied back, loose strands framed his face.

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, it was as if the man solely existed just to tempt him.

Tapping the ash in the tray in the other's lap, he waved his hand at the glass and braved his voice, "Nice taste. I quite like the colors." Damn, it still hurts.

Switzerland gasped, and Austria glanced back to see the other grimacing at him. He tensed up, instantly on edge. What had he done this time? Perhaps the Swiss was upset with him about—

"No smoking while you sound like a smoker," the blond hissed. He snatched the cigarette from the aristocrat and stubbed it out. He placed the ashtray on the counter and gave him a stern look.

Austria blinked. He couldn't help the smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth as he composed himself. "Yes, mother," he murmured, giving the other's wrist a squeeze.

Switzerland rolled his eyes and sighed, and the aristocrat could swear there was a smirk playing his lips. The blond softened and twisted his hand around in the other's grasp to hold the Austrian's wrist, and those emeralds traced over him again. Austria was thankful he'd spent the time to make himself look less sickly, and truly, nothing but affection held his heart alight in that moment.

That clingy, calm sensation from earlier when he'd first awoken flowed through him again, pooling in his chest. A shock ran from their conjoined hands, straight to his center, and caused him to flinch. The contact felt familiar, but it was also something he hadn't had the pleasure of associating with in ages. Violet eyes widened and he met the blond's curious stare. Could the Swiss have . . .

Switzerland's gaze fell to their hands. He cleared his throat and asked, "How are you feeling?"

The shock returned through his palm and morphed into a steady stream of electricity sizzling up his arm. Austria held that calloused hand tighter, stepping flush with the counter between the other's legs. He understood the sudden energy within him now, the pulsating thread between the two of them.

The Swiss had connected to him.

It took Austria a minute to realize that he was just standing there, staring like a startled deer. He couldn't help it, though. The last time he'd actually connected with another kindred entity like this,
intimately, spiritually, was . . .

Well, it had been with the strong blond figure before him, centuries ago.

Austria felt shameful for having not recognized the feel of other sooner. It seemed they'd been apart too long, after all.

*Is he really not upset with me?* His mind raced to try and find an explanation for the other reaching out to him. *He's not angry about my feelings for him? He would . . . He would connect himself to me again, after all this time? After all that's happened between us?*

Those viridian eyes furrowed in concern, the blond leaning forward slightly. "Roderich?"

The Austrian broke out of his thoughts and forced himself to take a step back. He pulled his hand out of the other's grasp, looking away at the floor as he rubbed his wrist.

"No, that's not it. *He must have just done so to help me through my attack last night, to help ground me.* Austria sighed quite heavily. *He would never feel the same for me, as I do for him.*

He nodded to himself and began heading for one of the backed stools at the island counter, retreating away from the other country.

"I'm all right," he croaked out, frowning at his sore throat. The brunet slid into a cushioned chair, quieting his voice to an easier whisper. "Safe, I feel safe. Like I'm not about to fall apart any second."

"Good." Switzerland slid off of the counter and emptied the ashtray into the can beneath the sink cupboard, looking pleased with his answer. "That's good."

Austria felt his cellphone vibrate once in his pocket and held back a groan. "Please tell me the coffee survived."

"The coffee survived."

"Merciful heaven."

The blond glanced over his shoulder as he washed out the tray, continuing with, "I don't think Germany and I could have done as much as we did today without it."

The Austrian perked up at that, lacing his fingers together on the marble countertop. "Ludwig is here?"

"Yeah? He carried you upstairs . . ." The Swiss slowed his motions as he dried the crystal in his hands, and the brunet could see the muscles in his neck and shoulders tensing. The other country set the ashtray down and turned to face him, leaning one hand on the sink and the other on his hip. Austria suddenly felt as if a spotlight was on him, and he swallowed.

"How much of last night do you remember?" Switzerland asked, green eyes searching his.

The aristocrat debated on whether or not to lie to the man, but figured it'd be best not to. Not that he could get away with much if he tried.

"I remember the pain of talking, but I don't remember what was said. The rest is a bit of a blur," he said quietly. The Austrian dipped his head, looking at his hands. His left one still burned with electricity. "Not to worry, Switzey. I do believe today will be one of my better days."
Switzerland grimaced at the nickname, and the blond felt himself wishing that the man would continue to call him by his actual name instead. It felt too impersonal now to just go back to calling each other by their formal country names, or variants thereof. Not after all that had happened, not after—after what was said, what was done. And, if he was being honest with himself, he was beginning to . . . enjoy the sound of his name being spoken by the aristocratic man. Like he used to. Even if his beautiful, lilting voice now sounded as if he was gargling pebbles.

A thought popped in the Austrian's head and he decided to cut in before Switzerland could say whatever was on the tip of his tongue. "I have something to confess, though." He peered over the rim of his glasses at the Swiss man, enjoying the other's simultaneous worried and curious look. "I spent the night sleeping next to a beautiful, young blond," Austria said, giving him a sly smirk.

Switzerland softened immediately, asking, "Is she still sleeping?"

"Ja, and she's just fine." Austria waved his hand at him, his smile growing. "But she wasn't who I was referring to."

The Swiss reclined away as if he'd struck him, verdant eyes wide, lips parted. That beautiful blush melted across his cheeks again, and the Austrian was suddenly aware of the chill in the room against his heated skin.

He wanted to run his thumb along the scarlet blooming across the man's nose, laying kisses as he went. Fingers caressing that pink-speckled skin, interlacing through blond tresses and letting them loose from their bun so they could fall around that handsome face like strands of sunlight. He clenched his hands together and his smile fell, heart sinking low in his chest.

Austria nearly wanted to cry.

This whole situation wasn't fair, it just wasn't fair. Why did he have to blurt out his feelings? Why? He'd gone over a millennia without bursting out in confession, despite inwardly coveting the Swiss man deeply, wholeheartedly. He'd chosen to love in silence. In silence he could stay close to the other without the fear of treading over thorns, like he was now. In silence he would assure himself that the other belonged to no one else but him, and him alone. In silence he could swoon and sigh to himself, and happily avoid the raw reality of rejection.

Why did I have to break that silence?

It had been a moment, just an instant of letting his guard down, and now everything was ruined. He couldn't even bring himself to feel the same pleasure over teasing the blond anymore, as now the man knew of his intentions. Despite everything, he couldn't help but berate himself over the mistake.

The Austrian could admit that he had been very relieved that Switzerland had sought him out so soon after the incident, reaching out to him, saying kind words.

"I care about you, too. Not in a friend way."

And yet he just couldn't bring himself to quite believe it yet. It would be better if he could just forget his infatuation with the other man, as it would certainly save him a lot of heartbreak. Once the Swiss left his home, he was positive things would return to the careful coldness between them and he would never hope for anything more than amicable tolerance from the man in the future.

...xXx...

Warm hands covered his and snapped him out of his thoughts. Austria lifted up his gaze.
Switzerland leaned over the island on his elbows, holding his fists in his hands, and he relaxed them at the touch. The tether between them reacted like a linen sheet blowing in the wind; waving and curling up his arm, and no matter his melancholy he couldn't bring himself to pull away right then.

"Does this," the blond started, giving his hands a light squeeze. "Does this help?"

The brunet's eyebrows raised at the question, and he could feel a heat of his own pooling in his cheeks. *He knows I can sense him.*

"Ja," he barely managed. And it was true; the constant buzz of energy flowing through him was definitely dulling the ache in his muscles, giving him the energy enough to even be as awake as he was at that moment.

The Swiss nodded and released him, straightening up. Austria ached at the loss. The smaller country turned around and began filling the kettle with water from the tap. "I'm glad that you're not angry at me for it."

The Austrian sat back slowly in his seat. "Why would I be angry?"

"Well, it's been quite some time since we—ah, since I've done this, so I wasn't sure if it would help or not," Switzerland said, keeping his back to him as the water boiled and he searched through the cupboards. "Or if you could even feel me."

"I can feel you," Austria murmured, clearing his throat of the gravel caught there. His voice was starting to sound a little better as he worked out the kinks. As long as he spoke gently he should sound normal again soon enough.

His phone buzzed again and he frowned, pulling it from his pocket to look at the screen. There were two more messages, but they could wait as he didn't quite feel like dealing with any more problems right then. He set his phone face down on the counter.

Austria decided to broach his earlier topic again instead. "Beautiful work, by the way. With the new window." He really did enjoy the colors and the frosting, and his last bay didn't have cranks to open the sides with.

"Thanks, I hoped it would match your doors," the other said. The Swiss leaned over and tested the stain on the shelving, deeming it dry enough to finally close the windows and cut off the chill from outside. "You should really be thanking Germany, since he paid for everything. Well, most of it."

"Of course," the musician sniffed. "Where is he anyway?"

"Outside. Fixing a tree."

"Oh? Would that have anything to do with the fact that my family room has been transformed into a forest?" he asked, gesturing over his shoulder to the mass of greenery behind him. Of course he'd noticed it before, and the question had been teething at the back of his tongue for the past several minutes.

"Not exactly."

Switzerland looked sheepish, though he couldn't fathom why. The man walked around the island to the bar on his left, and he noticed the menagerie of items placed there. The blond carefully picked up his English Ivy, spider plant, and a photo frame, heading back over to place them in the new alcove over the sink. He walked over to the bar top again and this time he picked up . . . a teacup?
"What is that?" Austria asked, motioning for the man to come closer. "Why—Why is my aloe vera in a teacup?"

"The crash broke its pot," the Swiss muttered, not meeting his gaze as he cradled the tiny plant in his hands. "I grabbed the first thing I could to save it."

The aristocrat noticed the teacup was one a part of his rare, lime green Stig Lindberg sets from the fifties that he'd gotten from Sweden as a birthday gift. It felt a little odd seeing his precious aloe filling the small cup instead of fragrant tea, but the style suited the tiny plant. He couldn't bring himself to be angry with the blond for using his dining ware to save the succulent, as he knew how much plant life meant to the other—and to him, too.

"Also," Switzerland began as he placed the teacup on the shelf, "Your greenhouse is gone."

Austria blinked, and blinked again. He sat there for several beats, urging himself to react properly to such a statement. Surprised, outraged, forlorn. Instead he sighed and turned in his seat to look out the sliding glass door. Indeed, there was his greenhouse—or, well, there it wasn't. Whatever was left of it, which wasn't much. He stood and walked through the threshold into the dining room, stepping around the table as his eyes scanned over the sea of plants at his feet. There were more dining and cooking ware being used, pots and pans and the odd bucket or cup.

*At least this much survived,* Austria thought, cataloguing the flowers in his mind.

His roses were there—the centifolias, Chinese, and rosa muschata were mostly unscathed, though his yellow lady banks only had two bunches. The geraniums were looking ragged and thin, and his carnations only had about half a dozen blooms left. The other plants, his herbs and ferns and small fruit trees, looked a bit torn in places, but otherwise intact. His dwarf peach tree even still had its leaves and its original clay pot.

Switzerland came to stand beside him, and the closeness comforted him.

*He worked so hard to save my flowers.* But something felt off. Where was . . ?

"Sorry about using your dishes," the blond said, distracting him from his search as he waved at the foliage. "I tried to salvage as much as I could, though a lot of it was half buried in the dirt out there. I think Lutz was getting a bit upset at me ordering him around, too."

Austria puffed a small laugh, glancing at the other. "I can imagine so."

"And," the Swiss piped up, lifting his other hand that contained yet another cup. "There's this."

It was a tiny porcelain creamer holding a single, small bloom of edelweiss.

Air caught in his throat, and the Austrian reached out a shaking hand. His fingertips brushed against the wooly petals and down the smooth china, thumb running over the blue ink etchings of similar edelweiss.

Austria had thought that now, perhaps, since his confession was out in the open that he could begin to let go. Let some metaphorical fresh air in and clear away his dusty collection of adoration. However, as he was rooted to the spot looking at the blond man before him—who stood silhouetted in the bizarrely bright evening light radiating in from outside the doorway, wild strands of golden hair highlighting around his head like a halo, holding his *very heart* in his hands—the overwhelming wave of love that rose up within his throat nearly throttled him at the idea of ever letting go of such a creature.
Switzerland wasn't sure how the Austrian would react to his greenhouse being decimated and was pleasantly surprised to see the man take it in stride with his usual aloofness. He was even more nervous about showing him the creamer of edelweiss, however, as the flower was severely important to him. It was regrettable that this was all that had survived.

All at once, arms enveloped him and the Swiss thanked his reflexes for being able to move the edelweiss out of the way in time before the brunet man crashed into him. A blast of cologne hit him sharply as he was pressed against the other's collar; a light, powdery, wooden scent. He could smell something warm, like cinnamon and cream, that perked up his senses.

His heart beat like the firing of a gun, heavy and decisive.

Austria nuzzled into his hair almost like a dog would, his arms wrapped around his chest tightly and he thought he heard the taller man whimper. The Swiss felt a little self-conscious about his appearance, as he surely reeked of sweat, and saw dust, and damp soil; and yet the brunet was still willingly clinging to him, his eagerness nearly knocking the blond off his feet. Switzerland didn't pull away. Instead, he just closed his own arms around the musician's middle, holding the creamer against the other's back as he held him close.

Fingers were in his hair, weaving and tugging tenderly at his scalp. The quiet, husky words, "Tausend dank," were breathed hot against his ear, and a spike of fire shot up his spine. "Vielen dank so viel. So, so viel. Please allow me a moment to just . . ."

The Swiss felt something blooming in his chest. A seed that had been buried there long ago, under the layers and layers of carefully constructed walls and caution.

Switzerland was acutely aware of the firm, heated body pressing flush to him, and of how one side of the man's much too thin silk robe parted to the side to reveal a long, pale bare leg rubbing against his own.

He elected to ignore the inferno raging through him and forced himself to actually enjoy the moment of intimacy between them.

And he did.

Steam began to whistle from the kettle, and they stepped back in each other's arms. Switzerland mourned the loss of their shared warmth.

"Bitte," he managed to finally blurt out as the Austrian pulled back. His hair hit the back of his neck as the man pulled his hands away, the tie in his palm as he murmured an apology for having accidentally loosened it. The Swiss just shook his head and took the tie from him, trading him the creamer.

Austria looked down at the small edelweiss as if it were the most precious thing to behold, hands cupping around the porcelain as carefully as possible.

Switzerland left the aristocrat to get settled at the counter once more as he made them both mugs of coffee, with a bonus cup of chamomile and honey for the brunet. Hopefully, it would help alleviate his sore throat. The other thanked him for both and stirred in his own honey, submerging a small
spoonful into the hot liquid to let the sweet substance dissolve. The flower filled creamer sat in front of him beside his phone, which vibrated loudly on the marble.

The blond took the seat to the Austrian's left, taking a large gulp of his sugar filled coffee. No matter how many servings he drank, the exhaustion wouldn't leave his limbs. It seemed he should have slept longer than he did, or gone a little easier on himself throughout the day. House work was his particular brand of easy, though, and simple chores and repairs were nothing he couldn't handle.

The Swiss decided to attempt some small talk. "There's still a lot to do around here, you know."

"Oh?" Austria hummed, sipping his coffee as he lazily stirred his tea. "Enlighten me."

"I haven't walked through the rest of the house to see if anything else was broken, and neither has Germany. We could do that after you're finished with your tea."

"Sounds reasonable. I'd hate to think all of my windows blew in overnight, or that more of the forest decided to try and get in out of the rain," Austria said, taking a slow drink from his steaming chamomile. Violet eyes closed, and he hummed in satisfaction, murmuring over the rim of his cup as he went to take another sip, "I don't believe my insurance would cover the restoration of all my stained glass."

"It would be very sad to find your rose window shattered across the floor of your Great Hall," Switzerland muttered, chuckling as the Austrian nearly choked on his tea. "Or the wall of lancet windows scattered about in your ballroom."

"What a horrible thing to say!" the aristocrat squawked, his hoarse voice rising several pitches as his eyes grew large. "Perish the thought even. Ooh!"

The Swiss laid a hand on his shoulder to keep him seated. "Settle down and drink your tea. I was only teasing," he said. "They've lasted centuries of storms, and I'm sure this one was no different."

"I should hope so," Austria grumbled into his teacup.

"Is your botanical garden still usable?" Switzerland asked, leaning an arm over the back of the stool as he looked at the other. He reached over to snag the spoon for the honey and added a healthy dollop to his coffee. "I know it hasn't been occupied in awhile."

"I don't see why it wouldn't be." The musician gave him a side glance through his spectacles, grimacing. "Unless all the glass decided to fall in there, too."

"It's seems as if the universe just loves throwing stones at you, huh?"

"Evidently."

The two fell silent for awhile after that. The mood was still odd between them, solemn and soft, and the Swiss was hesitant to break it. Their brief moment of holding one another left him dazed, and he was staring hard at the other man while he got his bearings. Austria was flipping through his cellphone, the corners of his mouth pulled slightly down in distaste as he looked over the screen.

The blond found he didn't really care for that look on the Austrian's face. The musician always looked better with a smile, or with that slight crinkle of laugh lines beside his eyes whenever he was looking at something he found interesting or amusing. Not frowning, or narrowing his eyes. His glare could bore holes through anyone it was aimed at, and this time it was directed at his phone. The Swiss was grateful that the poor device was on the receiving end of the severe look and
Switzerland found himself grimacing in response, and he took a sip of his coffee to distract himself. Austria had been smiling at him just a few moments before, but it had been hollow of joy and quickly died on his lips. The brunet had seemed distracted by something, almost uncomfortable around him, and the Swiss wasn't having any of that.

Maybe . . . Maybe the Austrian was still nervous around him because of what had happened the previous afternoon.

That whispered sentence punched its way to the forefront of his thoughts for what felt like the hundredth time that day, buzzing around the inside of his skull like an entrapped bee.

I love you so much I love you so much I love you so much . . .

The Swiss swallowed the lump in his throat. The Austrian shouldn't be nervous around him—hadn't he cleared that up already? The Swiss had clearly expressed that he wasn't angry at him, or disgusted, as he thought he would be. He'd even, well, he'd even sort of acknowledged his own feelings for the brunet.

But what were his feelings exactly?

At that moment, he wanted very much to wipe the gloom off of the other's face.

"Darling, you're making me blush."

Switzerland jumped as the musician spoke up, having not noticed that the man had set his phone down. He quickly brought his attention back to the present, meeting the other's mauve gaze.

"What?"

"You're staring," Austria said, his voice coming out a little easier after the tea. His eyebrows furrowed and his scowl deepened. "What's troubling you?"

The blond shook his head, running a hand through his messy hair. "Just thinking."

"Thinking."

"Mmhmm." Switzerland turned completely in his chair towards the other, hands on his knees. "Face me."

The Austrian's eyes widened as he turned slowly to face the other country, leaning against the countertop. "What is it?" he asked cautiously.

But the Swiss was too busy analyzing all of his facial features again, logging them into his mind. The thick, black lashes framing those amethyst irises like strokes of ink. The crow's feet at the corner of his eyes, the only signs of wear on his young face. The thin, manicured eyebrows like stripes of judgement. The straight, noble nose, of which he always held high with pride. Well-defined cheek bones, sharp, his profile cutting. Green eyes slid back down to the man's mouth, tracing his rosy lips, over the signature beauty mark below his bottom lip, down to his chin.

Switzerland tried to imagine himself kissing that spot, those flush lips. Just leaning forward and doing it, if he could ever bring himself to. How warm and soft the other's lips would be—because they were warm and soft, he knew, from the musician showering his cheeks and neck with kisses the past few days. The fact that he'd even allowed such a thing to happen between them should have been clue enough for the brunet to realize that he wouldn't be upset with him.
And it should have been a clue to himself, to realize the blossoming ache in his heart. As if he was finally stretching a muscle he hadn't used in a long time. It wasn't like he hadn't imagined himself simply kissing the brunet before. He had that time in the bath a week ago, quite vividly . . . Another sign, then.

His thoughts roamed to what it would be like to be intimate with him. They'd given each other cheek kisses throughout their childhood, and more recently again with the Austrian, so it wouldn't be a big deal. Or would it? The blond thought back to the kiss he'd received on the cheek the other day and how it absolutely made him feel anything but platonic. The same went with his lewd daydream in the bath.

The Swiss felt his cheeks heat up at the thought. His gaze slowly took in the sight of the other man, awake, alive. From his no longer frowning mouth—good, this suits him better—up to his cheeks, which were tinted pink now.

Switzerland blinked in surprise and he looked up to meet Austria's plum irises, which were as wide as an owl's. Why does he look so nervous? he thought, concerned, and he asked, "Why are you blushing?"

The Austrian cleared his throat a small bit, his voice deathly quiet. "Because you look like you want to kiss me."

The blond's cheeks continued to burn especially hot at that and he dropped his gaze. He reached out for the other's hand as a distraction, slightly hurt that the musician almost flinched away from him when he did so.

He . . . He would never want to hurt the brunet with something like this, not intentionally. Austria had to know that, right? He was so confused, and he had no idea what could he do to make him understand.

God, I'm so glad he's okay.

The Swiss turned the man's slender hand over in his hold, brushing his finger tips along those delicate fingers. Perfect for playing the piano, or violin, or with fragile heart strings. He brought the hand up to brush a light kiss over the knuckles, the skin smooth beneath his lips, trying his best to express the torrent of conflicting emotions inside of him.

Austria let out a shaky breath. "Vash," he gasped, "What are you doing?"

"I don't know," Switzerland murmured, unable to help the cracking in his voice. "I'm so happy that you're awake, and I'm just . . ." He couldn't meet the other's eye, instead looking torn at the arm stretched out towards him. He pressed the musician's palm to his chest, willing him to feel exactly how hard his heart was beating—it felt like it was about to rocket out of his body.

The rope of energy between them flared up and waved about wildly, blazing, almost tangible inside of them.

Despite his efforts, Austria just dipped his head and tried to pull his hand away. "It's all right," he muttered, "You don't have to baby me."

Switzerland jolted out of his haze, and snapped his eyes up. The aristocrat was looking positively crushed, refusing to meet his stare as he looked pointedly at the counter. The blond's mind tripped over itself as he panicked, gripping that lithe hand even tighter to his chest.

What am I doing? he scolded himself. Could he possibly just be mixing up his familial instinct
with, with the *lust* he'd felt the other day? Because it was easy enough for his past self to assert itself into the protective role over the Austrian, as he had been for a great portion of his long life. And he wasn't blind to the fact that he didn't exactly *release* his libido as often as he probably should—almost never really. Could he just be warping the brunet's constant affection for his own needs, having starved himself of pleasing caresses for so long?

Switzerland felt the heat from the hand against his chest seep into him, and saw the glossy eyed look of the other man. The scowl was now back on that fine face, worse than before. His heart nearly gave out at the sight.

*No. This isn't that.*

The blond tried to send as much assurance as he could through the line connecting them, bringing that hand up to kiss the palm this time. *I'm not confusing anything.* Austria jerked back in his seat, whipping around to stare at him in disbelief. *I just don't know what to do about it.*

Switzerland was immediately very tired. He forced himself to keep his gaze level and serious, wanting the Austrian to understand him. If only he were braver in matters of the heart, or more experienced, maybe then the man wouldn't look at him with such *disdain.*

The aristocrat's lip curled, and he snatched his hand back with such ferocity that the Swiss nearly fell forward out of his seat.

"Don't toy with me," he growled, his rough voice sounding deeper with ire. "Like you *know* my thoughts."

Switzerland cringed, nerves spiking as he sat up. He found he was unable to respond.

Had he been wrong? Did the Austrian not care for him in *that* way? Romantically? Had he misunderstood everything? Did the man only love him in a familial, brotherly matter? Was he revolted at the thought of being intimate with the Swiss?

Ice seeped through his veins at the thought that he may have just ruined the rebuilding of their relationship.

Switzerland leaned forward imploringly, grabbing the man's shoulder and trying to send another pulse of energy. It drained him more, as if all the caffeine he'd drank had just evaporated, but he couldn't stop, not now. He had to know.

"Don't pull away from me," he whispered, breathing heavy with exertion and panic. "Please."

He could feel the muscles tense beneath his hand, and Austria scrutinized him with that harsh glare of his. *Great.* The blond forced himself to look as sincere as possible, trying to keep the man in his seat.

The Austrian must have seen something on his face because he calmed slightly, looking as if a shadow had passed over him. His anger faded to a more crestfallen look, and he removed Switzerland's hand from his shoulder. Tempestuous lavender eyes stared at the floor as he moved to stand between their chairs, getting up to leave.

"Don't tempt me when you don't mean it," Austria hissed quietly, but there was no malice in his tone. Just defeat.

Switzerland stuck out his leg across the other stool, trapping the man between him and the island. He could begin to feel irritation nipping at him, and he wanted to scream in frustration. Why did
everything always have to be a struggle between them?

"Sit. We're going to talk." Two could play the hard game. Especially now that the good-natured mood was utterly ruined between them, and the kitchen air was thick with tension.

"So childish!" Austria shot a glare at him again. *That's twice now.*

"One could say the same about you!" Switzerland bit out, grinding his teeth. Couldn't he see he was trying?!

Austria huffed and turned back to his seat, moving to slide across it and escape out the other side. Switzerland caught hold of his arm, moving fast enough to cause his left shoulder to scream with strain at the too-fast movement. A gasp escaped him before he could help it, and he switched hands quickly, rolling back his shoulder to try and ease the burning.

"No," he spat out, giving the Austrian a glare of his own—even if it was more out of pain than full blown anger. "You do *not* get to ghost me."

The brunet stared at him, looking equal parts appalled and exasperated. He sat back down in his seat, opening his mouth to say something, but the Swiss cut him off.

"You don't get to pretend that nothing's happened," he said, the edge to his voice lessening somewhat although his resolve did not; nor did his grip on the other's arm. "Not now. Not after . . . After what you've done."

Heavy stillness fell in the room. The two men stared at each other, a contest of wills. Switzerland wanted to choke on the thick air around them, the pit of his stomach churning with unease. He was suddenly very aware that he hadn't eaten all day. Austria was just looking at him, his expression one bordering on horrified.

No, no, this isn't how I wanted this to go, the Swiss dreaded.

The brunet shook his head minutely, blinking several times with incredulity. His voice came out harsh and thick with the threat of tears, amethyst eyes matching the sound.

"Do you want an *apology?" Austria scoffed, shaking his head again. He yanked out of the blond's touch, and the Swiss used his now free hand to grab at his throbbing shoulder. "Do you want me to apologize for what I said? For me to take back my feelings?"

Fury and hurt were now rolling off the Austrian in waves. "Do I upset you *that much?!" he cried.

"Nein! Du bist so—!" Switzerland leaned forward, racking his brain for something to say. *Anything.* Their connection wavered, darkening between them. "I'm trying to tell you that, that—"

"That what?" Austria barked at him, twisting out of the other side of his seat so fast that his robe caught on his stool. The smooth material parted to reveal his leg once again, long and pale from the top of his hip down. The irate aristocrat was too preoccupied to care, though, gesturing wildly as he paced a few steps to slam shut the sliding glass door to the kitchen, closing them off from the outside world. "That you want a fight? Well, you have it!"

The Swiss jumped to his feet, wobbling somewhat, and he had to steady himself on the counter. A mix of annoyance and desperation bubbled up inside him and he took a shaky step forward, his stomach sloshing uncomfortably. His muscles were nearly ready to give out.

"I don't want to fight you," he said breathlessly.
"It's too late for that, Vash." His name was spat like a curse in his face. "Why don't you just say what you really mean? That I repulse you."

The Swiss shook his head, voice weak now. "Nein." He tried taking another step, but his vision began to sway and swim. *What the . . . ?*

Austria hardly noticed. His torn voice rose to full volume as he snapped at him, waving his hand in displeasure. "Clearly that's a lie. If I bother you so then you can leave!"

"Nein." Switzerland covered his mouth, heart beating rapidly. It was as if the Austrian had stolen his breath, his heart, all his energy. The tether connecting them wavered like an ocean swell, fat and dangerously close to bursting. *Not again.*

"Is that all you have to say? 'Nein'?"

"No!"

The image of the petulant musician rippled like a stone hitting the surface of a lake. He thought he saw a look of worry pass over the Austrian's features, but the Swiss moved his other hand erratically, still covering his mouth. He was too desperate, too upset, too bloody *tired of this bullshit* to let this drop.

"No, I mean, of course I'm not disgusted with you! A-Are you daft or something?!"

"Vash—"

"No! I told you last night and I-I'll say it again! *Ich hasse dich nicht!* Not even close!" He took another step, but abruptly found himself staring at his feet to try and stop the world from spinning. "Fuck, I mean, *fuck!*"

"Vash, what is—"

The blond didn't hear the rest of whatever the man said as he made a mad dash for the sink and retched.

...xXx...

Austria watched the man before him stumble his way to the sink, tripping over his feet like a drunkard. Anger no longer held the reigns on him, it hadn't for the last bit of their argument. He'd seen how the man's palette blanched, the sweat that appeared at his brow as he held a warning hand over his mouth, fighting to shout over it.

He was at the other's side as soon as he heard him vomiting, standing behind him and lacing his fingers through yellow hair yet again, this time to hold it back from his face. The Swiss clutched the edge of the sink, knuckles white as he emptied the contents of his stomach—which only looked to be coffee, though the dark color nearly had the Austrian terrified that it was something else.

Austria could see the toll all the hard work and many sleepless nights had taken on the other man. The bags under his emerald eyes, the droop in his eyelids and posture, the pain the other had exhibited at an apparently injured shoulder. Yet the country had been constantly supplying him with vitality enough to try and help steady *him.*

Selfish. He'd been *so selfish* when the blond was being nothing but *selfless* and caring. Like always.
The Austrian felt guilt gnaw his heart. He tightly knotted the man's fair hair in a fist and rubbed soothing circles across his back as Switzerland gagged and gasped.

"Shh, there, there," he murmured. "That's it, let it all out."

The Swiss groaned, his legs shaking like they might buckle beneath him. The aristocrat leaned forward against him to hold him steady and turned on the tap, washing the sick away down the drain. His trembling ward wiped at his mouth, washing off the back of his hand before cupping both of his hands under the stream and taking a tentative drink of water.

*Lord, let an anvil drop on my head to end my stupidity,* the brunet thought in self-resentment. *I've went and made a mess of things.*

Switzerland stood there unsteadily for a few moments, breathing hard and leaning his arms on the edge of the sink as he turned off the tap. Austria loosened his hold on his hair, petting it down carefully to keep it tucked behind his ears. Even now he felt the sullen spirit of the country writhing around him, and it made him want to cower in shame.

"Cut off the connection," he urged gently, patting the man's back. "You've used up too much energy."

That blond head just shook back and forth, and a terribly frail voice answered him. "You need it."

Austria bit back a snappy retort, irritated at the other's stubbornness. "You're making yourself sick, just—"

"But you need it!" the Swiss wailed, startling the brunet with his ferocity. The Austrian caught sight of tears streaming down his pallid cheeks as he leaned heavily on the counter. "You need it more than I do! Y-You were so close last night, so close to . . ."

"So close to what?" He knew the answer, despite the question. He knew. And yet, the quietness of the other man's answer still felt like a slap to the face.

"You were so close to leaving me."

Austria felt his breath catch, and he bit back another retort—a cruel, *Like you left me?*

This was different, and they both knew it. He was starting to regret even more that he had no recollection of the night before, not that there was anything to do about it. It wasn't like he could force himself to remember.

Austria hadn't meant for their evening to turn out this way. In fact, he would have much rather the opposite had happened—that the two of them had chatted away about nothing, had walked the halls of his home in companionship, and maybe even prepared dinner together. He definitely wouldn't have guessed that the Swiss would just go ahead and, and *kiss* him like that. The musician felt like the soft imprints of his lips were seared into the skin of his hand, the deep thumping of the other's heart beneath his palm resonating with his own.

Though, the other would never, surely, he would never be acting out like that for the same reasons the aristocrat would. His words had only confirmed it to him—that he was simply glad that the Austrian had survived the night, relieved that he was all right. While the sentiment was very much welcome, it wasn't when it was presented as the blond's actions.

Undoubtedly, he had been mocking him. At least, that's what he'd thought.
Switzerland slumped, his strength finally giving out. Austria wrapped an arm around him to hold him steady against the counter, meeting the other's gaze in the reflection of them in the bay window. It was now dusk outside, and the pair shone softly in the dim kitchen ambience on the glass. The brunet straightened the other up, pressed him to his chest, and he reached up a thumb to wipe away the still falling tears off of the man's cheeks.

The Austrian forced himself to settle down, to put away his mistrust. It was obvious to him now that he must have missed something, and he'd be damned if he wasn't mentally kicking himself over the utter pleading in the Swiss' rich green eyes.

"Please don't ever do that again," Switzerland croaked, leaning into his embrace.

"Okay, okay," the aristocrat agreed easily, anything to placate the man in his arms. When he saw the dark look the other was shooting at him he faltered in his fake bravado, sobering. He sniffed, brushed away another tear as it budded on those thick lashes and he murmured, "You have my word."

"I'm going to hold you to that," the blond said, meeting his gaze in their reflection again. The tether of energy finally retreated from the musician, and he could no longer feel any life force but his own.

Austria committed to memory the sight of them standing together. Switzerland fit perfectly in the crook of his arms, pressed back against his chest as he tenderly stroked his round cheek. The aristocrat composed himself, and allowed their closeness to overshadow any lingering animosity he may feel.

He leaned his cheek against amber hair, staring over the temporary portrait of them. "Look at us both. Sounding like we've swallowed sandpaper."

"At least we match now," the Swiss chuckled, mirthless. He put a bit more weight back on his own feet, but stayed where he was.

The Austrian pushed one side of the other's blond hair out from behind an ear, framing his face. "Ah yes, we both do look like we've been ran ragged."

"You don't look ragged. You look good."

"Darling, you should see me without my makeup."

"You're wearing makeup?"

Austria actually laughed at that, hoarse but genuine. He tilted his head to hide his laughter in soft yellow hair, wanting to press his lips to the man's temple. He held back, his eyes grazing over the other man and the multi-colored windows.

"Let's start over, shall we?" he whispered, wishing it were that easy. "Just forget any of this ever happened."

"No." The blond laid an arm on the one he had wrapped around his waist, giving a squeeze. "We're stuck with how we are."

"Ever the realist," the Austrian chided quietly, his attention caught on one of the window pieces. On the right side window, the strip of glass along the right length of the frame had more than just color to it; it had a picture. A spindly, dark brown branch mottled with autumn leaves stood vertical up the height of the rectangular section. Directly in the center, small and portrayed holding onto the
branch with back wiry feet while peering through the leaves, was a vibrant, red-breasted robin.

Switzerland caught his look of awe, of reverence, and gave his arm another squeeze. "One of us has to be."

Chapter End Notes

_Schlaf, Kleine_ - Sleep, little one  
_Amerika_ - THE UNITED STATES OF BENCHPRESSING A BENTLEY  
_Ja_ - Yes  
_Tausend dank_ - A thousand thank you's  
_Vielen dank so viel. So, so viel_ - Thank you so much. So, so much  
_Bitte_ - You're welcome  
_Nein! Du bist so—!_ - No! You are so—!  
_Nein_ - No  
_Ich hasse dich nicht_ - I don't hate you

Don't smoke, kiddies! It's definitely bad for you~ \(\text{owo})/  

Holy hell this chapter hit over 12k... It didn't go in the direction I'd originally planned, but _boy-oh_ did I have fun with this one. And I got to write from Austria's POV again! Omg! Welcome back, you unreliable narrator, you~  

Part of Austria's inner monologue is based on the quote "I choose to love you in silence, because in silence I find no rejection, and in silence no one owns you but me." by Jalaluddin Rumi, mostly because I adore it. Major props to him for putting the feelings into words when I could not!
Delirous & Devotion

Chapter Summary

Switzerland gets to the bottom of things (mostly Austria's heart, and his own), Liechtenstein steps up, and Austria is trying his best to return to normalcy.

Chapter Notes

Heyyy, everyone, I would like to point out that I made a playlist for this fic, and you can listen to it while you read here!

Kicking off with a re-confession! Sorry this one took a bit longer than usual to come out! I'm not reverting back to my old hiatus ways, I swear. The first section of this chapter was just giving me a helluva lot of trouble.

Oh, btw, thanks for everyone just sort of accepting the supernatural aspects of this story - the connecting energies, being able to feel nature, sort of thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A dim figure passed in front of the window, startling them both.

The two men parted from each other as soon as they heard soft footsteps outside of the kitchen, and the glass door to the yard slid open. Austria went to put some space between them, but stopped when the Swiss leaned heavily on the counter again, groaning like he was about to vomit once more. The brunet stayed near the man, just in case, holding his shoulders steady.

"Are you going to be sick again?" he asked quietly.

"Ugh," Switzerland moaned, keeping his head down. "Maybe."

Voices could be heard on the other side of the stained glass wall, deep and gruff, light and soft. Before the Austrian could say anything more, the door slid open to reveal Germany and Liechtenstein standing in the threshold. The new arrivals took in the sight of their host pressed behind the blond, looking as if he were bending him over onto the countertop.

"Austria! You're awake—Are . . . we interrupting?" Germany spoke, almost reluctantly, flipping on the lights to brighten up the kitchen.

Austria shot the taller blond a half-hearted glare and Switzerland groaned again, a mixture of queasiness and embarrassment. The brunet just turned back to him, his expression softening as he patted his back gently.

Liechtenstein took a few cautious steps towards them, her jade eyes wide with worry. "Are you all right, big brother?"

"I'm fine," the Switzerland wheezed, keeping his eyes shut.
"He's exhausted himself to the point of illness," Austria announced. He pulled the Swiss upright again, this time wrapping an arm around the other's waist to lead him past the others. "There's tea and coffee, help yourselves. I'm going to make sure this one lies down," he called over his shoulder to them. Once they were through the dining room and out into the hall, he pressed the blond a little closer, lowering his voice to chide him fondly, "Silly man."

Switzerland wrapped an arm around the musician's waist, entirely compliant as the taller man lead him upstairs to the master bedroom. Upon arrival, the Austrian guided him into the private bathroom, leaving him to sit on the edge of the half-bath while he searched the cupboards above his sink for some anti-nausea pills. He handed the blond two tablets and a paper cup of water.

"I thought you didn't trust medicine," the Swiss mumbled, taking the pills carefully.

Austria crossed his arms and leaned against the shower door. "Even I can admit that some of it helps."

"It's supposed to."

"Is it supposed to taste so awful, though? They give children's medicine flavors, yet they leave the adults to swallow this—this rubbish."

Switzerland nearly choked on his mouthful of water snorting back a laugh. He raised an eyebrow at the other man, unable to keep the smirk off his tired face. "You're serious? You don't like medicine because it tastes bad?"

The aristocrat sniffed, lifting his chin as he rolled his eyes. "If it doesn't taste pleasant, then it's not worth anyone's time."

"I cannot believe you sometimes," the Swiss said, finishing his water. He glanced around for somewhere to set his cup, and Austria just stepped forward to take it from him. His gaze caught on the other's hip, which was still exposed down to his ankle. A bit of heat filled his cheeks as the brunet caught his stare, clearing his throat self-consciously as he covered himself up with his robe.

"Oh dear, perhaps I should go get dressed." The Austrian set the cup down on his sink and made for the door, pausing to give the blond a once over. "Do you still need me here?"

The Swiss slowly lowered himself to the floor, leaning up against the side of the bath. His stomach had thankfully calmed down enough so he wasn't fearfully on the verge of puking again, though he didn't want to chance it until his head stopped swimming. He wanted a moment alone to process everything that had transpired over the last hour, but he also had to ask the dark-haired man something before he left him.

Waving his hand, he beckoned the other closer.

Austria dutifully walked over and knelt beside him. "Don't sit on the floor, idiot," the Swiss huffed. He plucked up to try to stop him, holding out his hands to push him away. "You just took a shower."

"Too late," Austria grunted and plopped right next to him on the plush bath rug in defiance. "I have joined you."

The aristocrat tucked some of the blond's hair away from his face, his violet eyes shining at him, attentive and warm. Miles away from their earlier piercing scorn. For the moment, Switzerland forgot what he wanted to say.
"I'll stay a bit longer," the musician murmured. The Austrian turned and leaned against the tub with him, lacing an arm around his waist once more to pull him close. The smaller man leaned his head on the other's shoulder, the brunet laying his cheek atop his hair. Reminiscent of their closeness in front of the window, if more relaxed, and with less threat of vomiting.

There the two of them sat for quite some time. Switzerland kept his eyes closed, focused on controlling his breathing. The aristocrat sat in silence for awhile, before turning to sigh into yellow hair. The blond felt a thumb rub gentle circles into his side, almost squirming from the ticklish touches, but allowed the simple act nonetheless.

The marble tile shone white and grey underneath the soft bathroom light when he opened his eyes again, and the Swiss stretched his legs out beside the Austrian's. The soreness in his muscles caused him to shudder, and Switzerland straightened his back until the vertebra popped and he slumped into the other man's side. Despite the hardness of the floor and the ache in his limbs, he felt more comfortable sitting next to the other man than he had all day. He couldn't remember the last time they sat so easily together.

The stillness after the storm.

The blond spied the Austrian's other hand in his lap and reached out, taking it in his own for the second time. Hopefully with better results.

He felt Austria turn his cheek to watch him as he soothed the man's elegant hand in his hold, feeling along his long, slim fingers to his slender wrist. The Swiss held his hand as he felt the leftover shocks of exhaustion and pain the Austrian had shared with him through their connection roll across his skin. What was once a stabbing, gnawing pain all over and made him viciously ill, was now only a dull ache as he came back into himself.

Switzerland was honestly amazed that the brunet had put up with such torture for as long as he had, and acted as if nothing were bothering him.

"This is the pain that you're feeling?" he couldn't help but ask. The Austrian stayed silent, answering him only by squeezing his hand. The Swiss cleared his throat of the thickness there, feeling rueful at his past obliviousness. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could do more."

"Don't," Austria hissed quietly, squeezing his hand again. His voice was like stone grating on stone. "Don't do that."

"I'm sorry." God, he couldn't take even a full _breath_!

"Don't be," the brunet warned. The arm around his waist pulled him closer until they were flush, hip to hip, thigh to thigh. "Please. Just don't."

Nodding slightly, the Swiss ate up the rest of his guilt. "Okay."

Switzerland should have known the man would want to chastise him for apologizing, but _really_. He couldn't help it. He wished he could take all of the Austrian's pain away, and then some. Running a finger along the musician's pale wrist, his eye caught on the fading red lines around said wrist, and Switzerland choked down the residual anger for how the man had received the marks.

Instead of continuing his cynical thoughts or words, he said, "Are you really wearing makeup?"

Austria lifted his cheek off him and sat up. His tone was no longer cold as he said, "I guess I
missed a few spots." He flexed his wrist for emphasis.

Switzerland turned to look at the man's face, startled by his closeness for a split second. Their faces were only a few inches apart. He felt the thumb rubbing his side, and he held onto the musician's hand with one of his as he reached up to brush along the other's cheek. Austria shied from him before going still, letting out a breath as he kept those amethyst eyes cast down at their joined hands.

The Swiss let his gaze rake over the man's skin. The bruises from the other day, the ones at the corners of that thin mouth, were gone. Including the slim cut his attacker had dug across his throat, the dark circles under his eyes, and the newer bruise he'd spotted on the man's temple the night before. He grimaced, and ran his finger across the Austrian's smooth skin.

"Did these heal already?" the blond asked, a tad stern as his fingertips traced where he remembered the knife cut to be. His green gaze narrowed as Austria glanced to him. "Or did you just cover them up?"

"Would you believe me if I said yes?" the Austrian asked, raising an eyebrow.

Switzerland pressed his index finger to the man's temple, causing him to wince.

Austria sighed, a small smirk playing his lips as he gave in. "I may have covered them. Though, the ones around my mouth have faded away."

"And how did you get this one?" The blond tapped his temple again, lighter than before. Even though he couldn't see the bruise, he still remembered it clearly.

"I'll tell you later." The aristocrat leaned out of his touch and dropped his gaze to their hands like before, closing his eyes.

Switzerland wanted to argue, to demand he tell him now—had he gotten it the night before, during the storm, or his thrashing—but he thought better of it. They didn't need any more arguments that night. He needed answers, to a lot of things, however, and he wasn't going to let the man go until he got them.

Or, until he got one.

Austria's hand was warm on his hip, thumb massaging back and forth.

_I need to know_, Switzerland thought. He lowered his left hand to cover the one on his hip, stopping the anxious movements. _I need to know exactly what he wants._

"Roderich," he started slowly. The man kept his eyes closed, but nodded in response, assuring him he had his attention. His heart beat heavily in his chest, making his breath stutter with nervousness. _Why is this difficult? Why is it so hard to talk to him like normal? Why won't he just say how he feels?_ Behind his thoughts reverberated a pungent echo, and he swallowed his heart. _Why can't I?_

The Swiss planted his mental feet and pushed forward, finally asking, "What do you mean when you say you love me?"

Austria blinked his eyes open, brow furrowing. He looked at him; those irises, open to him just seconds before, were now stormy and guarded.

"What are you getting at?" the brunet asked, sitting up a little straighter.
"I just—" Switzerland grimaced at his inability to speak his thoughts plainly, which was part of the reason their argument had escalated in the first place. His gaze traveled over the tile flooring, searching. As if the words were written in the marbling. "I want to know what you mean. How you mean."

The Austrian hesitated. He pulled his arm back from him and kneeled again, making to stand. Panic shot through him, from his ears to his toes. The Swiss caught his sleeve, hand tightening on the other's, worried he would leave without answering him. He had to know. If he didn't know exactly what the man wanted from him, they would just continue to have senseless fights, and he may even insult him without knowing. Again.

Austria patted his hand, urging him upwards. The blond was thankful for his hold on the other; his head was still spinning, not nearly as bad as before, but enough to make him unsteady. He kept clinging to the musician's silken robe, keeping his eyes locked together with violet irises.

The aristocrat squared his shoulders, a sincere look crossing his face. He took both of Switzerland's hands into his own then, stepping closer until they were only an inch apart.

"I mean exactly that," Austria began, voice even huskier from the harsh night and thick emotion. "Vash, I love you."

Switzerland wobbled on his feet. His insides melted; dripping right off his bones like a cut of lamb.

This time the confession was directed at him, directly. Full-force. He felt weak under the weight of those words, weaker than all of his energy being sapped from him, weaker than he'd ever felt in his entire life.

Fuck.

"There's no sense hiding it now," he heard the Austrian continue as the man held his ground in front of him. "Not anymore."

The blond tipped forward into the aristocrat's chest, wrapping his arms around the other's middle. Switzerland burrowed his face under the man's chin, inhaling his cologne with shuddered breaths.

Oh, wow, his heart was like a rabbit's foot—terrified, excited, thump, thump, thump—kicking against his breastbone.

"But how?" the Swiss croaked, his knees shaking.

Hot air washed over his scalp as Austria exhaled, holding him back. "How?"

"How do you love me?"

"Quietly." The aristocrat tightened their embrace, murmuring into his hair, "Profoundly."

Switzerland couldn't help the whine escaping him, pulling back just far enough to stare up at the taller man. He agonized at the tenderness that met his gaze, and he faltered for a moment to recall what words were.

"I mean—ugh—What kind of love?" The Swiss took a deeper breath, steadying himself and his meaning. "Is it like a friendship love? Like brotherly love? Like—" he gulped, throat suddenly dry, ". . . A lover?"

Violet eyes widened with comprehension, and the Austrian gasped airily with an, "Oh."
Switzerland grimaced. Whether it was from the difficulty of the conversation or the blurring of his
gaze, he couldn't admit either way.

Austria looked at the spot just above the blond's left shoulder, thinking carefully. "All of the
above." Purple irises flicked back to meet his. He saw that the aristocrat was trying his best to act
confident, even though he could feel a pronounced tremor under the man's grip. "And I will accept
any of those in return from you, or none at all. You can even punch me right now, if you want.
Whichever you feel."

"Punch you?" The Swiss asked, sucking in a breath.

I can't even bring myself to blink, let alone
throw a punch!

The brunet nodded, looking the most sure about this one thing. "Well, yes."

Switzerland puffed out a ragged laugh that sounded more like a bit off sob. "Rod, no."

"You don't have to do anything, just . . ." Austria rolled his eyes, scoffing at the ceiling. He shook
his head and took a step backwards out of their embrace, only holding the Swiss' hands to help him
stay standing. "Don't drive me away again," he said softly, inclining his head. "Even after you
punch me."

"I'm not going to punch you," the blond said, gripping the hands in his tighter. "You act like I can't
—" he inhaled shakily again, "Like I can't handle this."

"Handle it?" the Austrian raised an eyebrow, and the Swiss got the sense he was attempting to be
cavalier, but the heavy pink splashed across his cheeks gave away the aristocrat's bashfulness. "My
love for you is not your problem, it's mine."

"It's not a problem, though," Switzerland murmured, glancing down at the marble under their feet.
"Not at all."

"Do you mean that?"

"What?" The Swiss lifted his eyes as the other stepped closer to him again. He frowned, confusion
seeping into him as he met amethyst eyes. "Yes, of course I do."

*How thick can he be? Doesn't he see that I'm—*

His thoughts stumbled over themselves as realization kicked down the doorway to the forefront of
his mind.

*He's not being dense. Switzerland's brain was peeling itself apart. He's scared.*

It felt like his heart dropped through his stomach, and he lurched into the other man for support.
He really felt the trembling beneath his touch then as he rested his palms on Austria's silk clad
chest.

*So fucking scared.*

"Show me, then." The Austrian brought his hands up to caress the sides of the blond's face, gazing
into him intensely. "Show me that you mean it."

*I can't believe I didn't see it before. He's scared of me. Of what I think. Switzerland clutched the
silk robe beneath his fingers tighter, pinned to the spot as the brunet leaned down. Scared that I'm
going to hate him for this. Blood pounded in his ears and he thought he would nearly faint from*
looking at such an expression the man was giving him. *Scared that I won't feel the same...*

It wasn't until breath grazed against his lips did the Swiss finally snap back into himself. Slapping a hand over his mouth, Switzerland suddenly wished that he were sitting. Quickly, he leaned away as far as he could until he felt the cool shower door hit his back. Austria was still an ever present veil over him as the coolness of glass seeped into his heated skin, and the blond felt damn near close to falling over from shock.

*He just tried to kiss me! Kiss me! Roderich—Me—Kiss!*

The brunet faltered at his reaction, a dark look passing over him before he shook himself out of it, looking as serious as ever.

"Not a problem, huh," the aristocrat grumbled.

Switzerland floundered for something to say behind his hand, knowing his cheeks were bright red beneath the musician's palms. "B-But I just threw up!"

Austria stared at him. He kept staring. Eyebrows raised high up towards his hairline, rosy lips parted. Then his mouth lifted into a small smile, and his loving—*because what else could they be?*—eyes locked the blond into place like a cage.

"Really," the aristocrat said, voice a gravelly purr. "As if I would care about that."

"Well, I care, okay," the Swiss grumbled, looking anywhere but him. His right eye closed as the musician brushed a thumb underneath it, gingerly across his cheekbone, and he found himself tilting into his palm. He lowered his hand cautiously, continuing to look to the side as he huffed, "I don't want you to get grossed out."

His earlier thoughts of what it feel like to kiss the aristocrat came flooding back to burn up the back of his skull, and his blush doubled its efforts.

"Let's compromise then, shall we?" The Austrian lifted the hand on his left cheek up to brush away his unruly blond bangs. Before Switzerland could react the brunet swooped down and pressed a kiss to his forehead.

All the tension, fretting, and energy left within him seemed to vanish, and he let himself just enjoy the moment between them like he had done earlier with the edelweiss creamer. Sometimes he really hated his overactive mind for not allowing him to enjoy something as, well, *needed* as the gentle closeness of someone he cared about.

*And he did care.*

*So much.*

Switzerland immediately relaxed at the compassionate touch, and folded into the Austrian's arms.

It felt like a significant puzzle piece slotted into place. Shifting the whole picture into clarity.

"Please know that I care about you, too, Rod," he murmured against the man's collar as Austria pulled back, lips freeing him from their soft affection. "Just give me some time to process all of... *this.*"

"As you wish." The brunet nodded and stroked his cheek with his knuckles. A bit more light shone in those lavender eyes.
Austria deigned to pull away from him completely then, tucking the sides of his robe around him from where they'd loosened under the Swiss' touch. Words were said to him about how the man was going to dress himself then and get started making a late lunch, and how the blond should take a bubble bath to soak his sore extremities. He agreed quietly, smiling at the relieved expression the Austrian was boasting before leaving him alone in the master bathroom.

Switzerland swayed on his feet and slid down the shower door, burying his face into his hands.

...xXx...

Liechtenstein winced as she pressed the fresh bandage over her cut, pushing her wet hair out of the way.

She was happy the injury wasn't deeper, and that her concussion seemed very mild—not to mention, being a national entity did have benefits in the healing department. After a good night's rest, sleeping much longer than she usually would despite going to bed super early in the morning, most of its effects had dissipated. Now, only a slight pressure behind her temple remained.

Sighing with relief, the girl picked up her brush and ran it through her freshly washed hair once more. It'd felt good to get all the damp leaf and musty cellar smells off of her skin. Wearing a pair of faded jeans and a loose apricot-colored t-shirt with a banana and The Velvet Underground scrawled across the front, she was comfortably prepared to take on the makeshift forest in the dining room.

From what she could gather from Germany, he and her brother were planning to plant the viable flowers in the Austrian's botanical garden. Seeing as how Switzerland was physically ill when she seen him about a half hour ago, and how Germany looked dead tired, Liechtenstein had already made up in her mind to be the one to plant them before she'd rushed off to take a quick shower.

It wasn't like she was going to make Austria do it, either.

After setting down her hairbrush and sliding a thin headband on to hold her drying hair out of her face, the blonde thought back to the small glimpse of her host she'd gotten earlier. Austria had been standing tall and talking easily, if hoarsely, and he seemed normal again. Awake. Her heart warmed.

He looks better, she thought. Brother, though . . .

Switzerland had looked like hell. It was a familiar look to her, as she'd been privy to witnessing the man accomplishing in many overworked days and nights with barely any effort. Country or not, he tended to push himself well beyond reasonable limits more often than she'd like. The girl swore to herself that if Austria couldn't get him to lay down then she would make sure to do it no matter what. Even if she had to find some rope and tie the excessive workaholic to the mattress.

Liechtenstein straightened her shirt once in the mirror and left the upstairs spare bathroom. The small washroom was situated on the other side of her brother's guest room, and would have been across the hall from the master bathroom if said room had a door that opened out into the hall. Her black wool socks carried her softly down the hall, passed the Austrian's closed door, and downstairs.

She plugged in her earbuds to her phone, shoved it into her back pocket after picking a playlist, and skipped through the living room and out into the main hallway by the time the first song began playing. Deciding it'd be best to check out the indoor garden first to see if it were even usable, the small blonde made a beeline for the door at the end of the hall.
Headache be damned, a plethora of energy was coursing through her veins and she looked forward to burning it off by being helpful.

Liechtenstein opened the large door separating the side portion of the palace to the rest of the East Wing. She flipped on the lights and took a step.

The dark hardwood beneath her feet—walnut, her mind supplied from her newly gained knowledge—shifted through the threshold to smooth, pale marble. She recognized the slight white and silver-grey color as Volakas, no doubt brought straight from Greece from whenever long ago. The walls were painted a rich, royal blue with ivory trim, and the ceiling was still as impossibly ostentatious as it was in the Grand Hallway in the side residence. Instead of carvings of ships and doves in the marble, there were now etchings of plants and knots.

Similar to the rug the Austrian had in his room, from the corner above her head at the dividing door and outward along the hall, was a giant tree. As she walked from the intricately interlaced roots above her head cascading like spider webs, she reached the start of the trunk. The carving took up the middle third of the vast ceiling, and seemed to stretch on down the hall until the far door. The bark was painstakingly engraved to be both realistically accurate and whimsical, with waves of knots and swirls blossoming here and there, and gold inlay along some of the more fantastical veins.

On either side of the trunk were small groups of flowers and vines blooming alongside the tree’s length. Liechtenstein recognized the shapes of tulips and roses, carnations and daisies, sometimes with long leaves or heart-shaped ones. The vines grooved alongside the trunk almost like waves, sometimes wrapping around the bark and then twisting away.

After passing many doors on either side of the large hall, the blonde finally arrived at the door at the end of the wing. The treetop was in full bloom above her, with a beautifully sculpted canopy encompassing the last section of ceiling before the divider wall. An angled ray of sunlight cascaded from underneath the branches back down the trunk and over the blooms of foliage. The elaborate, graven Celtic designs were alluring and inspiriting to run ones eyes over.

Liechtenstein stopped at the large white, wooden doors and looked back along the length of her walk. It had been quite some time since she'd last walked these halls—the last time having been nearly a decade ago at a Christmas party that the Austrian and France had held at the estate. Even then, she'd mostly treaded the upstairs walkway, and the foyer. She couldn't quite recall the last time she'd walked in this particular hall, either, seeing as how all the guest rooms were on the second floor, and she hadn't been to a ball at the aristocrat's home in quite some time.

However, as she pushed open the doors in front of her, the girl was pleased to see that the very large, magnificent ballroom was also the same as she had seen it once before.

...xXx...

Lilac eyes bore into him, accusing.

"Coward," Austria whispered.

The brunet stood staring at his reflection in the mirrored closet wall. At the redness branded across his nose and cheeks. At his trembling lips.

His thoughts flashed the image of another pair of pink lips before him, and a flood of ardor threatened to steal him away.
"Coward," Austria repeated. Pearly teeth grinned back at him in response.

Sliding open his closet, the Austrian sighed almost dreamily, too pleased to be insulted by his own words. His mood had now done a complete flip from his earlier upset and heartbreak. Now, it felt like he was filled with the lightest air, ready to lift right off the hardwood and evaporate through his ceiling.

'I care about you, too, Rod.'

Austria's skin was tingling all over. From the soles of his feet to his scalp, his entire being was buzzing pleasantly with elation.

I want that written on my gravestone, he thought dizzily.

His mind was slowly processing the sense of timid acceptance and the whole strangeness of the situation. How his Swiss didn't hate him, didn't push him, wouldn't push him, press him, punch him. Wouldn't be disgusted with him. Wouldn't pull away from his lips . . .

Well, for the most part.

Austria slid off his robe with another sigh, letting it pool on the floor around his feet. The cool air of his bedroom clung to his fevered skin as he sifted through his shelved shirts. Still in shock, the brunet wasn't sure if he wanted to bundle himself up in his usual suits. It'd be like burying himself under the weight of a mountain when he felt like flying.

The aristocrat pulled down a cream-colored dress shirt with brown pinstripes and slid it over his arms, buttoning up the front in a daze. Next, he stepped over to his dresser to grab a pair of cream socks and trunks, and stepped back across his wool Khorassan to sit on the chaise lounge. He pulled on the latter, then began sliding on his socks as he looked over his collection of folded pants within his wardrobe. Figuring he didn't need to dress up for anyone but himself—and a particular handsome man who's already seen me at my worst anyways—Austria finished his ensemble with a pair of caramel-colored slim slacks, tucking his shirt into the waist.

Austria closed his closet doors and picked up his robe off of the floor. He gave himself a look over in his arrangement of mirrors, fixing a few loose strands of his chocolate hair and smoothing down the front of his shirt. He'd left the top button undone, forgoing a tie in favor of being comfortable and free while his emotions bubbled and flourished within him.

The brunet hung his robe on his bathroom door, his hands hovering near the wood.

Should I bother him?

Again, his thoughts turned to the Swiss' face being held in his hands, round cheeks warm against his palms and bright with heat. Looking up at him with such openness and, and fondness, that it made him want to fall across his lounge and croon his amorous desire to the heavens forevermore.

After all, what else is this all for?

His heart fluttered with the smallest intentions, and he made up his mind. I wouldn't be a bother.

"Vash," the Austrian called, clearing his sore throat as he knocked on the door. "Do you need anything else before I go downstairs?"

Silence.
Then a muffled yelp and a *thump*. A tiny curse. The splash of water pouring from an opened faucet.

Austria opened his mouth to ask if the other was all fine, but held his tongue when the door opened. Switzerland leaned against the frame and only cracked the door open a bit, rubbing his face tiredly as the sounds from the tub filling up echoed from behind him. The musician felt his heart dance at the sight of the man—even though he'd only been away from him for not even ten minutes.

"Could you, um," the Swiss began. He leaned his head against the frame and sighed, "Could you bring me my suitcase?"

The Austrian nodded and turned to fetch the red bag seated beside his first dresser as the blond continued to speak behind him.

"I'm just going to wash up real quick and then I'll be back down," Switzerland said, his tired voice carried across the room. He groaned quietly to himself as the aristocrat walked back to him with his case, and counted on his fingers as he called out tasks. "I still have to re-pot half of your garden, and then get started on dinner, finish up laundry—I should probably change everyone's bedding, too, now that I'm thinking about it. Clean up the dining room, see if I can——"

"Nein." Austria set down the suitcase between them and reached up to rest a hand on the Swiss' cheek. He tried to give him his best mother hen stare, despite receiving a beautiful blush under his touch. *He gets embarrassed so easily.* "You are going to take a long, hot bath, and then a nap."

Switzerland scoffed and rolled his eyes, but there was a bit of playfulness in his eyes as he smirked at the musician. *And take a nap.*

"No 'but.'" The Austrian pulled out of the other's grasp and placed his hands on his hips, increasing the intensity of his *look.* "Say it."

"What?"

"Go on."

"I'm going to take a bath," the blond huffed, after a long pause.

"And?"

Switzerland scoffed and rolled his eyes, but there was a bit of playfulness in his eyes as he smirked at the musician. *And take a nap.*

"Gut." Austria relaxed his stance, satisfied. He let his own smile show as he added softly, "You've already worked so hard, okay. Just get some rest, and I'm sure the others and I can handle everything else."

"Ja, ja." The Swiss ruffled his messy hair and opened the bathroom door wider to grab his suitcase, opening the front pocket to rummage for his things.

Austria made his way over to his bedroom door when a thought hit him. He paused by the doorway, one foot into the hallway, and called back to his beloved, "Oh, and feel free to use my mouthwash."

His peripheral vision just barely caught a sight of a bright red face as he dodged a sock thrown his way, rough laughter rumbling his ribcage and throat. With an indignant cry of, *"Hey!"* following him, the brunet ducked into the hall for safety and closed the door behind him.
God, I love him.

...xXx...

Liechtenstein spun in a slow circle as she stared up and around her, taking in the dusty air of the grand room.

As the centermost attraction of the Austrian's home, the ballroom didn't fail to impress. If one were to enter the estate from the palace entrance and walked forward in between the split main staircase, there were a pair of double doors that opened right into the opulent room. If one were to walk the length of the home along the first floor hall, as she was, then they would have to cross through the room in order to reach the opposite wing.

The first thing that caught the girl's eye was the floor. It was marble yet again beneath her feet, but instead of the white and light grey-blue veining of the halls and the rest of the palace, the stone was Breccia Violette. The landscape of the ballroom was sprawling tendrils of black interwoven around bubbles of white and grey rock; most certainly a unique choice for a ballroom floor, as most would pick a solid color stone or tile.

Austria's dance floor, however, looked like the tops of pillars standing in an abyss and contrasting nicely in color while giving the floor a deceiving edge. As if, while dancing one needed to keep watch of their feet so they wouldn't step off the figurative edge into the chasm below. Almost like a game.

A massive chandelier and a bounty of crystal lights sat among the sculpted figures of the ceiling, which was more of the same sorts of flowers with Celtic influences, and the occasional angelic being. The walls of the room were painted gold, with marble and ivory inlay in various geometric patterns. The only room, if she recalled correctly, that was painted gold to match the golden inlays of the ivory. The only room deserving of it.

Liechtenstein stepped across the islands of white languidly as she took in the sight at the far end of the ballroom. An array of seven lancet windows covered the back wall, the greatest in the center, and their stained glass shone the last of the weak evening light reflecting off the mountainside across the dancefloor. Pale colors of the rainbow caught on hidden flecks of silver in the stone, glinting against her gaze.

Each depicted a very distinct pictures of nature. The ones on the far sides portraying sparkling snowy countrysides; with frozen lakes and bleak trees, icicles and snowflakes of shining white, blue, and crystal clear. The next two inward shown autumn vistas of vibrant reds, oranges, and yellows opposite dark browns and greys; showcasing many trees and rabbits. The two windows framing the center one were dynamic murals of summer zest, with bright hills and lakes and birds in glorious greens, blues, and reds. And finally, the center lancet window depicted a great tree in the center of what could only be spring scenery; bountiful buds and birds of nearly every color, sunlight, and even a deer stood proudly amid the glass.

Beneath the middle window, at the very end of the room, sat a grand piano covered in a thick sheet.

The dimming of light reminded Liechtenstein that she was supposed to be checking out the new home for their rescued flowers, not staring around the ballroom with her mouth open like an awed owl. Humming to the pop song sounding in her ears, the small country made for the doors to the Western Wing and flipped on the lights to the ballroom so she could see her way back.

The next hall was the same as the previous one, with the image flipped and instead of a sun shining
beneath the treetop it was a moon.

Liechtenstein knew this wing even less than the other one, and she cautiously flipped on the hall lights. There were many doors on either side of the hallway, with the closest two on the right leading to the banquet hall she could remember. And on the left was the palace kitchen, she believed. That was about it, though.

*How does anyone remember all these rooms?* she sighed inwardly.

Her first few years at her brother's estate had been just her getting lost down nearly every corridor, unable to find a room to save her life. At least Switzerland's home was smaller than Austria's, though the brunet's was certainly more linear so that helped with navigation. It didn't help, though, that just about every room had an official name. Like Guest Bedroom #37, or something like The Really Rouge Room, or The Duke's Naptime Lounge. The girl couldn't fathom how they could keep track of all the titles.

As she reached the next door at the far—jeez, so far—end of the hallway, Liechtenstein was unbelievably relieved to open it and see a large glass room. A wave of earthy, musty scents hit her and she instantly knew she'd arrived at her destination. *Finally!*

The botanical garden was entirely made of glass and metal, with shelves and troughs for many kinds of plants. She could see through the lightly tinted glass walls and rounded ceiling to catch sight of the mountainside and darkening sky. There were some stools, pots, and cleaning and gardening tools already laid around the spacious greenhouse. Some more cushioned seats sat around to the right in a small seated area, and off to the left was a curtained off section.

Other than it being obvious that the garden hadn't been utilized in quite some time, everything looked to be usable and in good condition.

Liechtenstein ran a finger along a dusty benchtop as she looked around. Spying a long forgotten broom leaning against the wall, she excitably clapped her hands and puffed up. The perky pop song on her playlist changed to a lengthy rock ballad, and she got to work.

...xXx...

Austria managed to settle his daffy expression into something more reserved once he'd descended the stairs. By the time he'd crossed the hall, padded his way around the dinner table, and stepped through the threshold of the kitchen, his face was completely neutral. If the others noticed the bounce in his step, well, that could hardly be helped.

Although, he could only see Germany seated at the counter when he walked in. The man was sprawled on one of the stools, head tipped forward, eyes closed as a steaming cup of coffee rested between his hands on the counter. The clock above the stove read, *7:38pm*, so the German was no doubt worn out if he'd truly been working all day like the Swiss.

"Awake?" Austria asked, his voice quiet and still rough around the edges.

Germany made a noise in the back of his throat. "Unfortunately."

The Austrian picked up his forgotten tea and took a sip, scowling at the cold, bitter taste. He walked over to the sink and dumped the rest. Thankfully, the kettle had some hot water left and he made himself another cup of chamomile, giving his cup a spoonful of honey to top it off. When he turned back to his guest he saw that the German had drank over half of his own mug and was now bent over his phone, tapping away at the keyboard.
Austria leaned against the counter and sipped at his tea, watching the blond's brow furrow impossibly more and more as he fiddled with his phone.

"I thought you were supposed to be at a conference in Berlin all week," he said, hoping to distract the other from whatever was annoying him.

"I was. Then this came up," he mumbled, wavering the phone in his hand. "And technically, I still am."

Austria nodded once, nursing his tea for a moment. His eye caught on the weak yellow and red light cascading across the floor from the new stained glass to his left. He looked over the image of the glowing robin in the last of the evening light, his heartbeat picking up just the slightest.

Tearing his gaze away, he caught Germany's attention and gestured at the installation. "I suppose I have you to thank for purchasing my new window."

"Ja. Just another thing you owe me for," the blond said, only sounding half-serious.

"Add it to the tab. Tea?"

Germany swallowed the rest of his coffee before setting down his empty mug. "Only if I don't have to make it."

"Nonsense." Austria took one last sip of his own drink before turning around and made the man a cup. The German sighed heavily, the aristocrat feeling a twinge of satisfaction as he set aside his phone. The man ruffled his blond hair before compulsively brushing it back again.

It was silent for a few minutes. There were several questions that the brunet wanted to ask his companion, but he let them hang in the back of his mind as he pulled down another teacup from his cupboards. They could wait until he started cooking their late lunch—or, *supper*, he supposed. That's what he'd decided, until he heard a throat clearing behind him and glanced over his shoulder.

"How . . ." Germany trailed off, looking uncomfortable, his hands tightly grasping each other. "How are you?"

Austria blinked at the man's baby blue gaze, taken aback by his intensity. *Then again, when isn't he?* But there was a glint of something in those sapphire irises, something almost tender. Sensitive, even. The sight reminded him of a much younger, much less burdened version of the man sitting before him, and he let his formal regard relax. They were family, after all, weren't they?

The aristocrat walked over to set the cup of warm chamomile and honey in front of the German, lingering opposite him and resting against the countertop.

"I'm feeling better today," he answered truthfully. Germany's gaze shied away from his own as he, too, leaned on his elbows. For some reason he looked like a jilted child, and just the thought alone made him want to chuckle. It'd been quite some time since he'd seen anything close to vulnerable cross the usually stern German's features. He must have really gave the man a fright if he was this worried about him.

The attentive expression made him reach out to tuck a stray blond hair behind the man's ear, getting those eyes to meet his again. "I am, Ludwig."

Austria ignored the dull ache in his muscles from exertion during a night he couldn't even remember in favor of seeing the relief spread across the other's face; his shoulders slumping, hands releasing themselves from each other's strangulation. A little bit of light sparked in the back of
those blue irises as the blond exhaled slowly.

"Ja? Are you sure?" Germany asked.

The Austrian reached across the counter and took one of his hands in his, patting the back of it.

"Ja."

...xXx...

Switzerland let out a faint, broken sound as he lowered himself into the bathtub. The hot water immediately enveloped his skin and muscles with relief, and his limbs began to shake with latent exhaustion as he settled himself in the gentle curve of porcelain. The pain from sharing his energy with the Austrian, and in turn feeling the man's own misery and relieving it from him, was now being overshadowed by the emphatic ache throughout his whole body from the day's hardships.

The small cuts on his face stung as he submerged his head beneath the water for a moment, wetting his tangled mess of hair before rising out of the water to lay comfortably again. His sore fingers brushed wet locks and water away from his eyes as he took in a deep, deep breath.

The Swiss rested his calloused hands on his trembling thighs, and he saw fit not to move them or his arms any time soon for the foreseeable future. He knew that if he glanced down he'd see the dark purple and blue bruising on his left shoulder, the marks almost raw with several scrapes. His bones felt as heavy as stone, his skin feeling too tight and stiff under the heated water. Every moment a new pain would surface—the weakness in his ankles from standing for hours on end, the chafing on his knees from the hardwood, the knot in his lower back from bending over for prolonged periods of time, the tingling in his fingertips from too much pressure, the burnout of his calves, from his legs in general—and the overtired man sank further into the tub.

While his body fought to relax, his mind was surprisingly clear.

No thoughts of his to-do list or recent emotional trauma dared to bother him while his body vibrated with fatigue. At least, not blatantly.

Even though Switzerland's mind was questionably blank, the well of emotions within him seemed to fill up on its own. From the bottom of his stomach up to the back of his throat, they sent a weary, choking shiver through him, and he began to softly cry.

Chapter End Notes

Nein - No
Gut - Good
Ja, ja - Yeah, yeah
Nein, danke - No, thanks
Ja - Yes

Sooo about that whole Austria not trusting medicine thing? Yeah, no he's just a weird old man.

Also, I'm going to try to revamp this fic slightly; fixing some of the first chapters grammar/plot/etc. I also plan to go back and change all the 'blonde' and 'brunette'
words to be the proper 'blond/brunet' for males, and 'blonde/brunette' for females  
BECAUSE I was unaware of the masculine/feminine difference when I started this story, and English doesn't really have the whole m/f distinction for inanimate things. So, since I thought they were just different spellings, like 'theater' and 'theatre,' I didn't really think about it.

I will be using the correct forms from now on (I hope)! A few mishaps might still happen out of habit, but I'll do my best. And since I edit everything myself, it'll probably take me some time to go back through this fic and correct everything, but once I do I shall delete this little end note and be very proud of myself!

I thank you all for sticking with this story, even through the mistakes~ <3
Aching & Anhedonia

Chapter Summary

Everyone slowly recovers from their shared haggard night. Austria is faced with choosing between falling back into forced normality or stepping up into making a decision. Meanwhile, Switzerland breaks open to his sister.

Chapter Notes

I'm like the moon finally appearing after a long, long Alaskan summer. Six months late . . .

Anyways, so begins the last third of the story. There's a lot to sort out, so bear with me as the final tide slowly turns. By default the chapters are going to be longer, so buckle up, buckaroos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The gradual screaming of the kettle brought his fingers to a standstill, interrupting the rhythm of notes being tapped onto the stone countertops. Swiftly removing the water from the heat, the man poured it into a white porcelain teapot and two Habsburg china cups.

Making tea always settled the Austrian's soul in a way that nothing else could. Not even music. The process was so simple, yet precise, with an immediate reward that one could literally taste. Such an old practice, such a comforting one. He required some comfort.

Austria poured the water from the two cups back into the teapot and proceeded to spoon the correct amount of chamomile tea leaves into it. The first kettle had went quickly enough, between making coffee and tea, so he decided it best to make more of the soothing miracle liquid that continued to help his throat more and more.

Not to mention, keeping his hands busy and having his back to his German counterpart gave him a reason not to answer his incessant questions right away, or at all.

"Are you going to keep ignoring me?"

Austria lifted his chin and kept his gaze lowered. As he let the tea steep, he picked up a spoon he'd used to stir in some chopped watercress to a bowl of Topfen and continued that. Afterwards, he grabbed a knife to spread the mix onto the sunflower bread he'd picked out of his pantry.

To his companion, he added, "I'm listening."

"You're not answering me," the German huffed. He heard the man knock on the island counter. "When's the last time you spoke to your boss?"

The Austrian tipped his head to the side, evenly scraping his knife along the dark bread in his
"Either."

"I last spoke to the President when I went with you and, ah, Switzerland the other day," he clarified, picking up another slice of bread. "As for the Chancellor, he's been on holiday in Ibiza for the last two weeks."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Ja, klar." Something about the man's tone made Austria defensive, and his blood chill. He dared not to look over his shoulder. A prickle felt its way up his spine and he busied himself with spreading the Topfen. "What are you getting at, Ludwig?"

Suddenly, the sound of chimes trilled around the kitchen, and the brunet bit back a groan. He must have turned my ringer back on. The aristocrat's good mood from earlier was melting away, like the cheese on his knife. His neck began to ache.

"You're phone is ringing," Germany said. "Again."

_Trying to make a point._ "I can hear that." _Like always._

" Says it's a . . . L. K."

Austria grimaced. "Pay it no mind."

No more words were spoken between them as the chimes cut off into silence.

After the night that he'd had, that they'd all had, Austria figured the German would give it a break. He just wanted one day where he didn't have to think about anything. Didn't have to think about his leaders, his government, Germany's government. Every day had been something new, something alarming, something _sickening_. He needed a breather from all the chaos—one that actually involved being able to breathe.

The thoughts reminded him of a certain Swiss, and images of the golden-haired man flew to the forefront of his mind. Not that he was ever too far from it, anyways.

"Ludwig," he said calmly, catching the German's attention.

"Hmm?"

"How are you? After today, I mean."

Germany didn't respond for a few seconds. When the aristocrat glanced back to him the man was squinting at him, puzzled. Finally, he answered, "Gut. Sore from the housework, but I'm all right."

"I'm glad. I'd heard it was a rough night." Austria hummed and paused from layering the slices of radish he had set aside. "How about Switzerland?"

There was a deep sigh behind him.

"Honestly?" He turned to see Germany tapping his fingers on the counter, looking thoughtful. "Besides the fact that I witnessed him having a panic attack over some flowers earlier, I think he's fine."

"Oh?" Austria would never admit that his broken voice _may_ have squeaked.
"Ja, it was odd," the German continued gruffly, then shrugged. "But you know how he is with gardening."

"I suppose I do."

They both turned back to their work for awhile more.

Austria forced his tensed shoulders to relax, wishing there was music playing around the room. He laid down his knife and turned around, sparing the other man a glance as he walked around him towards the bar. Germany had one earbud in, eyes intent on his phone screen, and he was jotting notes down on a pad of paper. The Austrian knew better than to think the blond wasn't paying very close attention to both him and his phone.

Fiddling with the little red radio on his bar top, the musician decided against it. The last thing he needed was a news report to come on in between songs. Or even a weather report. Plus, it was perhaps not the most sensible thing, to play music right behind his companion as he was trying to listen to the live feed from his Berlin conference.

The Austrian flipped the radio back off and walked towards the glass divider, deciding it better to let the music echo low from the family room. He could still enjoy his much needed melodies and have it be inobtrusive.

He slid open the floral patterned glass, and stopped.

Half of his plants were missing.

Blinking, the lithe man stepped through the threshold and paused beside the dining table, leaning a hand on the corner of the wooden surface. It would seem that several towels where his rescued plants had resided were now gone. Poof. His peach tree was nowhere in sight, nor his roses.

That's when his mind clicked and he realized the something else that was missing. Someone else.

"Do you know where Liechtenstein went?" Austria called to his companion in the kitchen. He glanced back to see the man look up from his phone with a frown.

"She said she was going to take a shower," the blond answered. He checked his watch. "That was over an hour ago, though."

"Hmm." Austria walked passed the remaining rows of herbs and perennials, and around his leather couch. He headed towards the stereo. I can probably guess where she is, he thought, eyeing over his collection of tapes and discs. Always a sweetheart.

Straightening his hazel hair, the man scrolled through the list preprogrammed on the stereo instead. Something relaxing would do, something different than usual. He chose the lo-fi hip hop option from the database, waiting until the quiet beats, saxophone, and slow piano started up before returning to the kitchen. The music was just loud enough to be heard across the dining area, quiet enough to soothe.

A few peaceful moments passed where Austria poured them fresh cups of chamomile tea with honey, and began thinly slicing cucumbers and little red radishes. The sandwiches were meant as a thank you, for taking care of both him and his home. And basic host decency, of course. It didn't seem like anyone had eaten yet that day, and he'd be damned if he let his guests go hungry after working so hard.

The tea was hot and earthy, with a tinge of syrupy sweet honey. No matter how many cups he
drank there still seemed to be a dry, sandpaper spot at the back of his throat that wouldn't smooth away.

The time above the stove let him know that it was just after 8 o'clock. It felt like morning to him, having awakened not too long ago. The hassle with being sick was that it messed up his sleeping routine. Well, that, and everything else.

Austria layered the cucumber and radish slices onto the sunflower bread, along with a few more watercress and basil leaves. He then laid a few slices of smoked ham atop everything, giving the sandwiches more substance. It's what he could handle making for dinner that night, and it would have to do. Adding some salt and pepper, the Austrian put the sandwiches together and cut them in half, feeling pleased with himself. The smell of the bread and vegetables delighted his stomach, and he looked passed the dull ache in his gut.

Germany was taking a sip of tea when he set a plate of two sandwiches down in front of him. Blue eyes widened and blond eyebrows raised.

"I thought you were making that for yourself," the man said after he set his cup down, pausing the feed from his phone.

"Iss auf, Dummerchen," Austria murmured, rolling his eyes. He went back over to the counter beside the stove to put together the other sandwiches.

The German thanked him before taking an eager mouthful, not forgetting his manners.

Chimes rang out.

Austria ate a cucumber slice.

Germany cleared his throat after swallowing. "It's for you," he said quietly.

Austria hummed in acknowledgement, but made no move to answer. He laid another slice of cucumber on his tongue and cut the sandwiches in front of him.

After a moment of tinkling chimes, the noise ceased. Then they started up again. Like an irritable worm in his ear.

"It's from," the German began, "a G. K. How many K's do you know exactly?"

As soon as the initials were read off, the Austrian dropped his knife and spun around. The blond man leaned back in surprise at the ferocity with which the aristocrat soared toward the island and picked up his cellphone, swiftly tapping the answer button on screen.

"Hallo, Roderich hier," he answered breathlessly. He did his best to clear his throat to sound somewhat normal.

There was a relieved sigh on the other line, and a woman's voice greeted him. "Oh, Roderich, thank goodness."

"Gretta!"

"I'm sorry for calling so late. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"It's no trouble, really." Austria straightened up and cooled his expression, avoiding Germany's questioning stare. "How are you, my dear?"
"Ah," there was another sigh, "I've been better. We've been better. Are you all right? You sound like you're losing your voice."

"I have a bit of a sore throat at the moment, nothing to be concerned with." The musician was nodding to himself. He stepped around the island and out into the foyer, giving himself some privacy. There were so many things he wanted to ask her, but he started with why she was calling. "What's going on?"

There was a rustling noise, along with many voices in the background. It sounded like a crowd of angry people. He heard Gretta mutter firm excuses a few times and then the voices faded slightly before her voice came back into the receiver much clearer than before. "Sorry about that. It's been really crazy the past few days."

"Of course."

"I hate to ask you—" Gretta began, cutting off to curse softly away from the phone. Her voice was strained.

"Anything," he said at once. Austria crossed into the living room and sat in an armchair, preparing himself. "Anything at all."

A shaky laugh buffeted the speaker, and suddenly all of the woman's words were released in a rush.

"I didn't know who else to call. I haven't had time to talk, or really sleep," she took a breath. "It's been so crazy."

"Tell me," the brunet urged gently after a moment too long of silence.

"Sorry." Gretta said something hushed away from the phone once more, speaking to someone for a brief second, and then went on. "After the fire, it's all been a whirlwind. Lettie and I are safe, don't you worry. She's right here with me," a small voice in the background called out a hello, "The shop is safe."

The Austrian exhaled the air he was holding. Leaning back into his chair, it felt like a weight had been lifted off of him. Knowing that his city of Salzburg was relatively undamaged, that the places and people he cared about were mostly untouched by flames, made his heart heave a sigh. Then a guilty twinge hit him for those it did affect.

"The fire only got a few buildings to the north, near Freilassing and Bergheim, before they managed to redirect it. Freilassing took the brunt of it. I heard from Karl that some stray embers have lit a few smaller fires around town, but I haven't seen anything myself. The crews have really been on it since Monday."

Aloud, he murmured, "That's good to hear, regardless. Really good."

Gretta made a noise of agreement, going on with, "I took your advice, still. I packed up Lettie, Arlo, and I, and made a plan to head for Zürich. I called my great aunt and she said that we could stay with her. The hospital was going to transfer Vlad nearer to Vienna, but they told us that there were no vacancies. Is this true?"

The brunet confirmed what she was saying, only knowing himself from the little he'd heard from Germany that day.

Gretta huffed and muttered quietly, "What a shame."
"So what happened, then?" Austria asked carefully, wishing to hear what else she had to say.

"The hospital managed to get Vlad into a government aid facility within the area, at least. Said they'd give him the best care, you know. You didn't put a word in, did you?" He had, and said as much. Gretta responded with a hum. "Thank you. I hate leaving him, but I have Lettie to look after and there's not much I can do from outside a restricted facility anyways. Turns out, though, there's no flights heading out of the country right now." Austria stiffened. That, he hadn't known. "So I managed to get us train tickets for the border."

The man waited as her words faded off. He could just hear the ambient sounds of the crowd and what sounded like someone on a megaphone.

"It's just," Gretta started, then stopped. She spoke up softer than before, the voices loud in the background. "I don't know what to do now."

The commotion through the call mixed with the overall intensity that radiated from the woman was starting to worry him greatly. Austria was getting anxious about why the woman had called him in the first place. The nation had known Gretta since she was sixteen, she was more than double that now, and he knew that she didn't call him for anything lightly. "What is it, dear?"

"I hate to ask. There's so many other people here—"

"Where are you now?" he sat up, eyes ghosting over the furniture dimly lit by the lights across the hall.

"We're in Bludenz, arrived last night."

"Is everything all right?"

A pause. "They're not letting anyone cross the border."

The Austrian was on his feet before he had a chance to fully process the statement. He began pacing along the length of the dark room.

"We were going to try to go to Bregenz, to get to Frankfurt or something, but I heard from a lot of folks here that Germany's border patrol is doing the same. I'm calling because I wanted to, well," Gretta continued, oblivious to his reaction, "I wanted to know if you could ask your friend if there's anything to be done. Switzerland, you know," she whispered that part. "Or Germany. You know him, too, ja? Or just if there was anything you could do. I don't know the details of what's going on, but it's almost like a blockade is going to start up."

Frazzled mind whirled, empty stomach churned, fingers tapped his thigh; Austria forced himself to inhale. He endured the ache in his calves, in his heart.

Why wouldn't anyone be allowed to cross his border with Switzerland? Or Germany, for Christ's sake? Why? He pushed some stray locks from his forehead and did his best to attempt to unclench his jaw. It's not like anything had happened between them that would cause such a thing. He hadn't provoked the others. It didn't make sense. Neither country had said a word to him about anything like that, not a word. Sure, they hadn't really had much time to sit down and talk about these sorts of things after the Swiss had returned from his flight home or since he realized Germany was there, but he was positive that they would have said something about this. At least Switzerland.

Thorny vines began to form in his gut, looping and weaving and making a mess.

Or would he have?
The knot grew and tightened. A snake coiled to strike at any thoughtful assurances.

Austria shelved those thoughts, bringing himself back into the conversation. "Gretta."

"Yes?"

"Come to Vienna."

"What?" the woman scoffed, baffled. "And do what? We've nowhere to stay. You said yourself that we shouldn't—"

"Stay with me." Once he'd said the words he knew he meant them. The aristocrat wasn't going to leave her or Lettie out to dry, not while he didn't understand everything that was going on yet. Especially when it was partly his fault that they left home in the first place.

Gretta laughed again, aiming to speak, but couldn't. In the lull he doubled down on his conviction, and stopped his pacing.

"Come and stay with me," Austria reiterated into the phone and evening air. There was a bitter bite beneath his words, unintended for her ears. "I don't want you near that place if what you say is true. You won't be a bother. I have plenty of room, and this way I can personally get you in to see Vladimir while I sort things out."

"Roderich." The woman's voice wobbled. "I can't ask that of you."

"I'm asking it of you," he insisted.

"I don't know—"

"Please." The Austrian walked behind the armchair and rested his arms atop the back, slumping forward with a tired sigh. He meant to say more, but held back, leaving it up to his friend. He waited for her decision.

The reception crackled, and he thought the call cut out, until he heard Gretta exhale slowly.

"Thank you."

...xXx...

If anyone were to see the small woman easily carrying two sacks of soil under one arm and a potted tree over twice her height in the other they might have done a double take. The passing paintings of belladonnas and babies did so, with wide-eyes and open mouths, as it wasn't too often an interesting sight walked by.

However, she was more than happy at the moment to be doing such a thing and was smiling to herself. Bopping along to a punk rock song in her ears, and only a little breathless.

Liechtenstein jerked her head up and to the left to prevent her headphones from getting snagged by the clay pot. Her Austrian host hadn't seemed to notice her ghosting in and out of the dining room —taking a bundle of geraniums here, a wrapping of roses there, running around in search of the new pots and dirt to utilize.

It would be nice for both him and her brother, she'd thought, to see the flowers in a safer home than the rubble outside. They didn't need anything else thing to worry over.

The tiny country shuffled gingerly through the doorway into the ballroom, ducking and bending to
make sure the peach tree didn't hit the threshold. She kicked the soil bags up into a better grip with a knee once the tree was in the clear and set off again. Reaching the botanical garden room, Liechtenstein dropped the sacks onto the floor. She lowered the dwarf peach tree to the floor next to the work bench with a sigh, stretching out her arms in relief. She'd nearly brought everything over, and had only the collection of herbs and the rest of the pots left to retrieve.

Once she'd gotten every rescued plant and pot across the palace into their new garden home, so would begin the process of replanting what was salvageable.

The blonde took a moment and sat down, checking her phone playlist. As she moved some songs into a different order, her phone vibrated in her hand and a notification popped up on screen alerting that she'd received a text.

Vash: How are you feeling?

Liechtenstein's brow furrowed. Why was her brother texting her when—nope. Never mind. She looked through the open garden door and down the long, long stretch of hallway. It was too big a home to just verbally call someone on the complete other side of the palace. She tucked one side of her now dry hair behind her ear and replied.

Me: Much better. Everything ok?

A crooning rock song came into her earphones.

A minute went by.

Vash: You busy?

The blonde's confusion deepened.

And I know the night is fading,

And I know the time's gonna fly;

Me: Are you ok, V?

Vash: ?

Liechtenstein groaned at her brother's avoidance. She tilted her head back and sighed, taking a moment to listen to the words sung into her ears.

And I'm never gonna tell you everything I've got to tell you,

But I know I've got to give it a try.

She made up her mind.

Me: I'm free right now.

Vash: Can you come upstairs? To Rod's room?
Vash: I need help.

Vash: Please.

Liechtenstein was on her feet as soon as the first text came through, and her feet seemed to move of themselves especially so after the second one appeared. It wasn’t often the country ever asked for her help, let alone the man himself. Switzerland was, if anything, self-sufficient in most everything he desired to do. Aside from their chore rotations and the occasional, “Can you hold this?” or “Will you grab that for me?” she was usually left to her own devices while he did most other tasks himself.

I can make the run or stumble,

I can make the final block;

The hallways didn’t seem so long when she was running.

And I can make every tackle, at the sound of a whistle,

I can make all the stadiums rock.

Certainly more out of breath now than when she had carried the tree, the blonde girl slowed her pace once she reached the doors to the main residence part of the palace. The last thing she wanted was to be caught at a dead sprint bursting into the house and startling the others. So instead, she crept through the doorway, padded along passed several rooms, peeked into the dining room, saw no one but plants and furniture, and as swiftly and quietly as possible in her socks slid into the darkened living room, headed for the staircase.

And I can make you every promise that has ever been made,

And I can make all your demons be gone.

She took the steps two at a time, her heart pounding in her chest like a frantic bird. The tone of her brother's texts seemed off enough to raise alarm bells in her head, her thoughts like panicked hornets. Please don't let him be hurt. Please, her mind repeated in a plea to no one in particular. It was probably nothing, she was freaking out for nothing, absolutely nothing, no need to trip on the stairs.

However, Liechtenstein couldn’t ignore or quite place it, the feeling in her gut that this was exactly the reason he had messaged her. Her intuition was rarely wrong.

Reaching the second floor, the blonde woman steadied herself and made for the master bedroom. She thought her knees would give out from the anticipation as the door opened too slow for her liking.

And I'm never gonna make it like you do,

The lights were on, illuminating the bedroom in all its opulence. Liechtenstein skidded to a stop too late as she collided with the body in front of her, face smooshed into a warm cotton back and a thick, soapy aroma.

Making love out of nothing at all.

Switzerland nearly dropped the object in his hands with a yelp, quickly steadying himself and turning around. "What the—"
Liechtenstein gasped for breath, looked up at her brother, then gasped in general. The Swiss stood inches from her in a red plaid robe, one she recognized from home, and a pair of pajama pants, and he seemed to have just gotten out of a shower. The man looked all sorts of ragged and worn; freshly washed hair tangled, eyes red-rimmed with dark circles under them, skin paler than normal. She ripped her headphones out and immediately threw her arms around him, feeling him flinch.

"What happened?" she asked in a whisper.

"Um," the man started slowly, leaning over her to shut the bedroom door, "you came barreling in here out of nowhere and ran into me, so."

"Don't dodge the question." Liechtenstein frowned and pulled back, inspecting every inch of his face. "Are you hurt? Where are you hurt?"

"Whoa, whoa." Switzerland's eyebrows lifted in a genuine display of confusion. "Where's this all coming from?"

"You're hurt, aren't you?"

"What gave you that idea?"

"Your texts," the blonde girl insisted. She pulled back to show him her phone and their messages, as if he wouldn't have already seen them. She paused her music. "You never ask me for help. I thought something happened!"

Switzerland stared at her. She stared at herself in his eyes. Like looking into the surface of small, polished emeralds.

Liechtenstein all at once felt incredibly silly. Her face heated up.

"Why did you text me?" she managed to mumble through shell-shocked lips.

The Swiss cleared his throat and lifted up the bundle of cloth held in his right hand. "Um, I was going to change everyone's sheets and wanted another pair of hands." He looked away over her shoulder, his own cheeks tinting red. "I, uh, didn't mean to give you a scare, Lil'."

The little country nearly collapsed under the anvil of mortification that hit her squarely upon the head.

"Is that all?" she snapped, though there wasn't any heat behind it, only an embarrassing amount of relief. Liechtenstein took the sheets from him, tucking her phone and earbuds into her jean pocket. The blonde stepped around her brother and saw that the large four post bed was already stripped bare, naked pillows piled on the floor.

She glanced back to his bewildered expression as she shook out the sheet at the foot of the bed. "I could have done this while you were in the shower, you know."

"Bath," he muttered. Switzerland came back to himself and grunted, taking one side of the grey sheets and helping her spread them. "I was in the bath."

"Same difference." The two of them made quick work tucking each of the corners around the mattress.

"I wasn't going to have you do any of it, originally," the Swiss sighed, eyes cast down. "I . . ." His words faded.
Liechtenstein gave him a pitying glance. "Why not? I can easily make a bed myself."

"I know that!" he barked. The pair still in their work, both in varying degrees of shock.

Switzerland grumbled to himself angrily and rubbed his face. He grabbed hold of one of the bed posts. Liechtenstein watched him for a moment as the disheveled man leaned his forehead against the wood, eyes closed. Her brother was almost hiding behind the rail, trying to regain some form of composure from the graven wood.

Liechtenstein straightened up and walked around the end of the bed towards the man. This wasn't like him at all. She was sure that something else was bothering him, other than his exhaustion. She looked closely at red-rimmed eyes.

Switzerland sighed and sat down, still attached to the post. His gaze planted itself on the floor. She sat on the other side of him.

The blond man swallowed, fisting his robe. "I'm sorry," he murmured, and instantly received an assent by his sister. He sighed once more. "I didn't mean to yell, Lilli. I'm just tired. I'm fine."

Liechtenstein nodded. She disbelieved him.

Switzerland watched his sister suspiciously as she tucked up her feet on the bed, and turned to face him. "Shall we sit here a minute," she said gently, patting his arm, "and you tell me about your day?"

"What's to tell?" he asked.

Reaching out, the woman rest her hand upon his, hoping to relax the grip on his poor robe.

"Well," Liechtenstein paused. Jade eyes pointedly met emerald. "Why you were crying in the bath, for one."

...xXx...

After setting Gretta up with train tickets and the promise of a hot meal once they arrived, Austria hung up the phone.

The aristocrat was incredibly reassured now that the woman had accepted his offer. Gretta and Lettie would reach his home around noon the next day, as they had a hotel booked for the night already. He planned to pick them up from the train station personally, so he would have to make sure to not stay up too late; despite, well, having slept the whole day away.

Not to mention, if he couldn't lend out a room or two in his great palace to a friend in need, then what was the point of having the space? He might as well live in a shack.

It would suit my lonesomeness.

Austria walked towards the foot of one of the tall windows in his living room, watching as the last of the fading yellow light bled into darkness over the valley. A drizzle of rain misted the greenery, and his fevered breath fogged the glass. Strange solemnity crept up the nape of his neck, like a chill.

Germany would most likely scold him for accepting more guests, regardless of whatever he had to say. Whether he was doing it out of kindness or reckless abandon, it wouldn't matter. The Austrian released a low sigh, his shoulders falling. Must everything he do have to be tolerated?
The man folded his hands behind his back, eyelids halved. The front drive and distant valley cliffs faded together into a blurred smear of slate grey as he focused on the thin droplets streaking down the window's surface.

A sudden detachment overtook him then. A whole great wave of nothing. All sorts of pressure and feelings left him; the constant worry nagging the back of his skull, the tenseness in his calves, the dread in his heart. Or, rather, they froze in their wiggling.

He stood alone in the darkening home. A statue within a mausoleum.

It had been some time since a upsurge of apathy had hit him last. A usual thing whenever anything in life became too much, too fast. Too much stress, too much to do, too many thoughts. Instead of allowing himself to be overwhelmed, he succumbed to the comfort of emptiness. Buried himself under layers and layers of forced insouciance before further damage could be done.

At present, though, Austria felt it wrong to sink lower into himself. Not while they're here, he thought.

The cold desire to shake the torpor from his prickling skin was the only sensation he could muster, and he turned away from the black night.

As he stepped towards the hall, the Austrian felt himself slump with an untold weariness. He leaned against the living room archway, temple thumping against the wood. Something felt wrong. Or, it could have been the whole sensation of him coming back into himself, losing the last, lingering vestiges of the Swiss' outside energy leaving his body and soul. It still felt wrong.

It's one thing after the other, his thoughts descended all at once, like a river babbling through his brain. It's like waking up with a cloud around me that only I can see.

Austria felt detached from himself for the instant he pushed off of the archway. Almost like a spirit following a corpse a few beats after the mark. There was an itch in his fingers, in his soul—a frustration.

Turning around, the brunet tossed his phone to the couch, not caring if it landed or not. In the dimly lit room he took a stride, and then another, and then sat down. Feet and faith carrying him to the one spot that mattered most of all. Palms pushing against silken wood, he lowered his fingertips to paint their heat across pearly teeth.

Skin only just brushing against a chilled key, he pressed down.

A much higher note rang out than was supposed to. He lifted off the key.

The note continued to sound, and a few more followed in a gentle, tinkling rhythm.

Fingers shaking over the keys, the Austrian surged forward. Left elbow hitting the top of the piano, he buried his face into his hand. He ripped off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. The man inhaled with a tremble in his lungs.

I need—

In the ringing reticence his heart beat with a modicum of optimism. Then the high note sang again, and again, again; in quick succession. His fingers remained hovered over ivory, the quaking digits accidentally brushing a few keys to create an unintended, tottering tune.

Please, let me—
Heavy footsteps sounded over the doorbell's eager tirade through his halls. Thumping from the kitchen, then to the foyer, his German companion went to answer the call. The musician didn't move until he heard the front door open. Hand over eyes, the hazel-haired man slowly lowered the cover overtop of the piano keys, laying his palm atop it. He heard the German's voice trickle across the rooms to him, echoing surprise.

Austria was anything but.

With great effort, the musician sat up and fixed his hair. He somehow managed to slide his glasses on his nose, though he didn't remember picking them up from halfway across the piano top. He composed whatever expression he was showcasing by the time he heard a double set of footsteps walking down the hall. The brunet was up and reaching for his discarded phone, the room only lit from the hallway, when the voices grew louder from inside the foyer.

The hard throb in his limbs subsided, and the vault that had leaked open inside himself sealed shut, lock spinning.

...xXx...

"Oh, Vash."

"Don't 'oh' me."

Liechtenstein held back a retort and gingerly pressed a bandage over the large cut on the man's shoulder. *'From lifting the tree,'* he'd said. That fact didn't make her feel any less guilty, especially since the newer bruising bled around an older, more significant scar across the other's left shoulder blade. Like ink through paper.

Then there was the whole deal with a certain Austrian.

"So what did you tell him?" she asked as she applied disinfectant into the smaller cuts around the bruised area.

"I asked for time to think about everything," he said.

"And?" She sensed there was more to it than that, but her brother was always difficult to weasel feelings out of.

Switzerland shrugged stiffly, and then twitched at the sting of alcohol. "What else am I supposed to say?" he grumbled and rubbed at his eyes.

"Have you thought about it at all? How you feel towards Roderich and what he said, I mean." The blonde girl bit her lip, and then added, "Which, you know, how do you feel?" After more dead air in response, she added kindly, "Sorry. I know I asked this before. You don't have to give me an answer."

"Good, because I don't have one."

With his back to her, the Swiss ducked his head down; messy hair hiding any expression she could have spied.

*Oh, no,* she thought. *Is he going to close up on me?* It felt like her brother wanted to talk; at least, as much as could be devised from his hunched form. Switzerland wasn't one to speak his feelings aloud on the best of days, and this was far from a 'best' day, at least in her opinion.
After a stagnant moment, Switzerland looked back at her over his shoulder. Liechtenstein halted in her care of his wounds and met his stare. The skin under his eyes was an unsettling shade of bright, raw red, and a hollow grey.

"I know you wouldn't," the Swiss took a deep breath around his words, eyelids fluttering, "I know you won't say anything, if I told you. Right? You wouldn't."

"Of course not!" Liechtenstein replied without hesitation.

"Even if you don't like what I have to say?"

"What? Vash, no."

"Even if," he inhaled, "Even if I'm unkind?"

The girl sat back on her knees and folded her hands primly. "Vash. I would never betray your trust." She gave him a look, which hardly lasted more than a second before she softened. "Especially if you need to speak up about what's bothering you. At least, I hope you will."

Switzerland's eyes narrowed, his jaw clenched. Emeralds shone dully from their ruby and ebony cushions.

A little hope flickered in her chest as the blond turned back around and shook his head, whispering unintelligibly to himself. All she could make out was a simple, "Scheiß drauf."

Liechtenstein saw his shoulders sag.

"I think I might like him," Switzerland breathed out. "A lot."

The yellow-haired girl let out her own breath, not having realized she'd held it.

"Ja?" she coaxed gently.

"I think so. Maybe. I don't know!" he backtracked nearly immediately, looking struck at his own affirmation. "As soon as I think I have a solid thought on the matter, it all just seems to slip through my fingers, like sand. Only the same things, over and over, keep sticking," she heard him grumble, almost as if she weren't even there. The Swiss stared at his palms laid in his lap. "It's so disorienting. One moment I'm . . . Ugh, I'm elated. All butterflies and rosebuds, and everything honeyed that poetry has smothered over the centuries with repetition. Everything. Can you believe that?"

"It's like a joke," his voice caught on the last syllable, and he made a fist. "Just the biggest fucking joke, as if God is messing with me—"

Liechtenstein stiffened. Don't say that!

"—and I don't know what to do about it," Switzerland continued, his voice getting louder, hotter. His fist began to tremble. "My stomach won't stop twisting and turning, and I can't catch my breath. I don't know what to do with myself. I mean, I've never been in this situation before. I like poetry, and I-I like the idea of romance, but—" He gasped. "Not for me. Not me. I've never thought about it for me."

The Swiss started to hyperventilate, doubling over. His dutiful sister rubbed his back to steady him and made gentle shushing noises, as if she were consoling one of their goats. Mönch always was the one to startle easily at too loud noises, or probing conversation.
After a good while, the blond man slowed his breathing. His head was still bent low, his hands clenched around each other. His arms shook with tension, muscles taut like a wire drawn to snap.

"Then the next moment," he choked out, "I'm angry. God, I'm so angry." Liechtenstein felt him jolt, and the man leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "It's sickening; it makes me almost physically ill, and I don't want any part of it. It's like a burning, right here," the Swiss punched his fist against the center of his bare chest, the bed rocking somewhat from the force, "and I want it gone.

"But I can't just let go of what he's done, before all this happened. I know that he's not like this anymore, but I can't just forget about all the years of nights spent awake worrying over whether or not my dear, oh so dear, old friend was going to suffocate me in my sleep. All because of a—is a disagreement!" the blond lashed out, waving his hand around rigidly. "So many rash arguments! With way too much fucking nonsense! And I was in the right, yet I was to be fucking killed for it? No. I wouldn't stand for it. I-I can't."

Switzerland leaned on his elbows again and pressed his face into his hands. The stillness reigned heavy in the thick air of the master bedroom. The smaller woman waited patiently for the other to recover from the wealth of information he was divulging. Letting loose off chains that had spent too long rusting in the belly of his heart.

It didn't make the misery of watching her companion break down right in front of her any easier.

The Swiss' roughened voice spoke up after a long silence.

"Then I see him smile."

Liechtenstein could have sworn talons squeezed her heart at the exact moment the man's voice cracked. She pressed a hand over her mouth, and held in another, Oh, Vash, oh! She wanted to shout at him, but she wouldn't dare interrupt her brother. Not when he was cracking open like a shell.

"And I just can't think," Switzerland exhaled, his tone quiet once more. "Whenever I see him, or I hear that laugh of his, I can't focus. I'm no longer as angry as I know I am, or that I should be. But it's so rare," he rasped, "that he ever laughs anymore. Not like he used to, anyway, when we were younger. When we were still together. He's been laughing so much lately since we've been here. I don't know. I don't know what to think." He paused, then his voice came back like thin elastic, wobbling, "I love his laugh." The Swiss pushed harder into his hands, fingers sliding up through his hair and scalp. His words were barely that above a whisper. "I can't help it. Every time he does something so stupidly him I lose my head.

"The last thing I wanted to think about is all the pain we've caused each other in the past, but . . . It's like nothing that's happened even matters anymore, and I hate it. I hate that he is stuck in my mind, all the time! Like I've been demoted in my own head; forced to take a backseat to everything else going on, and hell forbid I try to think about anything that isn't that man because that isn't allowed in the slightest. Oh, no. That simply isn't feasible. It's not."

Seeing that the blond man was falling into a heaving bout of rambling, Liechtenstein leaned up on her knees and wrapped her arms warmly around her brother's neck and shoulders. His stiff tone trailed off and he fell quiet again.

The blonde girl was torn up inside. She hadn't been blind to the Swiss' struggle with being around the Austrian on any terms, let alone a friendly one, yet the man's admission of all the worries that truly bothered him disturbed her. It's no wonder brother kept all this thinking to himself. She knew
he was the kind of person to try his best not to burden others with 'frivolous' things; even if they were actually massive and monstrous thoughts that were eating him up from the inside.

Liechtenstein was at a loss for what to do.

The two men had been at odds since before she had even been created—a conflict she'd been unknowingly fated to always be in the middle of. Geographically speaking, if not quite ideologically. An unbreakable bond would forever tie her to her Austrian neighbor, the nation of her birth, whether she wanted to erase it or not. Which she didn't.

However, as she tightened her grip around the man in front of her, their yellow hair a near match as it hung loosely over the Swiss' shoulders, Liechtenstein knew she had to make a decision and be honest to herself. And to mein Bruder.

The thought of going against her word to take care of the Austrian hung heavy in her soul, like weights sewn into the bottoms of her feet. It was only the shudder she felt from the man in her arms that shook her from her compunction.

"Vash," Liechtenstein began softly, bravely hidden behind him. It seems like I won't be able to keep my promise. To anyone. Her cheek pressed against drying golden hair. "If you're this unhappy, and this unsure about it, then we can leave." The girl felt calloused hands reach up to hold onto her arms, the man relaxing under her embrace.

"It's not that I'm unhappy," Switzerland croaked. "I just really didn't want to bother you with all of this."

"We can leave tonight, no problem," his sister continued, not even acknowledging his attempt at martyrdom. "No questions or arguments, and you can think about all of this at home. I'll go downstairs and let Mr. Austria know." She felt the man stiffen against her. "I won't tell him what you've said, don't worry."

"It's not that—" he tried.

"Get your stuff together, okay?" Liechtenstein pulled back from their hug and quickly slid beside him off the bed. Once she'd reached and opened the door, she felt brazen enough to face the Swiss.

The sight of him sat there on the edge of the bed, haggard, bandaged and blue, eyes ringed with a motley of dark colors, strengthened her in a way she hadn't felt in a long time.

And she felt ashamed.

"I'm sorry, Vash," she added quietly, leaning against the doorframe. Liechtenstein met fellow green eyes, and murmured, "It's my fault that we're even here in the first place. I should have known how much it would bother you to be here, to be around Mr. Austria for too long. I'm so sorry." The blonde dipped into a deep bow and spun around quickly before her brother could see her expression. "I'll go speak with him right now."

"Lilli," Switzerland stated, raising up a hand as if to stop her. It wouldn't

The man, the nation, whom she respected above all else needed her. Even if he fought her on it, she refused to let him down.

And I can make all your demons be gone.

"I won't take long, I promise." And with that, she closed the door behind her.
"You are absolutely infuriating to work for sometimes, you know that."

Austria stood in the middle of his Great Hall and gazed evenly at the new arrival to his home.

His assistant was hanging up his rain darkened pea coat on the hooks along the wall, and untangling the scarf from around his neck. Luis Keller stood tall beside Germany, around the same height, if thinner, and straightened the cuffs of his crisp, black suit. The man was never one to dress casual, a quirk the Austrian both appreciated and encouraged.

The man's neatly smoothed dark curls were dripping from the rain shower, and he tucked a stray strand back into place using the mirror over the entranceway table.

"Luis, such a treat," the aristocrat said, only slightly feigning civility. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I hate the rain." Luis' narrow face turned to him, frosty gaze very unamused. "I hate being avoided," he continued, picking up a leather suitcase that sat by his feet. "Yet you force me to come all the way out here to make sure you haven't fallen down the stairs."

Austria raised an eyebrow lazily before lifting his chin, his voice level. "Is that concern for my well-being, or for your employment?"

"Guess," Luis sneered, then huffed. Navy eyes that sat behind square tortoiseshell glasses held more relief than scorn in them.

Germany, who until that point had been standing quietly off to the side, cleared his throat and gestured to the suitcase the other man was holding. "What have you brought?"

"Paperwork," Luis sniffed, adjusting his blue tie. "Insurance reports, updates, inquiries. Everything that... that one," he lifted the suitcase and pointed along the handle, "has been dodging for the last two weeks."

The tall blond fixed him with a reprimanding look. The Austrian didn't think it was possible for the German's frown to deepen even more, but he was frequently proven wrong. The musician stepped away towards the kitchen as soon as the other opened his mouth.

"Why—"

"Ah-ah," Austria tutted, shaking his finger in their direction as he faced forward. He heard the men hot on his heels. "I'm cooking and won't be disturbed."

"My disturbance will be over quicker if you just cooperate."

"I have several hungry mouths to feed, including myself," the brunet went on.

"I've only brought a few of the documents, as I don't want to linger here too late, either," Luis insisted. "I'll bring the rest over tomorrow, but these have a deadline."

"I see." He could respect that. Austria went over to the corner of counter near the stove and took up his knife once more, determined to listen to the low music from the other room instead of any patronizing from his companions. "Well, I'm expecting more guests to arrive tomorrow morning, so I must cook in peace if I'm to retire at a respectable time."
There were the sounds of chairs moving on the hardwood, and he assumed the two men had sat down at the island counter. A glance over his shoulder confirmed it. Luis was placing the suitcase off to the side in front of him. The dark-haired man opened it and began pulling papers out, along with a thin, blue laptop.

Germany was staring at the Austrian nation, a small furrow in his brow.

"You're expecting more people?" the gruff man asked.

Austria turned around and cut two more complete sandwiches in half, setting them aside. "Ja. My tailor and her daughter." He paused. "And their cat." Germany groaned behind him. "Only for a few days. There's something I have to help them sort out."

"You're really in no position to be entertaining, Roderich," the German started.

"Am I not?" Austria quipped with a bit of heat. "My house is the fullest it's been in years." His knife sliced evenly through the cucumber under his hold, if loudly against the cutting board. The itch was still trailing through his veins, and he was now taking it out on the poor vegetable. "It seems that I should endeavor to be constantly sick if I'm to get any attention anymore."

He'd said it as a joke, but something within his chest stung at the voiced words.

Before Germany could reply, his assistant piped up.

"Lucky for you, then," Luis said, "that for the next several hours you'll have my complete and utter consideration." The aristocrat suppressed a sigh and glanced behind him again to see Luis mostly set up in his usual fashion. Laptop open, papers stacked neatly in separate piles, and fountain pen ready to go. The man shot him a sly look, his voice lilting like he was talking to a child. "I'll even read aloud everything pertinent for you to know so you can continue cooking. All you have to do is answer my questions and sign a dotted line or two. Aren't I kind?"

His assistant knew him too well. The laidback nation could admit to being glad for his work, as it saved him from having to go into the offices too much on weekdays, or at all on weekends. Austria couldn't help the small chuckle that rose from him, and assembled the new sandwiches.

"Mighty kind," the brunet purled, and he glanced at the clock above the stove. "Especially since it's after eight. You usually make it a point to be done with all of your work before now."

"I am. It's all of your paperwork that is making me put in for overtime."

Austria snorted. "You love overtime, darling. Your lack of a social life is simply appalling."

Luis quipped right back, "Your lack of a proper work ethic is atrocious. I refuse to be partisan to your antics."

The Austrian heard Germany mutter a soft, "Mein Gott, thank you," to the man under his breath. Lavender eyes rolled for the second time that night.

Before either men could speak up next, a light knocking sounded behind them. Austria lowered his knife and turned around to see that Liechtenstein was peaking around the glass doorway of the kitchen from the dining room. The little blonde was dressed quite casually in pants and a t-shirt for once. Her expression was an unusually solemn one.

"Mr. Austria," she chirped, then stopped when she spotted the others. Her eyes widened on Luis. "Hallo, Herr Keller," she gave a polite little wave to the two Germans before bringing her focus
back to her host. "Ah, may I—Wait. Why does it smell like cigarettes in here?"

"Who can say," Austria said.

"Oh, well." Liechtenstein shrugged it off. "If I may have a second to talk to you, Mr. Austria. Please."

The Austrian was confused at the other's soft urgency, but nodded and stepped across the kitchen nevertheless. "Just a moment, fellas. I must tend to my other delightful guests," he stated matter-of-factly. Ignoring any budding protests from the others, he shooed his hands at them and followed the girl out of the kitchen.

"I noticed you started to work on my plants," he said as she led him through the dining room. He gestured towards the kitchen when she glanced back to him. "Thank you for that, by the way. I've made you some sandwiches for dinner. You must be starving."

Liechtenstein spun back around and picked up her pace, almost jogging across the hall. The hazel-haired man could see her tense shoulders bunched under her apricot-banana shirt, and her lack of a response instantly set off alarm bells in his head.

I hope nothing's happened, he thought to himself.

Once they reached the living room where he'd been just minutes prior, the golden-haired girl clicked on the closest lamp. Liechtenstein whirled around in her socks and faced him fully—and it was then that the aristocrat could see the extent of her countenance. Her sweet and happy demeanor that belied her true age gave way to a more serious, uptight visage. Grass-colored irises were tortured, and pale pink lips set themselves in a grim line.

Austria felt as if a stone had lodged itself in his stomach.

"Has something happened?" he asked aloud, beginning to be concerned.

Liechtenstein held his gaze and laced her hands together. "What do you remember about last night?" she said instead of answering him.

Still cautious, he exhaled, "Is that it? Are you sure there isn't something—"

"Please. Bitte," she said in that light, feathery way of hers.

After a momentary stare-off, Austria surrendered. Whatever the girl was thinking, he would only find out what it was by going along with her request for time being. Perhaps this was all that she wanted to discuss.

"What do you want to know?" he conceded.

"Do you remember me coming into your room last night to stay with you?" she asked.

Wisps of memory flit through his mind, like chiffon curtains fluttering in a breeze; snapshots of his darkened bedroom, of thunder rumbling through his home and through his head that ached with every electric pulse. Truthfully, he didn't remember much over the course of the night. At least, not much of the nasty bits. Flashes of moments in the basement were still clear to him, the memory of being carried upstairs by a shadow, of waking up with a desert in the back of his throat.

Austria did manage to recall a few snippets of the girl sitting at the foot of his bed, having brought him a glass of water.
"Sort of," he answered honestly, massaging his temple thoughtfully. "Pieces, here and there."

"Do you remember what we talked about, at all?" Liechtenstein egged.

He concentrated, muttering the first words that came to mind. "Water. I think I asked you for water." At the girl's nod he continued. "And rugs? My rug? Ghosts? Maybe those were in a dream." The past impression of warmth around his neck spread through his thoughts, and the brunet relived the smaller country's arms around him as he fell back to sleep.

Then there were the press of words right there, right at the tip of his tongue.

Austria's eyebrows drew together, and he met the other's gaze, saying uncertainly, "You were promising me something, I think."

"Yes, I did." Her eyes finally freed him of their intensity, dropping to the floor like jade marbles. Liechtenstein brought her clasped hands up in front of her chest, her troubled eyes tinged with a familiar self-enmity that made him both want to sigh and scream.

"I'm afraid I don't remember much else," he admitted.

"I won't be able to keep my promise."

Austria crossed his arms, and tugged at the lining of his sleeve. He tried to subtly urge her to lift her gaze. While clueless over what the smaller nation was going on about, the hazel-haired man didn't appreciate the way the stone in his belly was eagerly inviting its friends over to sit and keep it company.

"What do you mean?" he asked carefully.

Liechtenstein shook her head and closed her eyes, fighting for the right words. It was so difficult, so difficult, to always be caught in the middle. Having the Austrian standing in front of her now, looking at her with such earnestness, made her words scurry themselves to the back of her mind.

"It turns out," she began as she straightened herself up to her full height, meeting violet eyes, "that we'll have to—"

"Lilli!"

Jumping nearly out of their skins, the two countries whipped their heads up to stare at the man bent over the banister above them.

Switzerland stood halfway down the stairs, and his hands gripped the wooden railing with white knuckled ferocity. Wearing burgundy pajama pants and a checkered, red robe hastily thrown over his shoulders that revealed his heaving chest to the cool mansion air.

Gemstone irises were fixed firmly on his sister, and the voice that adapted his native tongue fell like an anvil.

"Not a word."

Austria was beyond baffled. Switching his gaze between the fierce, almost panicked aspect of the Swiss and the look of complete shock that had frozen Liechtenstein to the spot.

What on Earth is going on? His mind struggled to keep up. Did they get into a fight?

Seizing the moment, Switzerland released the banister and advanced the rest of the way down the
stairs.

Stepping onto the landing, he hissed out hotly to his sister, "The questions that you asked me this morning, before we went to sleep." Austria saw Liechtenstein nod as the blond traversed the rest of the steps down to the bottom floor, and she looked hesitant. The Swiss added, "I've made up my mind about the whole thing."

"Vash—" she puffed, but once Switzerland reached her he pulled her into a tight hug and cut her off. The man murmured words into her ear that went unheard by the Austrian, who stood a few feet away.

Austria tightened his grip on his shirt, eyeing the Swiss. There was a swish of bangs, and the brunet didn't miss the shadows around green eyes, more pronounced than they were before. His heart skipped over itself.

Liechtenstein pushed back from her brother and spoke firmly. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"Ja." Switzerland kept his hands on her shoulders. Neither sibling even noticed the restless musician in the room.

"Are you sure, though?" she repeated, voice pitching higher.

"Ja, ich bin sicher," the Swiss said, the heat leaving his demeanor. He took a step back and pulled his robe tighter around himself, eyes drifting to the floor. "For now, at least."

The living room fell to silence. Low beats and a keyboard melody leaked in from the stereo in the other room and floated through the tension. The nations stood quietly. Hushed voices could be heard from the kitchen, and an old grandfather clock down the hall tolled the hour.

Austria stopped trying to rip a hole into his shirt and cleared his throat. "I dare say I've missed something."

The siblings startled at his timid interruption of their forced silence. Switzerland glanced to him, but kept his head down, tucking a strand of damp hair behind an ear, while Liechtenstein turned around to stare at him. The girl floundered, her expression no longer severe, just stunned.

"Were you two fighting?" he asked delicately. The Austrian toed forward and uncrossed his arms. He wanted to reach out toward the pair in an attempt to comfort their unknown ailment, but wasn't quite sure he was allowed.

Both were quiet as they shared a look, and then the Swiss asked, "What did she tell you?"

"Oh!" The aristocrat grimaced. "Ah, just that she might have to break a promise? You know, I do believe that I'm missing something important here. What—"

"It's nothing for you to worry about," Switzerland said quickly. He straightened up, patting his sister on the shoulder while looking her in the eye. "Nothing."

"Right!" Liechtenstein visibly brightened as she faced the brunet once more, smiling at him like they hadn't been acting odd at all. "Absolutely nothing!"

Austria's frown deepened as he looked between them. He didn't mind if the two kept secrets from him, since that was only natural, but he very much disliked the ache in his heart when they lied to his face and he knew. He smoothed back several strands of his own coffee hair in distress.
"I see." He let it slide for the time being in lieu of their reconciled expressions. "If it's anything I can assist with, you only have to ask," he added gingerly.

"Of course," the pair said at the same time, glancing at each other. Then Liechtenstein giggled, looking her usual full-of-life self again. Happiness suited her much better than weariness.

"You said you made some sandwiches?" she lilted airily, beginning to stride passed him towards the hallway.

"Yes, but," Austria interjected and he caught her arm before she could escape the room. That uneasy feeling given to him from the encounter refused to subside, as the change in moods left him feeling mildly whiplashed. Violet eyes met light green curiously. "Might I inquire as to what promise you were referring to earlier? I really don't remember."

"Oh!" Liechtenstein glanced swiftly to the side then back up to him, giving the aristocrat an award winning smile. "I made you a promise that I'd start calling you by your name from now on."

"You did?" The Austrian crossed his arms once more, still suspicious that that's what the whole hullabaloo was about.

"Yeah." A light blush crept across the girl's cheek and she shyly rubbed her wrist. "I was a bit nervous about it, though, since I'm so used to called you Herr Österriech, you know?"

Austria couldn't help but feel his own cheeks heat up as he stared down at the bashful girl. Was this really all? He glanced over at Switzerland who was watching them with interest. Did she feel like she had to ask permission?

The stones in his belly began to roll away, one by one.

"If you would prefer to address me as Herr, then by all means," he acquiesced, turning his attention back to the blonde girl. "However, I'd be delighted if we were on a first name basis. Especially since I have been calling you by your given name so freely."

"Really?" Liechtenstein chirped, clapping her hands together.

"Of course."

The aristocrat found himself enveloped by her smaller form, warmth spreading across his chest from her embrace. He pat her back a few times before she pulled away, practically bouncing in her socks. Then she stopped with a gasp.

"Wait! I've got to finish making the beds first," she cried, and then she dashed back through the living room, passed both of the men. On the landing she called, "I'll be down to eat in, like, ten minutes!" With that, Liechtenstein vanished upstairs.

Austria let out a breath and smoothed down the front of his striped shirt. Perhaps that was truly all the little country had been worried about—she was always one for formalities, after all.

Mauve eyes carried themselves over to the static form of his companion. The yellow-haired man was staring after his sister, clutching his robe closed. The aristocrat broke etiquette and stepped closer to him. Switzerland looked over to him as he approached, and stayed put.

If he stopped a little too close to the handsomely rumpled man, well. His will was only so strong.

"Vash," he rumbled deep in his sore throat. Amethyst irises washed over the splotches under the
other's eyes.

"Roderich," the Swiss whispered in return. The robed man softened and closed the distance between them, bring them chest to chest, with only the blond's arms separating them. He smelled strongly of the aristocrat's shampoo and bath salts, and wintergreen.

Austria's heart fluttered like a fool.

Lifting up a hand, the brunet grazed a thumb underneath a bruised, bejeweled eye. The other leaned into the touch as the Austrian brushed his knuckles over a rosy cheek.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

Switzerland gave a light shake of his head. "No."

"I'll put away a couple of sandwiches for you for later, then."

"Danke."

"I have some concealer," Austria murmured, trying not to smirk as he ran his thumb underneath his eye. "If you want to use it."

The Swiss puffed a laugh and shook his head again. This time the aristocrat pulled his hand away, not wanting to tempt his luck.

"I'm sorry I look like a mess." The disheveled man looked down between them, hair loosening from behind his ear.

Austria tucked it back into place for him. "No need to apologize."

Switzerland cleared his throat and lifted his chin. "Is there someone else here, by the way? I thought I heard the doorbell ring. You didn't lock Ludwig outside, did you?"

"Ha, no." A small chuckle left him. "Luis is here."

Blond eyebrows furrowed. "Your assistant?"

"Yes, he's brought over a few documents for me to sign. I should probably go do that, so he can go home."

Neither made a move to leave.

"Ah, before I do," Austria added softly, giving the man a worried look. "Are you sure everything's all right with you and Lilli?"

"Ja." Switzerland leaned forward, resting his forehead against the taller man's shoulder. He nodded once more. The brown-haired man wrapped his arms around the other's shoulders, feeling a tremble, and gave him a squeeze.

Austria would take his word for it.

"Gut. Go and get some sleep, mein liebe, and I'll follow you soon."

Chapter End Notes
Topfen - a semi-sweet cottage cheese, also known as Quark in German
Ja, klar - Yes, of course
Gut - Good
Iss auf, Dummerchen - Eat up, silly
Hallo, Roderich hier - Hello, Roderich here
Ja? - Yes?
Scheiß drauf - Fuck it all
Mein Bruder - My brother
Mein Gott - My God
Hallo, Herr Keller - Hello, Mr. Keller
Bitte - Please
Ja, ich bin sicher - Yeah, I'm sure
Herr Österreich - Mr. Austria
Danke - Thank you
Mein liebe - My love

"Making Love Out of Nothing At All," by Air Supply is the song Lilli was listening to, and honestly that song is such a mood for this whole story.

...when will Vash sleep...

These men are very morose, and I apologize if any points hit a little too close to home for anybody. I know some of it did for me. I hope, though, because of that most of their feelings comes across as more genuine.

Luis enters the fray! He's not cruel, I swear, only fed up and adept at dealing with Austria's bullshit. Switzerland's assistant, Julian, shall pop in next chapter, as well! It's my belief that the nations have assistants who handle a lot of the paperwork for them, which is why they have so much free time.

Again, so sorry for the delay! I recently moved so everything was crazy.

This story is still ongoing! Love you all for sticking with it and sending me such sweet messages!

End Notes

You can also find this story on Fanfiction under the same author and story name.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!