Excelsior

by NoireKnightmare

Summary

By day, he is Arthur Kirkland, university student and best friend of Alfred F. Jones. By night, he is England, world-renowned thief and sworn enemy of America. Hetalia superhero/supervillain AU, USUK. Originally posted on fanfiction.net, but now it's on here so that more people can read.
Like a Thief in the Night

Chapter Summary

In which the adventure begins and groins are kicked.

Chapter Notes

Regular font indicates the present.

*Italic font indicates flashbacking.*

*Bold italic font indicates thought.*

*Bold regular font indicates writing/typing.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was quiet.

A little too quiet, for the likes of a certain Briton.

So far, the heist had been going along smoothly; Japan had been able to override the security system for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, allowing England to slip inside undetected and knock out the guards with ease. After disabling the security cameras and wiping any trace of digital fingerprints, England was able to make his way towards the highlights of the museum's artifacts without interruption.

_The silence is a tad unnerving_, he thought as he walked past the exhibits, his coat fluttering behind his slim frame like the feathers of a crow while his boots echoed throughout the empty hallway with every step he took, the dark lighting of the surrounding area making the Tudor rose in his lapel glimmer like blood. _While I know I should take certain things for granted, I cannot help but feel suspicious._

England almost jumped when he felt his communicator vibrate against his hip, a soft sigh of relief escaping from his pale lips when realizing he wasn't in danger. Call it paranoia or fear, but a heavy feeling had settled in his stomach with every moment he spent cooped up in the infernal museum.

"What is it, Japan?" He asked when he flipped open his communicator (a silver pocket watch that displayed the masked face of his partner as opposed to the time) and readjusted his own mask, always fearful that it would somehow slip off his face. "Miss me already?" He teased in an attempt to distill his shaken nerves.

A polite laugh escaped the familiar Kitsune mask shown on his screen. "I take it you installed the chip into the security system as I requested?"

"Yes," England replied, a small smirk etched onto his features when his emerald gaze caught sight of
a sign which read 'Highlights of the Collection' not far from where he was. "The guards have been knocked out, bound, and gagged. I'm about to enter the highlights' section of the museum, meaning that the Ganymede jewelry cannot be far ahead. Any sign of our American nuisance?"

"No, England-san," Japan answered, turning his head to the side so he could presumably glance over the live security feed on his computer. "No sign of America-san."

Another sigh of relief escaped from the Brit, his eyes closing in bliss behind his black mask decorated with silver tree branches while the smirk on his face grew wider. "Glad to hear the bloody wanker is nowhere in sight," he said as he redirected his gaze towards the hall bathed in a soft glow of lighting, his steps lighter against the floor as his worries lessened. "Perhaps we can finally get away without his commercialized ass messing things up?"

"Hopefully," Japan responded, resting his gloved hand against the cheek of his fox-mask. "Though it's good to keep your guard up if something goes awry, that way it will take less time for you to think on your feet. Regardless, I'll make sure to contact you again in case my feed gets cut off or America-san arrives."

England nodded as he closed the watch and slipped it into the pocket of his tailcoat, the heavy feeling in his stomach fully diminishing at the sight of the Ganymede jewelry resting defenselessly in its glass container. The Brit thanked himself for having enough foresight to disable the security surrounding the particular artifact while he was in the control room, otherwise it would have been much more difficult and time-consuming to disable it manually what with having to maneuver his hand around the alarm-triggering lasers surrounding the treasure.

"'Ello, love," he murmured, his gloved hands carefully tugging off the glass top and leaving the glass resting against a wall. The jewelry was priceless, what with it dating back to 330-300 B.C and being a combination of gold, rock crystal, and emerald; the apple of any artifact collector's eye, and the prime target for any notable thief to 'procure'. "What wonderful doors you'll be able to open for me."

With a shaking hand, he lifted up the 13-inch necklace and carefully wrapped it up in fabric to prevent it from being broken, taking extra caution in depositing it into the bag slung over his shoulder given like hell he was going to risk it being harmed when he and Japan had gotten this far trying to steal it.

He was so busy paying attention to the welfare of the necklace that he failed to register the sensation of his communicator vibrating against his hip. An action he would later regard upon recollection with a facepalm and a 'by GOD was I moronic!'

**With this, I can finally do it**, the thief thought excitedly, slipping the other pieces of jewelry (bracelets, earrings, fibulae brooches, and a ring) into assorted pieces of fabric and storing them into his bag, missing the sound of footsteps echoing closer and closer as his enthusiasm continued to peak. **With this, I can finally-**

All thoughts faltered in his mind when he felt a pair of arms wrap around his waist and pull him close, his back colliding with a solid chest before he could react.

"'Ello love."

Shit.

The Briton stomped harshly on the man's white boots without another moment to lose, relishing the satisfying screech of pain that escaped from his enemy before he spun around and shoved him away, successfully escaping his grasp in the process.
"Well, look what the cat dragged in and pissed all over," England snarled, his grip tightening on the strap of the bag wrapped over his shoulder while he glared at his nemesis doubled-over in pain. "Hello, America. Does mummy know you're breaking your curfew?"

"I can say the same about you, England," America spat once he recovered from the surprisingly-sharp blow, his gloved hands crossing over his toned chest as his blue eyes narrowed behind his white mask dotted with blue stars. "I didn't know your retirement home let you stay out so late."

The Englishman growled and started walking backwards when the American began to walk towards him, the adrenaline rushing swifter through his system with each resounding 'CLACK' the hero's white boots emitted. "I'm not as bloody old as you make me out to be!"

America laughed, the dim lighting dancing off his futuristic-looking jumpsuit. He glanced over England's attire as he continued to come closer at a slow pace, the smug glint in his eye indicating that he was unable to help savoring the Brit's reemerging panic given how rare England went out of his way to always have some form of backup plan. His confidence—which was somehow more prominent than normal, if that was even possible—proof enough that the hero was the one to have a backup plan between the two of them. "I don't know, those clothes of yours look like a failed version of cosplay."

"It's steampunk, you foolish twat," the thief snapped, motioning to his black tailcoat complete with grey cogs in the place of buttons, his dark pants with chains hanging near his pockets, and his knee-high green boots decorated with gear-studded straps of leather. He mentally cursed when he felt his back collide with a large lunette window overlooking the entrance to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, his brain going into overdrive so that he could come up with a way to escape. Perhaps he could use America's tendency to succumb to his emotions and engage in banter to his advantage and buy him some time? "And you want to talk about failed versions of cosplay? Try looking in the mirror, 'Captain America'!"

The Briton could practically see the American bristle like a cat that got stepped on its tail, his blush as vivid a shade of red as the fabric on his arms and legs. With his fabricated-blue torso, white gloves and boots, and blonde hair slicked to one side, he did somewhat resemble Captain America. However, the amount of logos attached to random places on his attire deterred his image and made him appear more like personified commercialism as opposed to the Marvel Avenger. "You're just jealous because the hero gets product placement," he informed, pointing to the brands dotting his arms varying from McDonalds to Starbucks.

"Yes, 'God bless the land of the free','" England drawled, sarcasm lacing his tone as thickly as his accent. He knew how he could make his dramatic exit (since he needed one for his long-term plan to succeed), though he'd need to be quick and careful unless he wanted to break his legs. "Where advertising is almost as prevalent as idiocy."

"Says the guy who didn't realize I showed up until the last minute," America retorted, smirking at how it was the Brit's turn to blush. Since his masquerade mask covered the upper-half of his face, it undoubtedly gave the hero a nice view of the villain's cheeks that were as red as a Mediterranean tomato. "I have to say, you're not very aware of your surroundings for someone who's supposed to be a thief -"

A swift kick to the nuts ended America's statement as soon as he started it.

"And you're not very aware of your surroundings for someone who's supposed to be a superhero," England hissed as he retracted his foot from between the hero's legs and broke through the window he was previously leaning against, the bag containing the Ganymede artifacts still held tightly within his grasp.
He wasn't sure whether or not the hero shouted for him to stop considering the world seemed to blend together in shards of glass. He barely had enough time to position his body in a tuck-and-roll position and prevent himself from going two-dimensional on the stairs leading to the museum, but it seemed luck was on his side that evening for he managed to land in the plants situated beneath the windows with nothing more than a few cuts, bruises, and a sprained ankle.

A moment passed before England gathered enough strength to hide himself in the large bushes he landed in, the bag pressed tightly against his chest as his pulse thundered in his ears. Knowing the superhero, he would immediately dart off in any direction he saw fit instead of simply checking the bushes under the window regardless of how badly his genitals were injured. It was just the way he worked, jumping into a situation without thinking things through first (or at least that was the conclusion England had come to in the months of encountering him.)

Still, he didn't want to imagine what would happen if America found him given how much stronger the hero was than him (not to mention it'd be difficult to run with a sprained ankle); the villain was unable to stop his heart from skipping a beat when he heard the entrance door open and slam shut with a resounding 'BAM', his eyes closing in fear behind his mask as the hurried footsteps became louder and louder, his hand clamped over his nose to prevent the hero from possibly hearing his breathing.

The footsteps abruptly stopped around the place where England hid, making his heart come to a complete stop in his chest cavity. He dared not breathe lest he be discovered and his plans foiled.

The Brit couldn't remember the last time his bones felt like Jell-O than when he heard those footsteps hurry in a random direction. He didn't care what way America went, as long as he was as far away from him as possible. He wasn't in the mood to continue their shenanigans, not when he could be possibly apprehended for his crimes due to his temporarily-weakened state.

"At least the moron is still as predictable as ever," England whispered hoarsely, standing up and climbing out of the plants with trembling limbs. He made a mental note to donate some damn fertilizer to those bushes since they saved him from a fate worse than a few scratches, bruises, and a sprained ankle.

Without another word, England ran/limped in the direction of him and Japan's rendezvous point. He made off, dare he say it, like a thief in the night.

~na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

"I'm relieved to see that you're back in mostly one piece," Kiku mentioned as he finished wrapping linen around Arthur's foot. He set the roll of medical fabric aside and took off his black-rim glasses since he was finished with close examination of the injury and they were threatening to slip off his nose anyway. "Thankfully, it's just as sprain as you initially thought, Arthur-san."

"Are the artifacts still intact?" Arthur wondered out loud as he carefully stood up from where he sat on the cot, wincing at the pressure he initially put on the sensitive appendage before he leaned on the end of the bed for support. "I tried my best to keep it together."

The Japanese male spun in his chair on wheels so that he could direct his attention to the stolen items placed on his observation table. "Hai, the Ganymede jewelry is still valuable as it was undamaged in the fall. I conducted a few tests to guarantee its authenticity, and the artifacts are legitimate."

"So he couldn't have been informed beforehand, because he would have probably swapped the real thing with an imitation or found some other way to gain the upper-hand," the Brit said, grabbing a bag (not his thieving bag, since it could be recognized by someone well-aware of his crimes) full of
normal clothes to change into as Kiku had already changed out of his criminal attire and hid it elsewhere. "That eliminates the idea of him having a spy of some-sort."

_Either that or he was so sure in catching me in the act at the right place at the right time, that he sought no need in replacing the artifacts given he would apprehend me anyway. But if that were the case, why didn't he simply arrive before me and catch me before I could remove the glass?_ Arthur thought, slipping off his black coat and stripping his long-sleeved green dress shirt off his torso when Kiku wasn't looking (he knew the male was sensitive about the showing of skin, even if it was between close friends/partners in crime). The 22-year old quickly snuck beneath the blankets of the medicinal cot and traded his formal black pants for a pair of casual blue jeans, and covered his chest with a T-shirt and an oversized sweater.

_It isn't like him to risk something being stolen simply for the purpose of arriving 'fashionably-late',_ he continued to think while slipping on some socks and tenderly nursing his feet into a pair of sneakers, his head of messy blond hair appearing even messier when he poked his head out from beneath the covers. _Or is it possible he was informed beforehand of my plan, pretended to go off in a random direction, but is actually trailing me to this location as we speak to finally put me behind bars now that he'd have actual evidence that I wanted to steal the jewelry?_

A knock at the door caused his words to catch in his throat before he could even voice his idea to Kiku.

The brunette sitting at the desk sensed the blond's distress and did nothing else except make a 'shhhh' motion with a finger to his lips.

Though Arthur was unable to understand why Kiku was so calm and keeping the bloody stolen jewelry out in plain sight, Arthur nodded and did nothing except hide his bag reserved for thievery inside his bag reserved for his change of clothes.

The door opened after a moment, Arthur's panic vanishing as soon as he realized that it was just his best friend.

"Alfred F. Jones, you need to stop barging in on us in the middle of the night," Arthur sighed, running a hand through his tousled blonde locks in exasperation. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Sorry Artie," Alfred laughed as he opened the door a bit wider, his eyes crinkling in delight when seeing his best friend huff at his nickname. "You guys still up at this late at night?" Alfred asked the two, leaning on the door with a smile lighting up his features. His line-of-sight trailed to the jewelry resting on Kiku's desk. "Woah, what is that? Looks old, dude."

"Ah, just something I've been working on for my artifacts' class," Kiku replied, adjusting the lamp on his desk so that the bespectacled American could see better. "Our current assignment is to replicate an artifact from a country we've been assigned, and I was assigned to Greece."

A low whistle resounded from Alfred as he walked over by the Japanese student and looked at it over his shoulder. "Pretty damn impressive, looks like it could belong in a museum."

"I hope it does," Kiku nodded, picking up a gold earring with tweezers. "I've spent countless weeks researching it on the internet and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Heracles-san (a close friend of mine who works as a curator there) told me it was being displayed."

"I didn't want Kiku to feel like he was the only one still awake," Arthur commented, yawning as he
lay on the cot. "So I decided to stay up with him, what with us being roommates and all. I figured I could study some more while I was at it."

Alfred laughed, sitting down on the other end of the cot and ruffling up the Brit's hair. "Dude, you need to stop looking for excuses to stay up late. It's not good for you and we both know you don't need extra studying hours."

Arthur couldn't help but blush given the close proximity to the American. "Alright, alright, I'll try going to sleep earlier, now will you please stop messiing with my hair?"

"It's already messy enough as it is," Alfred teased, sticking both hands in Arthur's hair and fooling around with it some more. "Like anything I do will change it."

"You know it bugs me, that's why you keep on doing it," the Brit reminded the American, his blush worsening when he laughed. "Seriously, I don't want cheeseburger crumbs in my hair or something!"

"I don't eat that much-"

"You do and you know it!"

"Kirkland-"

"Jones-"

"Alfred-san, Arthur-san, could you please release your sexual tension somewhere else? You're distracting me from my project."

The two males blushed from the tips of their ears to the tips of their feet when hearing that statement, both entirely at a loss of words to say.

After a moment, Alfred emitted an over-exaggerated sigh, before dragging a protesting Arthur out of the cot.

"Come on, Artie-"

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere where we can release our sexual tension in peace~"

"H-h-he wasn't serious when he said that-!"

"I know, but we should really let him work. Those jewelry thingies look awesome."

"They really are. Hey, are you limping?"

"Yeah, kind of crushed my nuts by hitting a pole on my way here. Wait—why's your ankle bandaged?"

"Tripped up the stairs between one of my classes."

"How do you trip UP the stairs?"

"Don't act like you've never done it!"

The door to Arthur Kirkland and Kiku Honda's dorm closed with a satisfying 'bang', leaving the
quiet Japanese male to himself as he overlooked the priceless piece of history residing on his desk.

He couldn't help but smile a bit as he rested his hand on his cheek, the light from his lamp reflecting off the gold of the necklace, sending yellow shadows cascading off the ceiling.

"Those two are so oblivious. In more ways than one."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: This is my first USUK fanfiction I've ever written, and I hope you've enjoyed this chapter of 'Excelsior'. And before you ask, yes, I'm fully aware that 'Excelsior' is a famous Stan Lee quote, while the intermission is the Batman theme song. I just put that in for the fun of it, though I will admit that America's hero outfit is based off Captain America's costume, and Captain Amazing's outfit from 'Mystery Men'.

Regardless, please favorite/follow at your leisure, and reviews (whether positive or negative, since I'm fond of constructive criticism) are much appreciated. I'll try my best to update it soon.

Until then? Stay awesome.
"I think it would be a good idea to make replicas for the Ganymede jewelry, Arthur-san." Kiku decided as he continued to overlook the artifacts residing on his desk.

Since the Metropolitan heist two days ago, he had been meticulously inspecting the Greek pieces to check for any wire taps or cameras somehow imputed on the jewelry for obvious reasoning and hadn't found any sign of alteration. Still, as he and Arthur were living double lives as 'Japan' and 'England', both understood the importance of precaution regardless of how big or small the situation was.

"It seems a logical idea, Kiku," Arthur remarked, resting his hand on his cheek as he created an internet tab on his laptop. "Though why do you recommend we make them now when we've stolen the items and have no intention of giving them back?"

If there was any time we should have made replicas, it should have been before the Metropolitan heist, the Brit thought while typing the name 'Ayuramih' into his search engine on the Deep Web portion of the internet, clicking on the first website that appeared; a black market website. That way we could have swapped the originals with the fakes.

"Alfred-san saw the Ganymede jewelry two days ago and I told him they were fakes for my artifacts' class," the Japanese male reminded his dorm mate/partner-in-crime after turning off the lamp and standing up, stretching lightly as he did so as he had spent a long time in front of the computer. "Wouldn't it would be suspicious if we sold the jewelry and Alfred-san requested to see the 'replicas' again, only for them to be missing?"

The blond snorted a bit when taking the idea into consideration. "A step ahead of me as always," he smiled, clicking on the portion of the black market site only labeled as 'Ailateh', his green eyes scanning across pages of stolen artifacts up for sale. "Alright. I'll take care of finding a customer and sending the jewelry to them while you make the replicas. And though it'll take a while for me to complete the transaction of money and product (what with having to skirt around the police and all),
I imagine you'll have plenty of free time to create the impersonations as you see fit."

_The fact remains that it will be difficult for him to make realistic-looking artifacts to match the ones Alfred thought he saw_, Arthur resumed thinking, creating a product profile for the Ganymede jewelry on the website and establishing a price. _However, Kiku is capable of completing such a feat, if what he's demonstrated both recently and in the past is proof enough._

Another thought struck the blond when he logged out of Ayuramih, causing him to close his internet tabs and open up one of his computer programs. "Hey Kiku," he began, his mouse hovering over the folder recently saved on his laptop. "Could I check the security camera footage you gathered during the heist?"

The brunette nodded, a hesitant look present amongst his features for a moment. "Hai, Arthur-san," he spoke, standing behind his partner to watch what was shown on the screen. "Though do you remember what I said about that chip I gave you?"

"Yes," Arthur replied, watching the footage taken. "You said how you would be given access to a live video feed of all the cameras. Why do you ask?"

"What I said was correct, and I was able to see what was going on," Kiku acknowledged, playing with his fingers while watching the footage with Arthur. "However, as you'll see in a moment, the live video feed was cut off about ten minutes in."

This caught his partner off-guard. "Wait, what?" the blond sputtered, skipping ahead and stopping at the ten minute mark of the footage only to stare in shock when the feed abruptly cut off. "W-what happened to the security cameras?"

"I believe the security cameras were unharmed, as you and America-san didn't engage in fighting that affected the building," the Japanese male informed, noting the Brit's sheepish expression. "With the exception of that window you broke in order to escape," he reminded, smirking at the embarrassed blush on the Brit's cheeks.

"However, the thing that intrigued me about the heist wasn't the fact that my feed disconnected, but who disconnected it," Kiku hinted, leaning over Arthur's shoulder and moving the mouse until it skipped thirty seconds after the footage initially cut off.

Just seeing the image pop up on the screen again sent shivers down the brunette's spine. While it wasn't particularly horrifying or insightful, the mystery resided in how open for interpretation it was. The image was a plain white screen with a black 'O' in the center, like something out of the anime/manga 'Death Note'.

"Whoever disconnected my feed knew of our plan," Kiku explained, skipping further along the footage only to see the same image throughout the entire video. "And knew that you installed my chip into the security system, so they infiltrated the system and blocked off my live feed of the situation. When this happened, I tried to contact you through your communicator," he admitted, holding up the familiar pocket-watch so that his partner-in-crime could see. "But you didn't answer."

"And by the time that happened, it was already too late for me," the Brit muttered distastefully beneath his breath, his brow furrowing when recalling how the hero hugged him from behind and greeted him with a 'Ello love'. The bloody wanker probably thought it'd be funny to hold him all close like that and whisper in his ear like a lover, didn't he?

"I apologize for my inability to properly alert you, Arthur-san," the Japanese male bowed, standing upright when the Brit waved him off with a wave of his hand.
"It's fine, if anything I'm the one at fault since I didn't realize it until the last minute," Arthur mumbled, his cheeks blushing in embarrassment again considering a certain American idiot said the same thing about him during the heist. "Anyway, do you think it's possible that the burger-loving twat has a sidekick?"

"I wouldn't rule out the possibility," Kiku responded, still staring at the screen entirely blank save for that infamous letter, his fists clenched at his sides while his brow furrowed slightly. "Whoever or whatever they are, we should treat them with the same precaution we treat everything else, perhaps more if they prove to be a formidable foe in the future."

"If they had knowledge of our plan and met your technological prowess with a decapitation move, I say we tread lightly around this 'O'," the Englishman insisted, closing his laptop and redirecting his emerald gaze towards the Ganymede artifacts on the desk. He stood up from where he sat and began carefully wrapping up the pieces into the same fabric he used before. "Especially considering we have no idea what their full sidekick alias, real name, or face is. As I've encountered America in the past, it's only been him and I."

He snickered a bit, leaning on his arm to support himself even though his sprained ankle was mostly healed by now. "In a way, he's America's version of you," Arthur concluded, looking back to meet the Asian's dark brown eyes. "'Japan'."

Even though the Japanese male was wearing neither his Kitsune mask nor his black and white tuxedo he wore when masquerading as 'Japan', he placed his hand over his heart and bowed a miniscule amount.

"I promised that I would stay by your side to help you achieve your goal," Kiku murmured, his eyes closed as he reminisced within the depths of his mind of that day that seemed so long ago.

His dark gaze met the emerald gaze he'd become so familiar with, as he straightened out with his hand still over his heart.

"Your goal to make Alfred F. Jones confess his love to you. By any means necessary."

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"So you finished making the Ganymede replicas?" Alfred asked, one hand positioned on his wireless mouse as he scrolled down the recently added items on 'Ailateh' to see if England had already put the artifacts for sale, his other hand holding his iphone to his ear as he listened.

"Correct," the person on the end of his phone replied, their answer causing a smile to break out amongst the American's features. "Though I anticipate that England's sidekick—for I have no doubt he has one—will be making their own replicas shortly."

"Huh? Why would they do that?" The hero questioned, his blue eyes widening behind his glasses when he caught sight of the Ganymede jewelry already up for sale at a price of-

The blond had to massage his temple given how much England was asking for. Gosh, the amount of comic books he could buy with that kind of money was unfathomable.

"If they wanted to make the replicas, it would make sense for them to make it before the heist that way they could swap the originals with the fakes, right?" He continued, sighing a bit when his headache diminished.

"That's because some of our information has been leaked." the voice said, causing the American to turn pale.
"How long has it been leaked? Who heard what?" Alfred interrogated, trying and failing to keep his panic at bay. His sidekick was efficient; deadly efficient. It was rare for him to make a mistake, much less a mistake that could cost them dearly.

"Since the Metropolitan heist two days ago," the voice continued, putting a lid on the hero's anxiety as he sighed again, this time out of relief. "I assume it occurred while I was intercepting the program England installed into the security system, so that I could gain access into his helper's live video feed and cut them off."

"Between the time I began and finished the infiltration, there was a gap of time in which I was at my most vulnerable point. A short gap of time in which you'd have to be fast to act upon, but a gap of time nonetheless," the speaker admitted, pieces of shame evident in their tone. "During that point, I suspect that England's helper infiltrated us and accessed the basics of our plan."

"So there's a chance that England will lure us into a trap based on the knowledge he has?" The blond exclaimed, nervousness and fear wrapping around his nerves like a python would do to its prey, his grip on his cellphone increasing until a small 'crack' from his phone case forced him to relinquish it. "Should we change our tactics and catch him by surprise? Should we back away and wait for all of it to pass over."

"No," the speaker on the end of Alfred's phone interrupted, surprising the American. "We will not run. If we run, we're giving into criminal activity and letting England win when we can clearly work this to our advantage."

"But you said he knows what we're going to do," Alfred expressed, exiting out of the black market website and closing his laptop, his heart beating erratically within his chest cavity. "Our plan will be rendered useless if he can anticipate our actions!"

"I said that England's helper knows the basics of our plan," the voice reminded, making Alfred's words die in his throat. "I never said they know it entirely, and that they told England."

"Why would they retain what amount of information they possess?" The American wondered out loud, standing up and walking to the window of his dorm. His dorm—much to his luck—was private and gave him a wonderful view of the New York University arch and park it was located in. "In spite of how much or little of our plan they know, it's obvious to tell your leader what the enemy is planning!"

"In some strategies, it's better to let your leader be oblivious of the things soon to occur," the voice answered, a hint of amusement in their voice. "Their actions, unaltered by knowledge of the future, prove to be more productive than actions altered."

"Right," Alfred agreed, letting his gaze wander downwards at the various students loitering in the park of NYU, a smile rising against his features again when seeing Arthur playing chess by himself on the grass. When they were kids, he and Arthur used to love playing chess together. Of course, Arthur always won. "Regardless, we should tread with caution around England and his helper, whether or not he's been informed of what we're going to do."

"That seems like a logical idea, Alfred," the voice remarked, as Alfred opened the door to his dorm and made his way downstairs to play chess with a certain Brit.

"Thanks, Oya."
Author’s Note: Funny story about this--I originally typed up a different chapter, one much more serious and dark than this one, initially. Though I decided against putting that one up since I wanted the second chapter to have the vibe this chapter I feel gave off. But don’t despair, I’ll post that other chapter later in the story, and I’ll mention in the author’s note whether it’s that one or not, so keep your eyes out for it~

Here’s a few things to explain:

*the ‘Deep Web’ Arthur mentions is the portion of the internet that’s more reserved for criminals, pedophiles, drug/people-traffickers, all that dark stuff. As for the website’s name ‘Ayuramih’ and the EBay-like section ‘Ailateh’, you can figure where I got the name for those things if you simply type it up backwards.

*As for the amount of money England/Arthur’s asking for the Ganymede stuff, I can’t find the estimated price range for the stuff ANYWHERE, so just assume it’s a lot. Like, a lot a lot.

*At one point, England/Arthur said ‘met your technological prowess with a decapitation move’. In strategy, a decapitation move is a move that achieves strategical paralysis by targeting political leadership, command/control, strategic weapons, things along those lines. Basically, killing the Hydra at its core instead of aiming for its heads. In the case of the Metropolitan heist, Japan/Kiku was acting as England/Arthur eyes, so without access to the cameras surrounding the area, England/Arthur was rendered unaware of his surroundings.

*Sorry for those of you who are more familiar with the way computers and hacking function. The interworking of computers are lost upon me, though I’d greatly appreciate it if someone who’s more knowledgeable of such could leave a review explaining it so that I could revise this.

So that’s the second chapter~! I’ll try to update soon, but until then? Stay awesome.
It had been a week since the Ganymede jewelry—the highlight of the Metropolitan Museum's collection and a priceless piece of Greece's ancient history—was stolen with nothing more than an empty glass container, a broken lunette window, and a few trampled bushes to serve as proof that such artifacts were stolen.

The event had taken the media by storm, as rumors began to spread and people began to wonder what occurred on that night. What was the purpose of stealing the artifacts, if they were stolen at all? Was it for the vast amounts of money the jewelry was worth, or was it for the glory of having managed to escape without a trace (save for the aforementioned glass container, broken lunette window, and trampled bushes?)

The press had a field day as all journalists and news reporters would with such an event as that. Countless articles ripped the police to shreds and cursed their inability to catch the thief, rejoicing in their failure as taking advantage of public interest increased the sales of their magazines and newspapers.

Out of all forms of media, none was more excited than the internet. With the internet, people could take sides without a second thought as they wouldn't face repercussions for hiding behind a computer screen. They could spread rumors and share opinions to their hearts' content without fear of their identities being revealed or their images being ruined.

News of the Metropolitan heist spread like wildfire across the web as people began to question numerous things regarding the theft. Why those particular artifacts when they obviously had the skills to steal more? How did they manage to get past the security and take the guarded items? Most importantly, who was responsible for sneaking in, robbing the museum, and slinking under the radar of both the NYPD and America, New York's finest superhero?

Little did New York—no, the WORLD at this point—realize that the man in question, the criminal who had become the bane of the police's existence and was quickly becoming recognized as a
renowned thief, was sitting in the corner of a Starbucks' café on his laptop and sipping lukewarm tea. 

*I anticipated that the museum and the NYPD would work to cover up the situation as best as they could,* Arthur thought as he took a drink from his brewed Earl Grey, cringing a bit at how quickly the beverage had cooled. *Knowing the museum, they would dismiss the Ganymede's disappearance by saying it was taken in for restoration to prevent their standing from being tarnished, which they did.*

He drained the rest of his drink and pushed the Styrofoam cup to the side, typing 'Identity of Metropolitan thief' into his Google search and clicking the enter button on his keyboard. *And, knowing the police, they would force America to keep quiet about the whole affair, which they did. Since America serves as a mascot for the police, they can't afford him to let slip any information that could make them look bad. Even though the heist occurred a week ago, he hasn't released any information that could point to a criminal responsible for the incident.*

The Brit's brow crinkled a miniscule amount at the millions of results found in 0.26 seconds, his hand resting on his cheek as he scrolled his wireless mouse up and down the screen. He clicked on the first website at the top of the page with a small smirk etching onto his features when he caught sight of it.

He leaned in his chair after a moment, still staring at the screen. "I knew I asked Kiku to upload some footage to the internet," he mumbled beneath his breath as he exited out of the site and clicked on the other sites, all of them showing the same sets of pictures. "But I didn't think he'd do it so quickly."

In order for his goal to be completed, several tasks had to be undertaken. The first task was to steal a few items, items well-known for their worth in the black market, to set the stage and begin molding his reputation. He didn't want to steal an artifact like the Ganymede jewels on his first heist; otherwise it would look like he was taking the credit for someone else's work.

The second task was to get in contact with other criminals for the purpose of making connections that could prove to be beneficial in the future. Arthur was especially careful during this task as it was a risky move on his end. If he dropped one tidbit of personal information, whether his true name or where he lived (although he would never be stupid enough to go about blabbing about such things to begin with), it could be his undoing. Though this was around the time he met Kiku, his dorm mate who turned out to be an expert in the field of hacking and technological manipulation. While it had taken a good amount of time to develop trust with the Japanese male, the Englishman found it to be a lot easier working with a partner than by himself. After all, the enemy of his enemy was his friend, right?

The third task was to create his pièce de résistance as a thief by stealing the Ganymede jewelry and evading capture from the NYPD. While he hadn't anticipated that America would show up in his best-cast scenario (even if the pesky American had somehow managed to find him during his past, less-significant heists), it did improve his image as he had stolen the jewelry and evaded capture from both the NYPD and New York's famous superhero.

Now that he had stolen the Ganymede artifacts, he figured it was about time for him to give the media a face to associate with the crime they became so infatuated with in so short a time. If he waited any longer, he wouldn't be surprised if some other thief stepped forward and took the credit for his work.

*I asked Kiku to submit a few snapshots from what security footage wasn't interrupted by 'O' to various websites, newspapers, and magazines,* Arthur continued to think as he closed the internet tabs on his laptop, erased his browser history, and exited out of his fake user IP address online. Ever
since he began his criminal activities, he found it useful to create a few IP addresses to prevent being traced. A simple protocol he and Kiku established when they first formed their partnership, as they both agreed that precaution was an absolute necessity if they wanted to stay out of jail. *That way, both the NYPD and America could be hounded by the press for not revealing that information sooner and decrease their public support. And after that, it won't be long before-*

"-All the tasks at hand have been cleared," Arthur finished out loud beneath his breath.

"What tasks at hand?" A familiar voice wondered, causing the Brit to almost jump out of his seat considering dear God for a minute he thought it was-

"Alfred!" Arthur gasped, holding his heart in an attempt to catch his breath. "You need to stop sneaking up on me like that!"

The American laughed at the sight of the blond looking so distressed, the sound causing a blush to emerge amongst the Englishman's previously-pale features.

"Sorry," Alfred apologized, pulling out the chair across from Arthur and sitting down. "I saw you were in here and decided to surprise you. I didn't think you were a Starbucks' person."

"If by surprise you meant scare within an inch of my life, then yes, you surprised me," Arthur replied while crossing his arms over his chest. "And I'm not one for Starbucks. Since Kiku began studying for his exams for his summer classes, I've been coming here to get my tea."

*In actuality, Kiku began creating the replicas for the Ganymede artifacts like we discussed recently,* the Brit admitted within the contents of his mind, getting up and throwing his empty Styrofoam cup in the trash considering he finished it some time ago. *He requested that I stay out of the dorm because the slightest distraction could result in inadequate impersonations.*

"Huh, and here I thought you had the unhealthy studying habit," the American remarked when he sat down again, an impish smile playing amongst his features again as he rested his hand on his cheek. "But off goes Kiku studying a week before his summer exams are to start."

"You know how we both are," Arthur retorted, hoping the blond couldn't see through his lie however true to Kiku's personality it was. "We take our education very seriously as we both need 4.0s to maintain our scholarships."

Alfred drew out an over-dramatic sigh, flopping his arms on the table. "I would have gotten a scholarship like you guys if I didn't flunk my English final-"

"Which, based on what you read, didn't surprise me all that much."

"Comic books are a form of literature!"

"As much literature as a children's coloring book."

"You're just jelly 'cuz my English is gooder than yours~"

"Good God, just hearing that statement made me lose brain cells," Arthur moaned, raking a hand through his messy blond hair to tease the American further, unable to help the small smile brightening up his features. "I'm amazed you passed high school, Jones."

It was Alfred's turn to smile. "That's because you insisted on tutoring me, Kirkland," he winked, snickering at the blush that bloomed across the Englishman's cheekbones.
"S-shut up, you moron," the Brit coughed out, trying/failing to fight the raging red on his face by averting his embarrassed emerald gaze from mischievous sapphire.

"If I ask, will you tutor me again," Alfred implored, leaning forward until his nose was barely brushing the boy sitting across from him. "Kirkland-sempai?"

Arthur lost it, having to cover his mouth to prevent himself from bursting into a fit of unadulterated laughter, his face brighter than a Mediterranean tomato and his stomach hurting from how badly he was holding it in.

"You just go off and ruin it, Jones," he managed to say between his fingers, burying his face on the table so he could quietly laugh his guts out in peace. "You burger-loving twat."

The American only grinned, ruffling the hair of the Englishman knowing how he felt about his hair being tampered with, the smile dancing across his features excellently concealing his confusion likely towards why that particular insult sounded familiar.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

He glanced over the blueprints with a curious smile residing amongst his shadowy features, loving the way that the metal glinted in the bright light of his computer. Even though it would have been easier to simply purchase one off the internet, it wouldn't have been as fun as making one directly. Besides, since he had finished making the replica of the Ganymede jewelry as he and Alfred agreed beforehand, 'O' had much more time dedicated to his more…personal projects.

He was efficient; deadly efficient, if the decapitation move he demonstrated during the Metropolitan heist against England's presumed sidekick was anything to go off of. While it was undeniably tricky to access England's feed and disconnect it, he felt it was worth it in watching the thief struggle akin to a squashed bug desperately clinging to life.

"Though the fact that people could potentially learn our secrets is proof that my abilities leave much to be desired," 'O' mumbled, glancing over the blueprints one last time to check for any possible mistakes he could have made. After England's helper had managed to infiltrate his computer and enact his own form of a decapitation move (granted, much more subtle than his own), he had no choice but to be even more cautious to prevent such mistakes from happening again. "However, with luck, I'll only have to wait a little longer before I can finally test this out and prove myself."

Another glance to the machine caused a miniscule smile to grow upon their features. An excited smile.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Yeah, I couldn’t sleep at all, so I decided to type up chapter three. This is the kind of stuff that pops out of my mind when my brain can’t go to sleep, it’s kind of weird.

However, I quite like where this is going. Sorry that the chapter isn’t longer and that my author’s note isn’t longer, but I’m going to try to get some sleep soon. Until then? Stay awesome.
Alfred F. Jones was not easily stressed out.

Sure, he went into panic mode and started shaking like a leaf whenever he forgot to study for an important test, but ‘stress’ and ‘fear’ were two entirely different things. Yes, he flipped out whenever he had to try British food, but if something that was supposed to be a scone ended up tasting like petrified couch stuffing, it was normal to react that way when your physical health was at stake. And, while he was known for hugging pillows and screaming like a little girl whenever he watched a scary movie, everything featured in those films were nothing in comparison to the gut-wrenching, heart-stopping panic he had experienced during his heroic escapades (except for Italian horror movies; those things were a chaotic bombardment of entrails and naked women.)

But even those situations, from forgetting to study to playing the part of a superhero (hell, even watching Italian horror movies) paled in comparison to what he was dealing with at the moment.

Is this a date or not? Alfred thought, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides as he glanced to the smaller blond beside him, quickly looking away out of fear he’d catch him staring. I can’t tell if this is a date or not!

To be honest, Alfred had condemned himself to this particular fate; shortly after the surprise-meeting in the Starbucks' café, Arthur pulled out a list as he suddenly remembered he had a few errands to run while he was temporarily exiled from his dorm.

"Just a few small things I need to get," the Brit mumbled beneath his breath, his emerald gaze averting the American's bespectacled sapphire one for unbeknownst reasoning, his pale cheeks glowing faintly with pink. "Considering I'm out and about anyway."

Alfred grinned from where he sat across from Arthur. "Can I come along?" he asked, brimming with enthusiasm at the idea of spending more time with the Englishman. "It'd go by a lot faster with two people."
The Brit appeared hesitant, looking out the window so he could avoid looking at his friend. "I don't know," he replied, his face blooming into a darker shade of pink while his eyes deepened in a whirlwind of emotions Alfred was unable to recognize, therefore making the American all the more curious to know what was going on through his friend's mind to make him appear like that. "I... suppose you could join. Just to help me carry my stuff. Nothing more."

That was Arthur's equivalent of a yes, so Alfred accepted it with another winning smile. "Great!" he cheered, standing up quickly and accidentally sending his chair flying backwards.

The café went silent, all eyes centering on the tall blond who laughed to diffuse the awkward silence. "My bad," he said, scratching the back of his head and sheepishly putting the chair in its previous spot. "We'll be going in a minute."

While I know it was an ingenious plan of mine to accompany Artie on his errands to spend more time with him, Alfred continued to think as he cascaded his line-of-sight over mountains of book titles sitting on the shelves, his heart rate calmer since Arthur went to a different aisle. And that the only reason he let me come with him was to supposedly carry his things-

His train of thought derailed there, as his breath caught in his chest and blood gathered in his cheeks.

I still can't help but feel like this is a date, he admitted within the contents of his mind, picking a random book title and reading the synopsis on the back, his eyes moving but his brain not registering what it said.

A soft sigh escaped from his mouth as he put the book back, picking up another one and opening it to a random page in an attempt to distract himself. Anyone who looked at him would have probably thought he was reading 'Fifty Shades of Grey' given how badly he was blushing.

T-though that's impossible, Alfred expressed mentally, hastily depositing the book ('Dating for Germans') and shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket, looking around again even though he was paying no attention. It's been like, seventeen years since we've known each other? We're practically family!

It was so obscure to think that he had known Arthur for so long. From afar, people would think they'd never get along, Alfred being a loud, cheerful ball of never-ending energy, Arthur being a quiet, secluded bookworm who spoke sarcasm as a second language. Hell, Alfred didn't think they'd get along at first, but even that mindset didn't last.

His bespectacled gaze automatically softened at the thought of the Brit, not caring how he was blatantly staring into space at this point as he began to question the fuzzy feeling stirring up his nerves. He grimaced at the sensation of his heart squeezing uncomfortably within his chest cavity, his eyes half-lidded in confliction as he continued to question its origin.

The blond reached into his pocket and removed his phone, pulling up his photo album and searching for a particular picture. While it took him a few minutes, a warm smile resided amongst his cheekbones when he found it. He could still remember when the photo was taken, even though it was many years ago.

After a moment, he turned off his phone and rested his forehead against the bookshelf in front of him, his internal confusion visible in the slump of his shoulders and the pained contort of his usually-optimistic features.

"My life would be so much easier if I didn't have to feel these things," he spoke barely above a
"Feel things about what?" A familiar voice wondered, causing the American to almost jump considering dear God for a minute he thought it was-

"Artie!" Alfred gasped, feeling déjà vu envelop his senses. "Now I know how you feel," he acknowledged, hating how quickly his body was heating up at the thought of being overheard. He turned to properly face his friend, surprised at how many books were stuffed in the plastic bag held in his hands. "Though did you really need to buy out the whole store?"

The Englishman turned bright red, looking at his feet in a vain effort to conceal his rapid blush with his blond bangs. "It's not as much as you think it is," he retorted, shoving the bag in the American's arms with his face still hidden. "J-just books for personal reasons."

Moments like these made Alfred relieved he had superhuman-strength, for he didn't want to imagine how horribly he'd struggle beneath the weight of the bag if he had normal muscles. Even though it was only the one plastic bag, it surprised the tall blond how many books could be shoved into it without it breaking. It didn't surprise the tall blond how Arthur probably dragged the stuff on the floor with both hands since he wasn't strong enough to carry it with one.

"'History of English Sorcery'? 'Spells, Hexes, and Potions'? 'British Black Magic'?" Alfred read the titles of the books out loud, a fair eyebrow rising against his forehead. "Didn't think you were really into this kind of stuff, Artie."

It never ceased to amaze Alfred how often (and vibrant) Arthur could blush. He once tried to keep count of how often the Brit blushed in a single day, but he lost count after the first minute of conversing with him.

"Some books for my mum," Arthur informed as they walked out of the store, zipping up his hoodie since it was a bit brisk for a summer afternoon, the slight chill in the air only worsening the red of his fair features. "While my family is Protestant (or Catholic, I really don't know), mum has always had a mild interest in magic. Since her birthday is coming up, I figured it was about time to purchase some presents for her."

The statement almost made the American stop walking, the fact dawning on his features. "Wait, isn't your mom's birthday next week? Oh crap, I need to get her a gift of some sort!" Alfred exclaimed, feeling like an idiot when the Brit walking beside him laughed.

"Don't worry about it," Arthur reassured, motioning to the mound of books in Alfred's grip. "We can wrap those books and say it's from us both, how about that?"

The bespectacled blond turned pink, guilt creeping up on his senses and hating how his stomach turned to knots at the sound of Arthur's laugh. "I don't know," he said, wondering if the weather was responsible for the warming nature of his face. "I'd feel bad about it since you bought it and all."

A light hit to the head made him stop his sentence as soon as he started it.

"Think of it as payment for carrying my things, Jones," Arthur huffed in a mock-offended tone, retracting his hand from the American's head as he crossed his arms over his chest. "My mum loves you anyway, so she'll think nothing of it."

Alfred laughed, using his free hand to rub at the already-vanishing blow on his head. "Okay, Kirkland."

The next minute passed in a comfortable silence between the two, broken only when the American
asked the Briton how his mother was doing.

"She's doing fine," Arthur replied, his hands in his pockets as his gaze kept on the lookout for possible stores to visit. "Still a bit hung up on us living in the college dorms instead of living with her, but she's gotten used to it."

A small smile surfaced on the smaller blond's cheekbones. "She says she can't get used to how quiet it is now that you're gone," he added, half-joking and half-serious while Alfred laughed again.

"I'm glad to hear that," Alfred commented, following the Englishman inside when he found a store to his liking. "When my parents died while we were in high school, I had no one around to help me. Mattie was in Germany for a study-abroad program, so I was by myself until you and your mom stepped in to give me support."

The days following his parent's passing went by in a blur, varying in shades of black and white.

His senses were numb and his heart felt cold; a hollow thump in his chest to remind him that he was alive. His heart beat was as monotonous as the ticking of a clock, and it served as his punishment. His cross to bear for what he had done.

"If it wasn't for me," he muttered beneath his breath, his vision blurry with saltwater as the darkness of his room seemed to engulf his being, the sound of his pulse thundering in his ears as each 'bump-bump' grew louder with every second. "If it wasn't for me, then-"

A soft knock interrupted him before he could go further. He blinked in surprise considering he wasn't expecting anyone to intrude.

"Alfred? It's me, Arthur," the voice explained through his door, realization replacing the pain of his previous expression. The American suddenly felt vulnerable, exposed as he sat on his knees amongst the darkness of his room. How long had it been since he had gone outside his bedroom? How many days since he had come home and locked himself away?

He felt his throat become dry as a million things he wanted to say swarmed into his brain yet unable to come out of his mouth.

A few more knocks echoed throughout his room, though Alfred remained silent.

"Alfred, I know you're in there. It's been two days since the funeral and since you holed yourself in there—you need to come out."

Do I, though?

After what I've done?

"While I don't know how they died, I know how it feels for people to suddenly leave. I know it hurts you, leaves a scar on your heart, and makes you think it was your fault they left."

It was.

It really was.

"-When it really wasn't, Alfred. Please, just open the door. For me."

Another moment passed in silence, broken only by the sound of sighing from behind the door. A sad sigh.
Alright," the voice murmured, causing the American's heart to twitch painfully in his chest. "I'll be leaving, then."

The quiet sound of footsteps trailing away from his door sounded louder than his heartbeat, desperation surging through his veins as if he had been injected with an EpiPen.

Alfred didn't even realize he'd gotten up and opened the door until he saw the Brit walking away, until he felt his arms wrap around the boy's waist from behind, until he pulled him close and buried his head in his shoulder.

Until he started to cry.

Since the whole situation happened, he had tried to remain strong. He tried to be brave like he hadn't back then, had tried to hold it in, but now...

Now that resolution washed away as quickly as the tears streaming down his face.

"I'm sorry," he managed to choke out, embarrassment overriding all his emotions as he was unable to stop himself from crying. "I'm sorry for this, but please don't leave me. Please."

Alfred couldn't see the Brit's expression, but he assumed it was a soft look based on the tone of his voice. "Don't worry," he stated, unwavering in his stance even as the American continued to sob on his shoulder. "I won't leave. I promise."

He couldn't remember how long the two of them stood there, how long it was until he finally managed to calm down. All he remembered was the comforting squeeze of his hands as Arthur asked if he'd like to come to his apartment to watch 'Doctor Who' with him and his mother, and the gentle grip on his hands when he agreed and followed him across the hall.

In actuality, he was the one who gave me the most support during those times, Alfred thought, watching the Englishman as he placed random items like roses, peppermint, and eggs onto the self-checkout aisle, his eyes half-lidded behind his glasses and making him seem far older than he actually was. While his mother took care of me like my mother did, Arthur offered me something else that made everything seem better. I don't know what it was, but I've been indebted to him for years because of it.

"Alfred? You've been staring into space for a while now, are you alright?" That voice, that same voice that reached out to him from behind his door, interrupted his train of thought.

The bespectacled blond blinked, glancing at the new grocery bag in the Briton's hand to register that they were finished here before a sheepish smile overtook his features to replace his previous expression.

"Sorry," he laughed, walking out of the store with him and ignoring the strange look he received from the shorter male. "Just thinking's all."

Only recently have I finally begun to repay my debt, the debt to both my parents and Arthur, Alfred continued to think as he walked with his friend. To my parents for what I wasn't able to do when they died, and to Arthur for what he's done to me.

Alfred smiled.

Yes. Using my persona as 'America', I can prevent people from losing their loved ones, and, even if it's through means as simple as putting criminals in jail, I can make the world a place where
Arthur can find happiness.

And I'll start by taking down England.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Hope you enjoyed that little bit of insight towards Alfred's backstory. I think this is the first chapter entirely in a particular character’s point-of-view, not to mention we got some USUK action goin’ on~ It's funny, I meant for this story to primarily be a romance, but I ended up typing a hell of a lot more crime/psychological stuff by accident since it was/is so much fun to write. Though I wanted to treat you guys, my fantabulous readers, to some more USUK since I know you've been probably waiting for it.

Sorry if the characters were OOC or if my writing didn’t make sense--I don’t have any beta-readers or editors of any kind, I rely on myself entirely for all my stories, so I don’t know how good/bad it is to other people. Thank you though for reading this chapter, I'll try to update soon. Until then? Stay awesome.
The Press Conference

Chapter Summary

In which shit hits the fan for multiple parties.

Chapter Notes

Regular font indicates the present.

*Italic font indicates flashbacking.*

**Bold italic font indicates thought.**

**Bold regular font indicates writing/typing.**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM PRESS CONFERENCE

Toris Laurinaitis, New York Times Staff Reporter

Xx/xx/xx

Updated: 23 minutes ago

New York City- Nine days ago, police officers from the New York Police Department surrounded the Metropolitan Museum of Art around 1:30 A.M and invaded the premise after receiving word that a masked figure was spotted entering the museum thirty minutes prior, followed by the superhero America about ten minutes after the masked figure. 2/3 of the squad went inside the museum while 1/3 went to inspect the area around the specified location.

The squad sent inside found the fifteen Metropolitan night guards bound and gagged in a locked security room on the first floor. Aside from the rope burns on their limbs, the men appeared to be unharmed regardless of the fact that all the men were tied to chairs with duct tape covering their mouths when they were discovered.

"The last thing I remember was being in the security room with the other guards," said Ludwig Beilschmidt, head security guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "We were overlooking the footage from the cameras when a strange smell infiltrated the room and I passed out. When I came to, I was unable to move and talk along with the rest of my men."

Rumors have been circulating that a broken glass cylinder was uncovered beside the door of the security room and that the container was sent into a lab for further analysis.

The guards and possible cylinder aside, nothing out of the ordinary was found until the squad
reached the second floor where they discovered an empty glass container for the historic Ganymede jewelry in the Highlights' section of the museum and a broken lunette window overlooking the front entrance. The Metropolitan Museum has dismissed the idea that the items were stolen, saying that the artifacts in question were taken in for restoration. Whether the statement is true or false has yet to be identified.

Closer examination by the outside squad confirmed that the bushes beneath the window were trampled, indicating the possibility that the perpetrator broke through the window and landed in the bushes to escape, though the outside squad later confirmed that America was found a few blocks away. While it is known that the outside police squad found the superhero and most likely asked him what happened, the contents of their conversation are unknown as the information hasn't yet been released by the police.

Since that evening, various speculations have arisen all over the media regarding the identity of the Metropolitan figure. Two days ago, photos from the Metropolitan security cameras were leaked onto the internet by an anonymous source, revealing several vague images of America inside the museum and appearing to be looking for something or someone. Along with those photos, the source also revealed photos of the possible perpetrator. The anonymous source only labeled the possible perpetrator as 'England'.

While the police have yet to uncover the identity of the source responsible for the 'England' images, the NYPD has finally resolved to give the public an explanation for the Metropolitan Museum incident nine days ago in the form of a press conference taking place later today at the New York University School of Law.

Arthur finished reading the article on his iphone, turning off his phone and putting it back into his pocket.

"It's all moving as I anticipated," he smirked, leaning back in the chair of his desk and cascading his line-of-sight through the window of his dorm. "Though I didn't think the police would take that course of action so soon in the game."

The NYPD dug their grave the moment they decided to withhold information regarding the heist from the public, he thought, resting his hand on his cheek as he continued to look out the window. His dorm had a nice view of Washington State Park located near New York University, so it allowed him an even better view of the news reporters gathering in the area to see the upcoming press conference. The police dismissed the heist by saying the museum took the Ganymede items in for restoration in an attempt to preserve both the museum and the NYPD's reputation. They didn't want to be perceived as weak for America being unable to catch a simple thief, what with America being the police's mascot and all. But information regarding the heist kept getting leaked, causing the public to grow suspicious. It wasn't long before it became obvious that the artifacts were stolen instead of being restored to their former glory.

His eyes crinkled as he struggled not to laugh. Arthur redirected his gaze towards the various newspapers and magazines littering his desk, all of the papers and magazines featuring articles that were clearly insulting the police and portraying them in negative light. The public began to hate the police for lying to them and treating them like they were children by deliberately hiding information. So, the media went out of their way to tarnish the NYPD's reputation by spouting conspiracy theories and blatantly-fake rumors to blackmail the police into giving them the truth about the Metropolitan heist. Not only did they know the NYPD would give into their demands if
they pushed hard enough, but they also knew that the sales of their newspapers and magazines would skyrocket. It was a win-win situation either way.

After a moment of overlooking the papers and magazines on his desk, he collected them all into a pile and began rolling them into paper balls. As if the internet was any better. When Kiku uploaded photos of America, it only added fuel to the fire since there was proof that America was there and that he was being forced to keep silent by his superiors. In any other instance, he wouldn't have hesitated to tell the public what really happened as he's incapable of keeping his mouth shut.

When he finished rolling all the articles into paper balls, he proceeded to toss each one into the trashcan across the room with his smirk growing bigger. It was the last straw for everyone when Kiku uploaded photos of England. It was definite proof that the police and museum lied to everyone. It actually got the point where people began to view England as a hero, considering they believed he was showing the police's true nature to the world.

Toss.

So the NYPD relented at last, deciding it would be better to let people know the truth rather than have people continue to sprout their own fabricated versions of the truth.

Toss.

The NYPD only recently let lose tiny bits of information, and even then to select newspapers like The New York Times. That information is visible in the article I just read.

Toss.

And now they're having the press conference to do damage control by stating the facts, in vain efforts of regaining the positive image they lost.

A soft sigh escaped from his lips when he tossed the last ball into the trashcan, leaning back in his chair and looking out the window again. "But we both know that won't be so easy," he spoke, his expression lighting up at the sight of the press swarming into the School of Law as the conference was starting in a few minutes. "It's far more difficult to regain trust than it is to gain it. You can consider this my checkmate, 'New York's Finest'."

Arthur opened his clothing bag and raked his gaze across his criminal attire resting within its depths, removing the mask from the bag and turning it over in his hands; how much he admired the way the bright sunlight shone from his window and glistened off the silver tree branches.

While Kiku uploading the footage to the internet was the final blow to the police's crumbling façade, that move was a double-edged sword as anyone could recognize my outfit now. On the other hand, with 'England' finally being acknowledged across the media, I can use the name to my advantage and finally accomplish my goals.

"With this, I can finally do it," he whispered excitedly, missing the sound of footsteps coming near his door. "With this, I can finally-"

He promptly jumped in his seat when he heard a knock on his door.

I am having the most bizarre sense of déjà-vu right now, he thought quickly as he shoved the mask into the bag and closed it shut, spinning around in his chair so he could see whoever it was when they came in. "C-come in," he stuttered, hoping to God that the person on the other side didn't hear
"A-Arthur-san, could you please open the door for me?" the voice replied from behind his door, relief spreading through the Brit's system as it was only Kiku.

"You and Alfred keep scaring me senseless," he said, standing up and opening the door only for a thick eyebrow to rise against his features when he saw how full the Asian's arms were with…fur?

"What the bloody hell is that thing?" Arthur questioned as he moved to the side so that his roommate could get through, his emerald orbs never leaving whatever the thing was in Kiku's arms.

"Alfred-san's pet," Kiku managed to say through the heaps of fur, setting was what apparently a pet on the floor and collapsing into a chair. Arthur closed the door and sat beside the brunette, still staring in a mixture of awe and fear at the mess of fluffiness currently running in circles on the carpet. "Its name is Americat."

"T-that's a cat?" The blond gasped, in no way screaming like a girl when what was apparently a cat jumped on his lap and started rubbing against his chest. "GOOD GOD, IT'S SO HEAVY! WHAT THE BLOODY HELL DOES HE FEED THIS THING?!"

"It's Alfred-san," Kiku deadpanned, scooting away from the purring feline. "What do you think he feeds it?"

"A strict hamburger diet, I'm assuming?" Arthur wondered out loud, grimacing when the cat started licking his cheek since its tongue was really rough. A groan escaped him when the Japanese male beside him nodded. "That was probably a rhetorical question. Leave it to the bloke to be so patriotic, though. Americat? Really?"

Another nod escaped his roommate.

"He's quite creative with names," he murmured in a sarcastic tone, getting a firm grip on the beast so he could properly see what it looked like (though the feat wasn't easy, as it seemed to somehow possess the same absurd strength as its owner.) "He's as good at names as America."

To be honest, the cat wasn't a hulking mass of living fur like he initially thought. Don't get him wrong, it was a big cat with fluffy white fur covering its body, long dark fur around its neck, and thin semi-circle marks under its eyes that kind of looked like glasses. But once his initial bout of horror subsided, he found himself strangely fond of the feline.

"It's actually kind of cute," Arthur mumbled, unable to help the small smile forming on his face when the cat resumed licking his cheeks. It kind of reminded him of a grumpy Scottish Fold he used to have as a pet when he was younger, though it wasn't nearly as affectionate as this cat was. "I wonder why it likes me so much?"

Kiku smirked a miniscule amount at that. "Perhaps because it's a lot like Alfred-san?" He teased, chuckling when the Brit proceeded to blush like a Mediterranean tomato. "Regardless, Alfred-san requested me to keep an eye on Americat until he returned from the press conference at the School of Law."

"The press conference? Why on Earth would he go to that when he can barely sit still for longer than five minutes?" The blond asked while absentmindedly petting the feline, his brow furrowing in confusion as he tried to imagine Alfred sitting still. After a moment, he stopped trying to imagine it since it was too unrealistic.

Kiku shrugged. "Told me it was for one of his classes," the brunette answered, standing up and
grabbing his school bag. "And speaking of which," he began as he headed for the door. "I need to go to the conference too."

Arthur's eyes widened in surprise. "You need to go to the conference as well? Why? What about the cat?"

Kiku smirked again. "I'm also going for one of my classes," he admitted, opening the door and poking his head out so he could still see his roommate. "Not to mention it's not often that a superhero visits the school."

That statement caught the Arthur's attention. "Wait, superhero? Kiku!"

The Japanese male closed the door so that he wouldn't have to answer, leaving the Briton engulfed in silence save for the purring ball of fur still sitting on his lap.

"So America's here?" Arthur acknowledged, standing up with the cat held to his chest and walking towards his window. He set Americat down on his desk and looked down at the crowd gathering in front of the School of Law, grimacing at the thought of his nemesis somewhere in that area. It was disturbing to think the superhero was so close yet so far away. In any other situation, it would be the ideal time to get his revenge for leaving the Metropolitan Museum so abruptly, but with the public, press, and police all intermingling in the same premise, that would be practically suicide.

"Though when did he end up coming? Surely I would have seen him arrive considering I was next to the window for a while," he expressed, not noticing how much Americat was smelling the bag on his desk containing his England attire. "And he couldn't have come now, otherwise he would be hounded by the press! How did he sneak past so easily?"

He opened the window and stuck his head out, leaning down a miniscule amount in case he somehow missed the masked idiot. No matter, he thought bitterly as he came back inside and turned his back from the window, his hand on his chin in a thinking motion. He'd stick out like a sore thumb even if I did see him there.

"Well, it's not like it'll really matter," he admitted, shrugging his shoulders. "I mean, it's not like I'll be going to the conference any time soon-"

He stopped his statement as soon as he turned in the direction of the window again, his words lost in his throat considering the window was open, the cat was gone, and the bag containing his England attire was gone too.

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I wonder when this stopped being a USUK fanfic and turned into a Code Geass fanfic. I didn’t mean for it to happen, it just kind of...did. Though, I have to say, this next chapter is going to be FUN AS HELL to write.

Thanks so much for reading, I'll try to update soon with chapter 6. Until then? Stay awesome.
An Unusual Form of Checkmate

Chapter Summary

In which cats are chased and drastic measures undertaken.

Chapter Notes

Regular font indicates the present.

*Italic font indicates flashbacking.*

**Bold italic font indicates thought.**

**Bold regular font indicates writing/typing.**

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).

Alfred rubbed his temples to stave off his oncoming headache, wishing he had enough foresight to bring along some pills that could prevent his skull from throbbing with pain every ten seconds.

To be honest, Alfred F. Jones was fine with press conferences. As a superhero, they were a necessity as they helped increase his popularity with the public and gave him an opportunity to reach all media outlets while controlling the message he wanted to convey.

But that was an entirely different story if he was sitting beside the police and contributing nothing whatsoever to the topic at hand.

"The Metropolitan Museum incident has caused our support to go downhill," the Chief of the New York Police Department, Vash Zwingli, informed over the phone in his usual serious tone, albeit with a hint of shame within his voice. "With the media at our throats and the public in uproar, we need to fix this situation before it gets even more out of hand."

"What do you recommend we do?" Alfred asked, holding the iphone closer to his ear out of paranoia. While he possessed a phone reserved for superhero-related calls and ensured that nobody, not even the cops, could trace it back to his location, the American was always afraid of being overheard. Precaution was always a virtue to abide by, after all. "The NYPD is treading a mine field at the moment. One wrong move could result in a bigger blow than anything England could cause."

"On one hand, the public could view the NYPD as a group of individuals trying to apologize for their actions," the Department Chief sighed, him likely being the one to massage his temples as means of reducing a headache. "Yet on the other hand, people could view the NYPD as a group of cowards with their backs against the wall. Yes, I'm fully aware of the current epidemic, America."

"What has the Commissioner said about it?" The American wondered out loud with his eyes narrowing behind his glasses, absentmindedly stroking his fluffy white cat (with whom he dubbed 'Americat' for patriotic reasoning; God bless America) resting on his lap in an attempt to lower his
"It seems that you do become intelligent when the need arises," the chief remarked sarcastically, causing Alfred to roll his blue eyes at the statement. "I figured it was just a myth. Yes, the Police Commissioner is technically uninvolved with our current circumstances as this mess resides purely with the uniformed members of the force. While he isn't a uniformed member of the force, he has agreed to offer us advice but is formally bound by his duties to remain away until the mayor of New York deems it a big problem."

"You'd figure the public possibly turning on New York's finest would be a big problem," Alfred mumbled, leaning back in his sofa and staring at the ceiling. He grimaced when Americat stood up and walked over his legs, soft mewing emitting from the feline who now sat near the door. "Did he have any advice for us?"

"He recommends a press conference should be held later today," Zwingli replied, catching the blond by surprise. "He said that the first step is to cut the plant by its roots and stop the media from badmouthing us."

"D-don't you think that's a hasty decision?" The American coughed out, wondering if he heard him right. 'O' had anticipated they would move fast to prevent the fire from spreading any further, but Alfred thought it would take longer for the police to do it. "You said so yourself—we could either be depicted as honest or cowardly depending on the generosity of the media! Surely we should wait a little longer to see if they finally run out of crap to publish, right?"

"Regardless of whether or not that'll happen, we should take responsibility for our actions and be out front about it to the public," Vash stated firmly, making Alfred's words die in his throat. "Besides, the media won't deny how big of a risk we're taking. They can't turn that around no matter how hard they try."

After a moment, the American sighed. "Alright," he said, unable to help the sensation of his stomach twisting into knots given he had a bad feeling about this. "What do you need me to do?"

And thus, the current predicament at hand.

In other words, Alfred F. Jones sitting around and doing nothing.

Zwingli said that just because we were going to be honest about the Metropolitan incident doesn't mean we should explain everything immediately, he thought, his hands turning to fists at his sides as he cast his bespectacled gaze to the stoic Department Chief sitting next to him. That the first step we should take is to admit our mistake and say what happened, then delve deeper into details the further along we get.

He inwardly grimaced when recalling what Vash told him before the conference began, trying his best to maintain his composed outward appearance.

"You want me to what?" Alfred questioned, unable to believe what he was hearing.

Vash sighed, mentally counting to ten before he restated his sentence. "We want you to refrain from talking about 'England' at this press conference. While we're taking a risk with this situation, we're easing into it as slowly as we can by pacing out information. If we divulge too much information at once, we'll give off the illusion that we were hiding more than the public initially thought."

"But one of the reasons people started getting angry was because you guys told me to stay quiet about the Metropolitan Museum incident in the first place," the American objected, crossing his
arms over his emblem-covered chest. "If word gets out that you guys were making me withhold what I knew again, than this entire press conference would get nothing accomplished in regards to the police regaining their positive reputation!"

"Look, all we're asking is to not say anything about 'England' until we're closer in our goal to get back what we lost," the chief asserted, his green eyes narrowing as his pool of patience started to resemble a puddle. "Keep in mind that a decent portion of the internet considers 'England' a hero. When the public has reinstated a bit of their confidence in the NYPD, then you can tell them what you know about 'England'."

"What if they ask about it at today's conference?" The superhero scoffed from behind his mask. "It'll look suspicious if I suddenly change the topic."

"Say how you're still trying to sort out what happened and it won't be long before you can confidently recall everything from that night," Zwingli retorted, readjusting his I.D tag to ensure it wouldn't be lopsided in the pictures that would be taken at the conference. "Just you being there will restore a bit of the people's faith in us, as it means you have faith in us."

When recalling that statement, Alfred sighed softly.

**I want to have faith in the NYPD,** he thought as he stood up with the other police officers when they stopped the press conference for a fifteen-minute break, sneaking behind the backstage curtains to steer clear of the reporters gathering in the main hall. **I want to believe that what they're instructing me to do is for the betterment of New York and its civilians, yet I can't help but feel like I'm just a figurehead.**

After a moment, he rubbed his temples again. "Gah," he moaned melodramatically. "All this is making me depressed. I need some fresh air."

**Though Zwingli would get mad at me if I got swarmed by the press while I was outside since I could let slip something that could send us back to square one,** he continued to think as he opened the back door to the building and peered outside. Surprisingly, there was no one around the back area of Washington State Park.

"Probably since most of the people who live in this area attend the School of Law, so it's likely they're still inside with the reporters," the masked blond murmured beneath his breath as he fully emerged from behind the back door, whatever semblance of a headache vanishing as soon as he inhaled the scent of gasoline and hot dogs.

Yes, it smelled like New York, like his home.

"-OI, GET THE BLOODY HELL OVER HERE THIS INSTANT, YOU ACURSED FELINE!"

His nostalgia was broken when he heard a familiar voice shout that sentence followed by a familiar blur of white fur dash across his line-of-sight followed by an even more familiar blur of messy blond hair and an oversized green sweater chasing after said blur of white fur.

The American paused as he took a moment to process whatever the hell he just saw, before taking a deep breath and turning his head to see what was going on.

It appeared that Arthur was chasing Americat around Washington State Park and was failing horribly at it given the state of the Brit's heavy breathing and trembling figure. Arthur was always stubborn, not to mention incapable of running up a flight of stairs without passing out in the middle of the staircase.
"I thought Kiku was supposed to be watching over Americat," he commented, observing the Englishman attempt/fail to catch the nimble cat. "But I guess he left him in the hands of Artie for whatever reason."

It was then that he noticed that his cat was carrying something between his teeth as he climbed up the tree—a medium-sized fabric bag, to be exact.

"I wonder where I've seen that before," he mumbled while stepping from behind the tree, his gaze darting from Arthur to Americat to the bag. "I can't remember for the life of me. Why would Artie be chasing him so desperately, though?"

He gasped in a manner found in a Japanese anime. "Maybe it contains some embarrassing secret of his? A picture of him at New Years'? Some sappy poetry? Women's underwear?"

The blond shook that last idea away, blaming the warm weather for the reddening tips of his ears.

"Whatever it is, it's clear he needs some help," he decided as he rolled his shoulders and cracked his knuckles for dramatic effect. "He's not going to stop until he achieves his goal, so I should lend him a hand before he hurts himself."

*Though I need to be quick to retrieve Americat before Artie does*, the superhero thought while jogging over to where the Briton was attempting/failing to scale the tree like Ezio from 'Assassins' Creed'. *But, since this is Artie we're talking about, I doubt it'll be that difficult to do.*

"'Scuse me, sir," Alfred said, tapping the shorter blond on the shoulder. "You look like you could use some help with that cat of yours."

"Trust me, I'm perfectly fine on my own-" Arthur began, turning around and ending his statement as soon as he registered who it was. His eyes grew wider than the American had ever seen before, thus making Alfred even more curious to find out what was in that bag of his to provoke such a response.

His curiosity increased ten-fold as the Brit quickly splayed himself against the tree, completely pale at the sight of the superhero. "T-t-trust me when I say I'm perfectly fine on my own, thank you!" He exclaimed, rousing the tall blond's interests even further.

Alfred employed the aid of his '100% American' smile to try calming the male's nerves. "Don't worry about it," he laughed, grabbing hold of a tree branch and hoisting himself upwards. "I'll be quicker than the Flash!"

"N-no, seriously, I'm perfectly fine with catching him myself," Arthur fretted before grabbing a different tree branch and forcing himself on top of it, grabbing another branch and climbing towards the cat. "As you can see, I'm quite skilled at tree-climbing so there's really no need to worry about me!"

"Nonsense," Alfred reassured, climbing up at a faster pace than the Brit and wondering if it was an accident when the bushy-browed boy beneath him had tried grabbing hold of his ankle. "I'm up here anyway, and you look pretty tired as it is. Though is it the cat you're worried about, or is it the bag he's holding?"

"T-t-that's none of your concern!" The Englishman exclaimed, increasing his speed so that he was on the branch below the American and extending his hand towards the content feline sitting on the branch a little ways away from where they were. "And I'm more concerned for the welfare of the cat!"
"Right," Alfred drawled in a sarcastic tone, climbing up on the same branch as his cat and extending his arms. "Come on, little kitten," he started with sugar lacing his voice. "Don't be scared, daddy's here to help you down!"

"Daddy?" Arthur asked, a thick eyebrow rising against his forehead as he tried to climb on the branch supporting the superhero and the feline.

"I-I'm just trying to comfort it," the masked blond rephrased, surprise overcoming his expression when Americat swiped a claw at his outstretched hands and started hissing. "Hey! Don't be like that!"

"I guess he doesn't like you," the shorter Briton announced with a roll of his eyes. "Seriously, I'll handle this."

"No way, dude, animals love me," Alfred disagreed, wondering what could be the source of his cat's distrust-

Of course! He doesn't recognize me because of the mask! He thought, realization dawning on his features. He remedied the situation as soon as Arthur had turned his head to glance back at the ground.

"It's daddy," he whispered to the cat, quickly putting the mask back on and sighing with relief when the feline jumped into his arms and started purring against his chest. "Thank God."

"What was that?" Arthur wondered out loud, redirecting his attention to the superhero and paling even worse than before when seeing how the hero was successful in the catching of the cat. "Oh…g-great."

"Told you animals love me," Alfred smirked, climbing down the branches and getting back on the ground with a Brit hot on his heels. Unable to control his curiosity anymore, he removed the bag from Americat's clutches and prepared to undo the string responsible for keeping it closed. "Now, about what was in the bag-"

Before he could even undo the string, much less blink, Arthur pulled him close and kissed him.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

There's no way in Hell I'm letting my identity be revealed like this! Arthur thought as he sprinted after the cat currently sniffing its stolen prize, already out of breath given he did run down several flights of stairs. He was never as much of an exercise-nut as Alfred was.

"Come on over here, Americat!" He cried out, reaching forward and mentally cursing when the feline saw the whole situation as a game of tag and started running with the bag containing his criminal clothes in tow. For something so fluffy and/or fat, it was surprisingly quick on its paws. "I said OI, GET THE BLOODY HELL OVER HERE THIS INSTANT, YOU ACURSED FELINE!"

His legs and lungs were burning as he continued to chase the mound of white fur, each heave that seemed an hour longer than the last; had he known he would end up spending his afternoon running after a cholesterol-ridden animal instead of watching the NYPD squirm like an injured ant, he would have decided against wearing an oversized sweater.

"This git's going to be the end of me whether America gets his hands on me or not," he whispered hoarsely as he leaned on his knees in an attempt to catch his breath, glaring at the cat currently situated on a high branch of a tree. "Though it could be much worse."
"Scuse me, sir," a familiar voice said as Arthur vaguely registered the sensation of his shoulder being tapped, though he frankly couldn't care less. "You look like you could use some help with that cat of yours."

"Trust me, I'm perfectly fine on my own-" he began as he stood up properly and turned to face whoever it was offered their assistance, whatever color somehow present in his face vanishing at the sight of an obnoxious white mask with even more obnoxious blue stars.

Shit.

"T-t-trust me when I say I'm perfectly fine on my own, thank you!" He exclaimed, splaying against the bark of the tree in hopes that the American idiot would take the bloody hint that this was a no-go zone!

"Don't worry about it," America laughed, grabbing hold of a tree branch and hoisting himself upwards. "I'll be quicker than the Flash!"

As expected, his ability to sense the atmosphere is as existent as his intelligence, he thought sourly. "N-no, seriously, I'm perfectly fine with catching him myself," he fretted, grabbing a different tree branch and forcing himself on top of it before grabbing another branch and climbing towards the cat. "As you can see, I'm quite skilled at tree-climbing so there's really no need to worry about me!"

"Nonsense," America reassured, climbing up at a faster pace than the Brit who internally groaned and tried to grab one of his stupid fabric boots to slow him down, grimacing when the blond escaped his grasp just as quickly.

That is to say, nonexistent.

"I'm up here anyway, and you look pretty tired as it is." He resumed. "Though is it the cat you're worried about, or is it the bag he's holding?"

His blood froze in his veins. Right, Alfred's cat from Hell stole his bag and could possibly lead to him being discovered by his American arch-nemesis. Shit, shit, shit.

"T-t-that's none of your concern!" The Englishman exclaimed as he increased his speed so that he was on the branch below the American, who was close to finally catching the content feline sitting on the branch a little ways away from where they were. The shorter blond's pulse was roaring in his ear as he struggled to reach the cat, desperate to contain his secret. "And I'm more concerned for the welfare of the cat!"

If luck is on my side, he won't catch my blatant lie-

"Right," the American drawled in a sarcastic tone.

-Should have seen that one coming.

"Come on, little kitten," America started after climbing on the same branch as the demonic Americat and extending his arms, sugar lacing his voice. "Don't be scared, daddy's here to help you down!"

"Daddy?" Arthur asked, a thick eyebrow rising against his forehead as he tried to climb on the branch supporting the superhero and the feline.

"I-I'm just trying to comfort it," the masked blond rephrased, surprise overcoming his expression when Americat swiped a claw at his outstretched hands and started hissing. "Hey! Don't be like that!"
The Brit repressed the urge to laugh. Maybe that cat wasn't as bad as he thought it was.

Or maybe it was as bad as he thought it was and did that to lower his guard. He honestly wouldn't have second-guessed it at this point.

"I guess he doesn't like you," the Briton announced with a roll of his eyes. "Seriously, I'll handle this."

"No way, dude, animals love me," America disagreed, making Arthur roll his eyes a second time as he looked away. Maybe if he could distract the superhero in some way, he could swipe the bag away before he could look inside?

**Though how could I do that?** He thought, biting his lip as he ran numerous scenarios through his mind. Take the bag and run? No, he was in no shape to run, especially against America of all people. Kick him in the nuts and run? Tempting thought, definitely tempting thought-

"-nk God." America whispered around the same time that Arthur turned back to face him.

"What was that?" Arthur wondered out loud, redirecting his attention to the superhero and paling even worse than before when seeing how the hero was successful in the catching of the cat. "Oh…g-great."

_I'm dead. I am so dead. I am so dead that, when someone from my family tries to summon me from the depths of Hell, some other abomination will come in my place and say that I'm still out of commission!_

"Told you animals love me," America smirked, climbing down the branches and getting back on the ground with Arthur hot on his heels. No way was he going to die in this life and the next without a fight. "Now, about what was in the bag-"

And, without even thinking, Arthur grabbed the obnoxious American superhero by the scruff of his commercialized outfit, pulled him close, and kissed him on the mouth.

He tried his best to squish the overwhelming, gut-wrenching embarrassment he was experiencing at the moment (along with the weird, fluttery feeling in his chest most likely caused by residing adrenaline and lack of oxygen from physical taxation), instead focusing on carefully removing the fabric bag from the hero's fingers. The Brit was astonished at how lax the masked idiot's grip on the bag became in such a short amount of time, but he decided against taking it for granted by hiding the bag behind his back before pulling away.

"Thank you so much for your help, love," he breathed, relishing how wide America's sapphire eyes grew and how the vibrantly he blushed beneath his horizontal half-mask, an odd sense of accomplishment residing with the aforementioned gut-wrenching embarrassment he was hiding rather well.

It seemed the hero was at a loss of words for once (a feat the shorter blond never thought possible), his temporary paralysis bestowing Arthur the chance to walk away with Americat and the bag in tow.

As soon as he was out of America's sight, he dashed up the stairs before the superhero could realize that the bag was no longer in his grasp, already used to the burning sensation in his legs and lungs at this point given he had been running all over the place.

He ripped open the door to his dorm and slammed it shut as he let go of the cat and slid against the
door, the bag held close to his chest as he willed his breathing to regulate.

The blond exhaled a deep sigh of relief when acknowledging that his secret was safe and he was no longer in the presence of the American nuisance, a worn-out smile working its way against his pale features as he stood up on wobbly legs and walked back to the window to check on said American nuisance, who was still frozen beneath the tree in Washington State Park.

Arthur allowed himself to smirk, closing the window before Americat could jump out with his bag and possibly reveal his alter-ego a second time. His forehead felt cool and relaxed against the glass of the window.

"Consider this my checkmate, 'New York's famous superhero'."

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Oh Arthur, you loveable badass you~

So how you like that? There’s some USUK action for you readers of mine since I know you’ve been wanting it. So, yeah, this ended up MUCH longer than expected, but I quite like the route this is going. And yes, I made it so that Vash/Switzerland is the Department Chief of the NYPD, since he’s an awesome trigger-happy guy who wants to preserve the peace even if his methods of preserving said peace are questionable. I initially wanted it to be Ludwig/Germany, but then I had this idea that he’s the head of the Metropolitan Museum security who happens to have a crush on a famous Italian artist whose works are on display at the museum he’s working at~ You’ll notice throughout this fanfiction that there’ll be characters with varying roles mentioned throughout it, so just keep that in mind.

Anyway, there’s chapter 6. Sorry if it was confusing at some points, but I’ll try to update soon. Until then? Stay awesome.
Reprecussions

Chapter Summary

In which the aftermath of certain events are discussed. Also, Kiku comes up with an idea for an awesome BL doujinshi.

Chapter Notes

Regular font indicates the present.

*Italic font indicates flashbacking.*

*Bold italic font indicates thought.*

*Bold regular font indicates writing/typing.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arthur kissed him.

Arthur kissed him.

Good God, Arthur kissed him!

Alfred spent the next minute staring into space with a slack-jawed expression replacing his previous expression consisting of wide eyes and profusely-blushing cheeks. His heart was thumping in his chest, his stomach was twisting into knots, and he couldn't stop touching his lips as he tried to comprehend the fact that Arthur just kissed him!

*He kissed me,* he thought once he finally walked away from the tree and opened the backstage door to the School of Law, completely oblivious to his surroundings as he continued to dwell in his thoughts. He vaguely remembered sitting back down beside Department Chief Zwingli and nodding in agreement to whatever the hell it was he said even though he didn't register what his sentence was at all. *I never imagined him doing something like that out of nowhere. Though wait-*

His face bloomed into fifty shades of red when the realization hit him like a ton of bricks. *That was Arthur's first kiss. Oh God, he gave me his mouth-virginity! Wait, that came out wrong-*

"Excuse me? I have, like, some questions I'd like to ask America?"

Alfred immediately dropped out of his stupor and redirected his attention to reality at the sound of his alias. He was unable to mask his surprise at the fact that someone actually wanted to ask him some questions considering that, since he released the statement that Chief Zwingli requested, not a single audience member had spoken to him.

"*Before this conference officially begins, I'd like to make an important statement regarding the*
Metropolitan Museum incident," Alfred announced, standing up from his seat and wincing at the bright camera flashes that caught his image. He blinked a few times when getting a good estimate of how many people were there.

He swallowed in an attempt to swallow signs of his nervousness, hoping that the media would take the statement in a positive way. "As of this current time, I am unable to recall much information pertaining to the events from nine days ago."

From there he was interrupted by the press firing questions at him like bullets from a gun.

"Are you being restrained by the police department?"

"Is the NYPD restricting your freedom of speech?"

"Is your memory lapse the result of some kind of injury at the Metropolitan Museum?"

"What of the photos posted on the internet revealing your search of the museum?"

"Do you recall any information about the 'England' character posted on the internet?"

"-As of this current time, I am unable to recall any information pertaining to the events from nine days ago," he repeated, causing the audience to go silent. "Because of how massive this situation has become in the last few days. It's not uncommon for people to forget information when suddenly given attention."

"How long do you estimate it will take until you fully regain your memory?"

"Are you implying that the NYPD has been giving you unnecessary hardship for over a week since the incident?"

"Does this mean that you will be unable to catch the 'England' character if they attempt to strike the museum a second time?"

Alfred could feel a headache coming on. Would it kill them to just let him finish his statement without jumping like piranhas? "I doubt it'll take long." He continued, crossing his fingers behind his back that his proclamation wouldn't somehow come back to haunt him. "However, until I can properly remember everything relating the Metropolitan Museum incident, I request that all questions in need of specified details are put on hiatus."

No one had asked him any questions after that, the exception being this reporter who stood up and flashed their I.D from where they were amongst the audience members.

"Feliks Łukasiewicz, columnist of New York Post," he introduced, flipping some strands of shoulder-length blond hair to get it out of his way. "Tell me, like, what is your relationship with the man pictured in the photo recently uploaded to the internet?"

All the color drained from Alfred's face as his mind ceased thinking. "Sorry," he apologized with a scratch of his head, laughing to diffuse the awkward silence. "I think I misheard you. Could you please repeat what you said?"

*Photo recently uploaded to the internet?* The American wondered as he tried to remember any instances where he could have been caught on camera. A few instances came to mind (like the Metropolitan Museum incident for example), but even if there were photos relating to said instances, they would have been uploaded ages ago. *Is it possible I could have missed something? Perhaps it's a ploy meant to make me reveal something by mistake?* Well, *The New York Post is a tabloid*
newspaper infamous for its gossip-centered articles and non-credible sources.

A saucy smirk etched itself onto the blond's features, his green eyes sparkling with mischief. "You know, the man shown in the photo taken a few minutes ago in Washington State Park?" He rephrased, removing his iphone and pulling up a picture on an internet tab. He waded his way through the crowd and passed the phone to the superhero who quickly accepted it and stared blankly at the pixelated image on the screen.

It was uploaded to the same site responsible for the original screenshots of 'America' and 'England' at the Metropolitan Museum. Only it didn't depict England or any of the instances he initially imagined. No, it depicted him, 'America', kissing Arthur Kirkland in broad daylight.

"W-who uploaded this photo?" He spoke barely above a whisper, relieved that half his face was covered by his mask considering it helped cover how pale he became in such a short amount of time. "How long ago was this taken?"

"A few minutes before the conference resumed," Feliks informed, crossing his arms over his chest with a light eyebrow rising against his fair features. "And the source was anonymous. I totally received a notification from the website the moment it was uploaded, since I added the site as a favorite on my phone after debuting pictures of you and 'England'."

Is it possible that the source responsible for this photo is the same person responsible for the photos of England and I? Alfred thought, sweat forming on his brow at the idea. Is it possible that the person who uploaded the photo is still at this conference?

"Regardless of the picture's origin," the columnist resumed, shrugging his shoulders. "Do you care to admit whether it's a fake or not?"

What do I do? He mentally debated, returning the phone back to its owner before he broke it with his immense strength. He had lost many phones from accidentally breaking them due to stress. If I lie and say it's a fake, then the public would lose their trust in myself and the police if word ever got out it was true! Though if I admit that it's real, then who knows how the people will react? Who knows how Arthur will react? Though Arthur kissed America, not me…

Alfred pondered over the sensation of his heart squeezing when that last thought crossed his mind, hesitantly pushing it aside so that he could remain focused on the current situation at hand. He couldn't allow himself to get distracted by something that would probably lessen over time, not when his choice of words here could end up with serious repercussions later on.

"I-in regards to the photo," he started, hoping that the crowd didn't hear his stuttering. He doubted it though, given how everyone's attention was resting on him and him alone this present moment. "I would like to declare that the photo is-

"Legitimate," a voice acknowledged, causing the hero's eyes to dilate and his heart to pause. He swiftly turned to the side to see who was responsible for finishing his sentence, his mask unable to conceal his surprise when he saw determined green eyes staring him down.

"The photo is legitimate," Vash Zwingli concluded, folding his hands on the table before him while signaling with his head for Alfred to sit back down as he ignored the shocked aura emitting from the Polish columnist who, along with all the reporters there, was scribbling down the information without hesitation. "Any other questions for America while we're discussing this particular subject?"

And so, the media-equivalent of Pandora's Box was opened.
"Are the two lovers by any means?"

"Is the male the one who initiated the kiss or was it America?"

"Does this confirm America's sexuality?"

"Was the kiss of gratuitous or romantic intent?"

"Who is that boy?!"

Alfred sank back in his seat, no longer hiding how deeply he was rubbing his temples as he no longer cared. This was obviously going to be a longer press conference than he thought.

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America's Secret Lover

By: Feliks Łukasiewicz

Xx/xx/xx

Updated: 25 minutes ago

America, New York's famous superhero who girls drool over and boys envy, revealed a stunning tidbit of personal information at the Metropolitan Museum press conference that took place at NYU’s School of Law earlier today.

"Yes, I will fully admit that I was kissed by the man in the picture," said America after some coaxing from the Department Chief of the NYPD, Vash Zwingli. "To be honest, I expected it to be just between us, so I'm a little embarrassed."

The superhero later released a statement after leaving the room with Zwingli for a few minutes, addressing the circumstances in which the homosexual kiss was found.

"It's a typical hero story," he said. "Hero saves a cat, and the cat's owner thanks them. I saved his cat after it climbed up a tree, so he thanked me for it."

However, in spite of how often he was poked and prodded by questions, he didn't reveal the identity of the man in the picture.

Based on the picture uploaded to the internet shortly after the press conference's fifteen-minute break and the fact that it was openly acknowledged makes it all seem believable. But as the picture was uploaded by an unknown source, it leaves the situation open for guessing.

No one can deny how rare this piece of information is as America is notorious for never revealing personal information of any kind whatsoever. Is it possible that America, the apple of the New York Police Department's eye and the epitome of superheroes everywhere, is gay? If so, does he know the true identity of the person who kissed him? Is he his lover? What is his name and relationship with America?

With luck, these questions will hopefully be answered later on.

Arthur didn't realize his phone had dropped to the floor until a resounding 'THUMP' jolted him out
of his daze. Even then, he only glanced down at the phone for a second before the weight of the present predicament crashed down on him again.

He sat down on the sofa and buried his face in his hands, leaning back until he was pretty sure he would be looking at the ceiling if his line-of-sight wasn't blocked by his palms. "Oh God," he whispered, hoping this was all some bad dream. "What have I done?"

"Arthur-san?" Kiku asked before sitting beside the blond and inspecting him curiously, his brown eyes taking in the slump of the Brit's shoulders and the (even more) tousled state of his hair. "Are you feeling ill? You've been a bit odd since I came back from the press conference."

"Kiku, what the hell have I done?" Arthur questioned, removing his hands and encountering the gaze of the Japanese male beside him, his eyes akin to those of a mad man. "I-I did something wrong, something that ended up backfiring in my face!"

His roommate looked at him warily, leaning away out of precaution. "What did you do, Arthur-san?"

Arthur retracted his back against the sofa again, his hands covering his face once more. "Oh God," he groaned, his voice muffled by skin and flesh. "I kissed the bloody idiot."

A dark eyebrow rose against the Asian's forehead. "Alfred-san?"

A surprised expression overtook his features when the Englishman shook his head.

"-Merica," he mumbled, making Kiku roll his eyes and ask him to speak louder. "I kissed America!" He confessed, cringing at the audible gasp the Japanese emitted like something out of an anime. "I bloody kissed him!"

"You…kissed America?" Kiku responded, his eyes widening until the Briton feared they might pop out of his skull. "You actually kissed him? I thought you hated him!"

"I do! I hate him so much!" Arthur exclaimed, standing up from the couch and pacing around the room to occupy his body with something. A growl escaped his throat at the thought of the commercialized figurehead with his annoying product placement and self-proclaimed 'hero voice'. "I hate him so much I can barely think of him without wanting to punch something! Him and his U.S-sized ego and his disturbingly-patriotic love for all things American!"

And then, contrary to the belief of his roommate, Arthur Kirkland did not proceed to grab a pillow and scream into it like a fangirl whose OTP finally got together.

He then proceeded to not punch the pillow until resembled feathers more than it did fabric, all the while grumbling about 'stupid, stupid America' and 'I hate his stupid face' until he collapsed into the abused cushion.

"What am I going to do about this, Kiku?" He wondered out loud as he sat down on the couch and rested on his stomach, mentally berating himself for sounding so pathetic in the eyes of his right-hand man. "If I didn't kiss him, he would have found out who I am, but since I did-"

"-You created an entirely different situation than you initially predicted?" Kiku finished as he grabbed Arthur's phone and scanned through the article the Briton had finished reading. He couldn't help but whistle at the sight, mentally saving the article's Boy-Love image in his mind as he came up with an awesome doujinshi idea.

"Yeah," Arthur murmured, his speech distorted by pillows (or remnants thereof) as opposed to his hands. "Pretty much it. I didn't think it'd turn out this badly."
"In any other circumstance, the NYPD wouldn't have hesitated to say the picture taken was a lie," the brunette spoke, creating a new tab on the phone and searching up 'America's gay lover' on Google to see the results. He whistled again at how many results popped up in 0.21 seconds. "However, they decided to use the picture to their advantage by temporarily drawing the attention away from themselves and onto America. They used him as bait and set him out to dry so that the press could have something other than the police's Metropolitan blunder to publish."

He registered Arthur's head nodding from the corner of his eye as he looked through the repeated images showing up on different websites of varying reliability, ranging from credible sources like The New York Times to non-credible sources like The New York Post.

"Not only could they potentially get the attention off them for a change, but they hope that the media will be so focused on America actually revealing some personal information about himself (even if it was a microscopic amount), that the Metropolitan incident would be swept under the rug and forgotten about it without the need for any more press conferences," the Asian mentioned, causing the Brit to suddenly lift his head up from the pillow, a mixture of shock and anger residing against his fair features. "In other words-"

"...Our actions will have been meaningless," Arthur finished, rolling over so that he was lying on his back instead of on his stomach and grabbing his laptop. He opened it and returned to the stolen-goods portion of the Ayuramih black market website, Ailateh.

"I decided to become a criminal for two reasons, and two reasons only," the blond recalled while looking over the bidders who had expressed interest (and sums of money, very large sums of money) on the Ganymede artifacts currently in his possession. "Reason number one was to make Alfred F. Jones confess his love to me."

Kiku nodded, remembering the thoughts he experienced when the Englishman first told him of that particular motive. He thought Arthur was insane and that his methods of achieving his goal were even more insane, but strangely, it all sounded insane enough to work. He found himself wanting to see what would happen, to watch it all unfold, to take part in the action and in the drama by any means necessary.

"The second reason," Arthur carried on, his emerald eyes catching sight of the highest bidding offer from a man only labeled as 'Russia'. "Was to bring dishonor and ruin to the New York Police Department, and to their precious puppet, America."

Ah yes, that was the motive that didn't capture the Asian's interests as much as the first one had, but it was icing to the cake in his opinion. Again, he thought Arthur was insane and that his methods were just as (if not more) insane, but his curiosity and desire to see it happen with his own eyes resulted in him taking part in the Brit's schemes.

His entire life, Kiku had been born and raised with standards to live up to with a specified way of living he had to uphold. His path had been decided before he was a murmur in his mother's womb and he had been bored to death because of it, but too scared to make a first move that could alter his fate.

But that all changed the moment he met Arthur Kirkland.
Arthur was different. Outwardly, he appeared to be just like Kiku; a smart, capable person whose future was already laid out for him. But after living with the blond for a few months, he came to realize how drastically different Arthur was from himself. Arthur was sarcastic and cynical, sharp-tongued with a razor-like wit that could cut thin or deep depending on his mood. He was the man who claimed to be an 'Absolutely Invincible English Gentleman', yet was known for dawning leather pants, lip-rings, and eyeliner from time to time. He was abstract, cunning, unpredictable, an excellent strategist, and the only person Kiku had ever known who could burn water.

And Kiku envied him.

He envied him, the little quirks of his personality that were like cells of the human body as those little quirks were the foundation of everything that made Arthur who he was. He envied how quickly he could turn from a charming Englishman straight out of a Victorian-era novel to a foul-mouthed awkward socialist who practiced black magic in his basement at the drop of a hat. He envied how he wasn't afraid of taking life into his own hands or thinking outside the box, how he had confidence in his abilities and loved to put his skills to the test.

He wanted to be like Arthur. He wanted to have those little quirks somehow rub off on him, somehow, someway.

Which is why, when he heard those motives, heard his plan, and heard Arthur's offer to help him achieve his goals, Kiku jumped at the opportunity. To watch the events unfold and to help change himself into a different person than he was now. Someone who had more of a backbone and craved the rush of adrenaline, someone not afraid of taking risks.

In a way, I'm still not strong enough, he thought to himself as he listened to Arthur talk about a possible customer who went by the alias 'Russia' who was offering large quantities of money that could help him in his plans. In the end, Arthur is the one out in the field and taking all the risks while I sit here in our dorm and help him from afar.

His fists clenched at his sides at the thought, biting his lip as he contemplated his past actions. While I remain a coward. As long as I do that, I'll never become stronger like Arthur.

"-Kiku?" A voice interrupted his train of thought. That same voice that asked him if he'd like to join him on his mission to claim Alfred's heart while sending America and the NYPD in ruin at one point in the past. "Are you listening to me?"

The brunette nodded, feeling an unusual wave of embarrassment flood his angular features at the idea of being caught. "Hai, Arthur-san. I think we should accept Russia-san's offer, and exchange the Ganymede artifacts for the money as it will undoubtedly aid you in your goals."

The Briton nodded as well, closing his laptop and resting against his back. He sighed. "Now with my face posted over the internet, it'll be difficult to masquerade as England since I could be recognized," he vented, running a hand through his blond locks in a futile attempt to distract himself.

"I beg to differ, Arthur-san," the Eastern male chuckled, catching his Western roommate by surprise. "I doubt anyone will recognize you with your eyebrows being covered up by your mask." He joked, unable to help the small smirk that rose on his face when seeing the Englishman bristle like a cat that got stepped on its tail.

Though I have undergone several steps to ensure I do become stronger, he thought as he dodged a pillow thrown by an angered Brit, before running and locking the door of his room to hide until Arthur's anger wore down. A risky process, but one I hope will be worthwhile in the long-run.
Thankfully, it wasn't long before the sounds of Arthur's protests decreased in volume and stopped altogether. Kiku opened the door to his bedroom and caught sight of his English roommate asleep in the pile of pillows the blond would have probably used to fire at the brunette had he not retreated elsewhere. His breathing was deep and slow, his face was relaxed for the first time in what seemed like an eternity.

"The Metropolitan Museum incident on its own shook up his nerves and made him more paranoid, in spite of how well he tried to hide it," he muttered beneath his breath, draping a blanket onto Arthur to prevent him from catching a cold. "Combined with the stress of today, it was inevitable that he'd collapse like this."

He went back inside his room after turning off the lights in the dorm and tending to his nightly health ritual. Kiku leaned against the door once he finished and flipped open the pocket watch communicator he used when masquerading as 'Japan', admiring how the moonlight streaming through his windows glistened off the silver metal of the watch.

It's too late to turn back now. He thought, closing the communicator with a small 'click' and putting it back in his pocket. I have no choice but to move forward. All the tasks at hand have already been cleared.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Yes, I made Toris/Lithuania a writer for the New York Times while Feliks/Poland is a tabloid columnist; they first met in their high school Newspaper class and still meet up every Saturday morning at Starbucks. Also, I'm debating whether or not I should make a Tumblr page for Kiku to post his shenanigans relating to this story--leave a comment if you agree or disagree, and if you do think it'd be neat, go ahead and tell me some ideas you have since I'd be happy to listen.

Regardless, that's chapter 7 and I'll try to update soon. Until then? Stay awesome.
It had been two days since the Metropolitan Museum press conference had taken place at the NYU School of Law, since America revealed that he had been kissed by a man after saving his cat, and since Arthur Kirkland had last left his dorm and went outside.

_I should have anticipated this happening,_ the blond thought bitterly as he peeked through the blinds of his window, cringing and moving away from the window when his suspicions were confirmed. _I only wish I could go back and slap my past self in the face._

A soft sigh escaped from his mouth at the thought of what he had done to resign himself to a fate like this, as he pulled out his phone and searched up ’America Fiasco’ on Google and clicking on the first few websites. He cringed a second time when his emerald gaze registered the pixilated image of him and America kissing within his mind, closing the tab on his phone and setting it face down on his desk.

It had been two days since the America Fiasco-the name the media dubbed the situation in which New York's beloved superhero, America, was kissed by a male stranger-had taken place at the Metropolitan Museum press conference and had pictures of it leaked all over the internet.

The press had a field day, as all journalists and news reporters would with such an event as that. Was America gay? If so, was he in a relationship with the man who kissed him? Why did the man go as far as kissing America all over a cat stuck in a tree? Who snapped the picture of the two kissing? And who was the man who kissed the superhero in the first place?

As America didn't release any information relating to the man's identity or his relationship with the man, a competition of sorts arose between all those, be they reporters or regular people, who were interested in finding out the truth behind the America Fiasco:

Whoever finds the mystery man first, wins.
Arthur groaned as he sat down in his swirling chair, resting his arms on his desk before resting his head on his arms, grimacing when feeling a headache coming on.

"Whoever finds the mystery man wins the game," he mumbled beneath his breath, blowing some strands of sandy-blond hair out of his eyes. "Even though my face was obscured for the most part, people are persistent to find the man responsible for kissing America. While it's a slim chance, to find the mystery man means to find a possible link between America and who's behind the mask. The best-case scenario would be finding the mystery man and getting him to release more of America's personal information or legitimate identity."

As America has created quite a reputation for himself in the years he's been an ally to the police and an enemy to criminals, there are people out there who would pay quite nicely for knowledge of his name or where he lives, he thought as he sat up in his seat and stared at the ceiling, his headache diminishing for the time being. A smirk etched itself onto his features. I can't deny how helpful it'd be to know that kind of information. To know who he is or where he lives would undoubtedly be a valuable asset to my plans, no matter how big or small the knowledge may be. Precaution is a virtue to abide by, after all.

"Regardless, that's the best-case scenario," he resumed with a shrug of his shoulders, eyeing the way the sunlight streamed through the small gaps of his window blinds with envy. "Just finding the mystery man would cause the sales of newspapers and magazines to go up. And, as the police want to keep the unwanted attention of the press off them for as long as they can, they wouldn't hesitate to contact the mystery man and convince them to publicly debut as America's 'boyfriend', to give the media more crap to publish that isn't about the police."

A low growl escaped from his throat at the thought. He had expected the police to make a move that would get the attention off them, but throwing America under the bus to cover up their own tracks? That was just despicable.

"'We stopped checking for the monsters under our beds when we realized they were inside us', I believe someone once said," Arthur remarked, peeking through the blinds and grimacing when seeing reporters lurking around the grounds of Washington State Park. They assumed that since the kiss had taken place there, the mystery man would hopefully be located in that surrounding area. A logical assumption, but they failed to realize how close they really were to the object of their interests. "And whoever said that is right. This is a scary world we live in, nowadays."

Websites like Ayuramih existing to satisfy malicious intentions under guises and greed, he started within his mind, his fingers tapping against his desk like a musician would to a piano, his brow furrowing with each second he dwelled on the topic at hand. Groups like the NYPD led by corporate bigwigs and corrupted moneylenders-

His fists clenched until his knuckles turned white and his fingernails threatened to pierce through the skin of his palms, his gaze harder than steel at the thought. People like America blindly following their orders without question or hesitation, discarding their own conscience for the sake of doing what is deemed 'justice' by their debauched superiors. Treated like pawns to play in a chess game, cast aside like garbage when they're no longer needed, used and abused for a situation they had no part in.

The very thought made him sick to his stomach.

Arthur shook his head in an attempt to lead his mindset elsewhere, resting his hand on his cheek as he opened the blinds a miniscule amount. "Though with 'Japan' as my shield and 'England' as my
sword, I can finally accomplish one of my goals at hand," he murmured absentmindedly, missing the sound of footsteps coming near his door. His features softened after a moment, his eyes crinkling in happiness as a genuine smile worked its way onto his cheekbones. "Then, and only then, can Alfred and I-"

He promptly jumped in his seat when the door to his dorm opened, stifling a shriek by clamping a hand over his mouth lest his neighbors overhear.

A sigh of relief exhaled through his nose as he removed his hand and ran it through his tousled blond locks out of exasperation. "Alfred, you need to stop scaring me like that," he huffed, crossing his arms over his chest as he kept his gaze locked onto the bespectacled blond (who was blushing for unbeknownst reasoning at the moment). "Seriously, I thought you were-"

"-The press?" Alfred finished, noting how the Brit turned a shade paler than he was previously. The American closed the door behind him, his skin a light shade of pink. He looked away when the smaller blond sitting in the chair nodded. "Yeah, I figured as much, what with you not being outside and, um…I, uh, saw the picture." He admitted with a full-on blush, his hands in his pockets as he looked anywhere but at the Briton across from him.

"Are you disgusted?" Arthur asked, feeling his heart painfully twitch and his hands grip the sides of his chair tighter at the idea. "Of me going off and doing that, that is-"


To that statement, the American met the Englishman's gaze with a teasing wink. "Didn't think you went for the hero type, Artie-"

**Alfred F. Jones activated Boy-Next-Door Charm in attack mode. It is super effective,** Arthur thought sarcastically, hating how badly his face was heating up. He coughed in an attempt to redeem himself. "I-I'm not," he spoke, feeling the strong urge to beat up some pillows at the thought of kissing his American nemesis a second time. "I-it was just…spur of the moment, that's all."

He couldn't help but be curious in regards to why the bespectacled blond appeared downcast for a split-second, only for another smile to overtake his features. "Still, I didn't think you had a wild side," he laughed, crossing his arms over his chest. "I thought it went against your gentlemanly-principles."

Another blush from the Briton. Dammit.

"A-anyway, what are you doing here? I thought it'd be impossible to get out of these grounds without being swarmed by the press," Arthur acknowledged, causing a light eyebrow to rise against the American's forehead.

"Since my little stunt, they've been looking all over the place for me," he explained, his expression twisting into distaste at the thought of his hasty actions and repercussions for said hasty actions. "I haven't been able to leave my dorm for two days because of it."

**Not to mention its severely limited my amount of criminal activity,** he admitted within his mind, looking out the blinds again. **It'd be suicide to try something when my actions could be caught by the media. At least with Kiku, I can control what activities of mine are filtered onto the internet.**

His frown grew deeper as he closed the blinds. **It turns out the America Fiasco picture was initially posted onto the same site Kiku used to upload the Metropolitan images. I asked him if he was responsible for the Fiasco photo considering he was there at the time, but he denied having uploaded the photo or having seen anyone suspicious.**
Wait. Now that I think about it, where is Kiku?

"-hange that now, don't you think?" Alfred's voice interrupted his thoughts, resulting in the Brit blinking and asking him to repeat himself. "I said we should change that now, don't you think?"

"Huh?" Arthur said, standing up from his chair. He proceeded to blush like a Mediterranean tomato and sputter a whirlwind of English profanities when the American scooped him up and hauled him over his shoulder like he weighed less than a sack of flour.

"It's time for you to re-join the living," Alfred grinned, keeping a tight grip on the Briton as he began squirming and pounding rapidly at his back in an attempt to be released. "Don't worry, my dorm is in this same complex, and you can borrow some of my clothes since people will recognize you in your old-man clothes."

"Dammit, Alfred! My clothing-choices are just fine, you twat!"

"Says the man with a bow-tie collection-"

"BOW-TIES ARE COOL!"

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"So, what was the purpose of getting me out of my dorm anyway?" Arthur wondered out loud towards Alfred, readjusting the hood of Alfred's dark green hoodie out of paranoia it would fall off in the midst of their exploration of Times Square. He tried his best to keep up with the tall American, as the city streets were crowded and bustling with urban life. "Not only that, but dressing me up in your clothes and sneaking off the campus!"

"I already told you," Alfred expressed, his hands in his pockets as he waded through the crowd with the shorter blond in tow, his blue eyes barely discernable behind the sunlight-induced glare of his glasses. He appeared to be looking for something, though it was unclear to the Briton trailing behind him what it was exactly. "You needed to re-join the living and get out of that place before you went nuts. It's unhealthy to stay cooped up in there for so long, even if it'd risk the press finding you."

Arthur rolled his eyes behind his sunglasses (which Alfred shoved onto his face claiming it was big enough to hide his monstrous eyebrows as he claimed that no one could recognize him without his eyebrows), biting his lip in embarrassment as he now had to jog to keep up with the long strides of the bespectacled blond. "You contradicted yourself just now," he informed, quirking an intrigued look from his friend. "You claimed it'd be healthier to risk the press finding me than hiding in my room. Have you seen the things the press are capable of?"

"Like for instance…?" Alfred left off, slowing his pace so that the Englishman could catch up, readjusting Arthur's hood as it was threatening to slip off his head.

"Like the Metropolitan Museum fuss that's been overshadowed since the America Fiasco," Arthur panted, his hands on his knees as he gasped for breath, missing the panicked expression that daunted the American's features at the mention of it. "They bombarded both the NYPD and America without mercy, surely something like that's unhealthier than simply staying hidden?"

"What do you mean by that?" Alfred questioned, averting the Brit's emerald gaze out of fear he'd be unable to look away, nervousness eating at his senses.

Arthur stood straight, pushing his sunglasses further up the bridge of his nose to prevent them from slipping. "I'm just saying how the press and media aren't to be taken lightly, particularly by people they've deemed worthy of their headlines." He shrugged, resuming his walk beside the American.
"The NYPD fail to realize how big of an opponent the public is, especially taking things like the internet into consideration. How quickly people can switch sides and turn against those they supported, and how they can easily paint certain people out to be whatever they want."

"Like people painting the NYPD as a villain, America as a voiceless puppet, and England as a hero?"

That statement caused Arthur to stop in his tracks, his eyes widening behind his dark glasses when registering what the bespectacled blond said. He shook off his shock as quickly as it came, as to not provoke suspicion around Alfred. "Precisely. With tools like T.V and the internet at their disposal, there's no limit to the power of the people. The only question resides in what they plan to fight for."

Alfred couldn't help but smirk, internally laughing at the thought of someone like England actually having something to fight for.

*Criminals are only in it for the money, recognition, and the thrill,* he thought, dark amusement close to revealing itself amongst his deep pools of sapphire, his hands clenching to fists in the pockets of his jacket. *England is no different. I doubt he could ever have motives worth his freedom or his life.*

"Well?" A British voice interrupted his train of thought, as Alfred blinked and requested him to repeat himself. "I asked if you would have any reason to fight if you were somehow caught up in all this chaos."

To that, Alfred snickered. "I'd never let myself get involved in that kind of mess," he lied, wondering if the sickening sensation in his stomach was caused by guilt or another feeling. "Situations like those will definitely ruin your health, staying cooped up in your house or not. You?"

"Same," Arthur agreed, his green eyes half-lidded behind his glasses. "Though I wouldn't concern myself with those matters if I didn't feel like I had to."

*If he didn't feel like he had to…?*

Before the American could ask further, a familiar sight caused him to grab the Brit's hand and dash towards their destination. "Come on, Artie!" He exclaimed, blaming the fact that he was running to conceal the fact that he was blushing. "You're going to love it here!"

Arthur managed to glance at the surrounding areas, realization dawning upon his features. "Central Park?" He gasped, caught in a mixture of relief and disappointment (?) when Alfred relinquished his grip on his hand. He flexed his fingers, wishing the boy didn't have as much physical strength to rival America, as he continued to look around. "What are we doing here?"

Alfred grinned, and the world seemed to dull in comparison for a mere instant. "The press will never find you here," he pointed out, crossing his arms over his chest as it was his turn to look around. "Plus, you've never visited this place before, right?"

The American 'tsk'ed and shook his head when the Englishman next to him nodded. "I find it hard to believe that you've lived in New York since you were five, yet you've never been to Central Park," he recounted, ignoring how badly his friend proceeded to roll his eyes. "Therefore, I shall remedy that misfortune of yours by showing you around, today!"

The Brit stared at him, entirely at a loss of words to say. A moment of silence passed between the two blonds, broken only when Arthur started to laugh.
"No need to be so melodramatic," he managed to say, covering the lower half of his face in a futile attempt to conceal his smile, looking everywhere but at the bespectacled man beside him. "Alright, Mr. Tour Guide," Arthur agreed, his response a tad muffled. "Do as you see fit."

A wide smile broke out amongst Alfred's features, letting out an excited "Got it!" before grabbing Arthur's other hand that lay limp at his side and tugging him forward. "It'll be loads of fun, trust me!"

Another nod escaped the Englishman as he followed. "Don't worry. I trust you."

Again, Alfred wondered if the sickening sensation in his stomach was caused by guilt or another feeling.

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"How many places have we visited so far?" Arthur inquired, holding up the map of Central Park at different angles to see the sites crossed out in red, indicating that they saw them already. "I could have sworn we've been walking in circles for a while now."

Alfred glanced at the map, scratching his head and laughing a nervous laugh. "Yeah, I may have… gotten us lost," he concluded, holding his hands up in the air in a sign of surrender. "I honestly had no intention of doing that! The last time I came here was with Mattie before he left for Germany."

The Brit raised a thick eyebrow as if to say 'really?' in regards to his statement, a disbelieving smirk playing at his pale features as he sat down on one of the park's numerous benches.

"Regardless of whether you intended this to happen or not, we should still try finding out where we are," he addressed, folding the map up and looking towards the trees serving as a canopy over the bench, admiring the way the sunlight shone through the green of the leaves and cascading shadows all over the place. "Otherwise, who knows how long we'll be here?"

To that, the American sat down and laid his head down in the Briton's lap, ignoring the colorful responses that emitted from the latter. He feigned innocence, keeping his eyes trained on the emerald eyes hidden behind sunglasses, an impish expression residing amongst his face.

"Until death do we part, my dear~!" He declared with an exaggerated flop of his arms (nearly whapping Arthur's head on the process, if not for his quick reflexes). "Until then, we are doomed to wander our own Garden of Eden~"

Arthur blamed the summer weather for his heated cheeks. "Oh, shut it, Jones."

"You know you love it~"

"-You know I don't~"

"-You know you love me~"

"-You know you're delusional~"

"-Crazy people don't know they're crazy, and since I know I'm crazy I'm not crazy, isn't that crazy?"

Alfred blamed the summer weather for his the heating of his cheeks when Arthur laughed, sitting up from where his head previously rested and resituating himself beside the blond.

"To be honest, there was a particular place I had in mind," Alfred confessed, quirking a confused look from the shorter male. "A place I thought you'd like the most, even after we visited sites like the
Carousel or Conservatory Garden."

The Brit put his hand on his chin in a thinking pose. "I don't know," he conceded, his tone heavily laced with sarcasm. "I'd be perfectly satisfied with simply basking in your presence."

"Why the sarcasm?" Alfred chimed in in a joking mannerism. "We both know it's true. Anyway, it was this bridge that's been in tons of movies and has a really nice view and whatnot-"

"Like that one?"

And then, after following the Briton's finger pointing in front of the benches they occupied, the American noticed the large bridge not too far from where they were sitting, clear as day in the rays of dusk.

The American proceeded to facepalm at his remarkable eyesight, wondering if it was too late to change his superhero alias from 'America' to 'Captain Oblivious'.

"Yes, that one," he uttered as his pride took collateral damage, standing up and walking beside the British blond. "Good to know my skills of perception are still kick-ass."

His spirits lightened up a bit when hearing Arthur laugh. Three times in one day, he was on a roll.

*While it's not unheard of him smiling, he doesn't smile as much as he used to when we were younger,* Alfred thought with a hand on his cheek, leaning on the rail of the Bow Bridge as he stared out into the sunset with Arthur. *Before, he never went a day without smiling, but during the summer when we were fifteen, he just…stopped.*

He didn't realize he was frowning until he felt his facial muscles contort uncomfortably, given it was unusual for him to frown. *He became more introverted and quiet, hiding out in his room until I'd have to force him out like I did today. It seemed as though his inner spark diminished significantly, burning like a candle does before being blown out. He wasn't necessarily gone, simply not as bright, not as happy.*

He didn't realize his fists had clenched on the railway until he felt a gentle squeeze from someone's hand, his bespectacled sapphire eyes encountering seemingly-endless pools of emerald staring at him. Arthur's eyes were no longer hidden behind sunglasses, instead uncovered and reflecting the red and orange of the setting sun, wide with worry and uncertainty.

*Now that I think of it, that was around the time my parents died, right?* The tall blond remembered, wondering if Arthur's touch was always so comforting, if it was possible to drown in the deepness of someone's expressions, and if it was natural for his heart to race so fast in his chest. *But that doesn't make sense, he barely knew my parents. Why would he change so suddenly during that time?*

"While I don't know how they died, I know how it feels for people to suddenly leave. I know it hurts you, leaves a scar on your heart, and makes you think it was your fault they left."

*Did he lose someone precious to him?* Alfred contemplated, brushing some strands of messy blond hair out of Arthur's face, curious as to how/when the distance between them decreased so much. *If so, did they hurt him? Leave a scar on his heart? Made him think it was his fault?*

He didn't realize he had cupped the Briton's cheek until he felt his fingertips skim the boy's cheek. Until he felt Arthur lean into his palm and relax. *Even so, I don't want him to experience that pain again. I don't want him to suffer, grieve, or despair. I don't want him to concern himself with*
matters of the NYPD or England because he feels like he has to.

"Alfred?" He heard the shorter male say, causing the American's breath to hitch in his throat. The Brit's gaze was half-lidded, his cheeks awash in crimson like the sun kissing the horizon of the sky, his lips parted as unknown words struggled to slip off his tongue.

"Arthur." He heard himself say, surprised at how six letters could affect him so badly.

At this point, all Alfred knew was warmth. The warmth of the diminishing sun, the warmth of Arthur's cheeks, the warmth of his own heart beating wildly within his chest cavity. He couldn't speak, he couldn't phrase anything into words, and the only thing he could think was one sentence:

More than anything, I want him to be happy because I-

"-nd they say that a HERO COULD SAVE US, I'M NOT GONNA STAND HERE AND WAIIIIIITTTTTTTT," a loud voice interrupted, causing Arthur to jump and Alfred to hit his back against the ledge of the Bow Bridge. "I'LL HOLD ONTO THE WINGS OF THE EAGLES, AND WATCH AS WE ALL FLY AWAYYYYYYYYY!"

Alfred internally cursed at the sound of his ringtone ('Hero' by Nickelback), his face blushing so vibrantly it was a miracle he had enough blood to pass through the rest of his system. "Sorry about that," he apologized, rubbing his back with a grimace on his face considering it hurt when his spine collided with the metal of the bridge.

Whatever physical pain seemed to vanish as soon as he realized the phone currently ringing in his hand was the phone reserved for his duties as 'America', and that the caller I.D was one of Department Chief Vash Zwingli's many aliases.

The NYPD? Why would they be calling me now, when it's clear the Metropolitan Museum incident's been overlooked by the public?

"Do you mind?" Alfred implored towards Arthur, who nodded with a sheepish expression residing amongst his pink features. "Thanks."

Without another moment to lose, the bespectacled blond accepted the call and held it closely to his ear to prevent the Brit from somehow overhearing. "What is it?"

"America," Vash began, his already-irritated tone of voice making the American all the more curious to know what happened. "There's been a situation, one that requires you to come down to headquarters right away."

"What happened?" Alfred interrogated, glancing at the Englishman checking his phone. Arthur appeared to look surprised at whatever he was reading, but he didn't seem to be paying attention to what Alfred was saying. Just to be sure, Alfred lowered his voice. "Last I checked, you guys were in the clear after my little stunt at Washington Park."

A migraine-induced groan sounded from Vash's end, quirking a concerned appearance from Alfred. "Everyone here at the NYPD thought the same."

After a minute of listening, Alfred hung up his phone and put it back in his pocket, stealing another glance at the British boy across from him who was still reading his phone. "Sorry about that again," he continued embarrassedly, making the male look up from his phone and blink as if to register what was going on. "A personal call I had to take. Do you think you can make it back to NYU by yourself without being caught by the press?"
Arthur nodded again, resulting in an abrupt goodbye and an even more abrupt leave from the American.

**Dammit,** Alfred thought as he continued to run, relieved that he had enough hindsight to wear his superhero attire beneath his clothes in case something like this happened. *Why did England have to strike again at a time like this?!*

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Yeah, ringtones are the bane of my characters' existences considering they tend to interrupt certain moments. What can I say? I'm known as 'The Writing Sadist'. So that's where this chapter's going to end, though explanations will be given in the next chapter--I'll try to update soon. Until then? Stay awesome.
As soon as Alfred was out of sight, Arthur ran.

He ran out of Central Park until his legs had become numb with the strain of his muscles, until his breath came in shallow pants, and until his lungs burned with each heave that felt an instant heavier than the last. He didn't care about how strange he must have looked to those still wandering in the park, as long as he got out of the location as quickly as possible.

He was physically drained by the time he reached Times Square, yet he continued forward regardless of how badly he wanted to collapse on the ground from exhaustion. The Briton was forced to walk when he merged into crowds of civilians, keeping a tight grip on the hood obscuring his face to prevent it from slipping.

*If what the message I received is true,* he thought semi-coherently as he slipped and side-stepped across and between people, apologizing all the while as he gradually increased his speed. *Then there's no time to waste. I have to hurry.*

A sigh of relief escaped his pale lips when he finally escaped from the urban horde, resuming his run when he caught sight of the NYU dormitories. The events after that went by in a blur, as he ran up the stairs and located the dorm he shared with Kiku.

Arthur opened the door and closed it with his back, resting against it as he gulped in air and tried to steady his heart rate. After a moment, he removed his back from the door, walked across the room, and sat down in his rolling chair facing the windows, grimacing at how akin to jelly his legs felt. The blond looked up when hearing footsteps, his dark green gaze encountering dark brown ones hidden behind a Kitsune mask.

"I take it you received my text message, Arthur-san?" 'Japan' asked the Englishman, who nodded and removed his phone from the pocket of his hoodie. Arthur pulled up the text and showed it to the Japanese male.
"'Initiating backup plan. Return to dorm ASAP'," Arthur repeated, storing the phone into his pocket and grabbing his England attire (which he kept under lock and key, especially after Alfred's cat from Hell), retreating into the restroom and proceeding to remove his clothes so that he could take a shower. "I was surprised when you sent me that message, I'll admit. Though I came as fast as I could."

"Where were you, anyway?" Kiku spoke through the door, inspecting his pocket watch communicator to check for any malfunctions. "When I came back, you had left. I thought your moves were limited given the events from two days ago."

A groan resounded from the bathroom, muffled by the sound of running water. "Don't remind me about that," the Brit said as he stepped into the shower, the warm water easing his tense muscles. "I'm going to pretend that it never happened. I was out with Alfred."

"With Alfred-san? If it was a date, I'm sorry I interrupted it with my message," the Japanese grinned, anticipating that the blond was blushing vibrantly given his statement. "I would have delayed it a bit longer had you told me."

"I-it wasn't a d-date," Arthur stuttered, relieved his roommate couldn't see the crimson state of his face as he would mercilessly tease him. "The bloke dragged me out of here, insisting I 're-join the living', as he put it. We went to Central Park considering I've never been there before."

The Brit heard a gasp from behind the door. "You've never been to Central Park? How is it that you've lived in New York since you were five but you've never been to Central Park?"

"That's what he told me," Arthur replied, running a hand through his drenched blond (temporarily light brown) locks in an exasperated motion. "Nothing happened, I swear."

"You swear nothing happened? I find that a little hard to believe, Arthur-san," Kiku mused, provoking the Briton's blush to somehow deepen. "I figured that you would try any avenue to make Alfred-san yours, with or without 'England' to help you."

"I'm not that desperate," he addressed, turning off the water and grabbing a towel to dry himself. He wrapped the fabric around his waist, unable to stop himself from thinking about the situation that occurred at the Bow Bridge. His brow furrowed.

He had such a pained look in his eyes, the Englishman remembered, drying his hair with a hand towel. He slipped on his short-sleeve white undershirt and fastened a black tie around his neck, pulling his usual long-sleeve green shirt after that. Like he thought of something truly saddening. And seeing that look...it gave me an epiphany.

"So, phase one has already been completed?" Arthur called out when he finished changing, buttoning up his tailcoat and putting his England mask in his pocket to affix on his face later, opening the door shortly thereafter.

Kiku nodded, his Kitsune mask still concealing his facial features. "Phase one has already been initiated," he announced as removed his laptop, pulling up the program that allowed him to view security camera footage. "In regards to your earlier question of where I was, I was scoping out the surveillance system of the Metropolitan Museum," he explained, quirking an intrigued look from the Brit.

"I would think that the Metropolitan Museum hasn't upgraded its security or removed that chip installed last time, as they've been too pre-occupied with attention from the media to improve their faults," the blond mentioned, crossing his arms over his chest. "What did you find out?"
"Your assumptions were correct, Arthur-san," Kiku assured, showing the Briton a current view of the Metropolitan Museum from the infiltrated cameras. "I also provided another glass cylinder to use on the night-guards." He informed, pointing to a bag resting on the couch that could be confused for containing a high-quality camera as opposed to a small glass container. "Nitrous oxide. Enough to make the guards dizzy and pass out."

The Englishman smiled smugly, recalling how the police had sent the first broken cylinder into a lab for further analysis. "So everything will go along in accordance to last time," he approved, pulling on a long black coat to cover up his England outfit. "Without America's commercialized ass messing things up. Did you send the message to the NYPD around the same time you sent me that text message?"

"Hai, Arthur-san," he answered, pulling up a different program on his laptop and clicking on the recent file. A white backdrop with a black 'E' in the center was the only thing visible on the screen, similar to the image America's sidekick, 'O', had used to cut off their video feed last time. However, unlike 'O', it included a recorded message.

After listening to the audio, Arthur nodded with esteem towards the brunette. "Excellent as always. America and the NYPD will be so focused on decoding the message that, by the time they figure it out, it'll be too late."

Kiku pulled up a charger and connected it to his laptop, his dark brown gaze focused on the cameras. "The Metropolitan Museum incident occurred with the intent of bringing down America and the police's reputation," he reminded the British male, who automatically frowned at the thought.

"But, they were able to push that incident under the rug thanks to the America Fiasco. Because they distracted the public and media to cover up their mistakes, they didn't suffer nearly as much as they should have," Arthur mumbled bitterly, his eye twitching when remembering the situation. "So, what'll happen tonight is a backup plan to remind everyone of America and the NYPD's inability to catch criminals."

Another cocky smirk graced his features. "In a way, this plan will be much more effective than the original plan was, as New York's police and New York's famous superhero will be thwarted twice by the same criminal in the exact same scenario, without anything to show for it except for scars and wounded pride."

"Then it won't be longer before your first goal is completed, giving your second goal more focus," Kiku implied, inwardly snickering at how the Englishman turned redder than a Mediterranean tomato. "Again, are you sure that nothing happened on your outing with Alfred-san~?"

"Not necessarily," Arthur voiced as he looked away, embarrassment prevalent against his fair features. "Though I did have an epiphany relating to him."

A dark eyebrow rose against the Asian's features, prodding the blond to continue.

"I no longer want to make Alfred mine." Arthur stated firmly, curious in regards to what Kiku's expression would be if he could see him. The only physical evidence of how he felt reflected in the lowered state of his head.

"Why has your motive suddenly changed?" 'Japan' questioned behind the face of a Japanese fox, his hands in the pockets of his tuxedo pants.

It wasn't long before 'England' sighed. "I love him," he admitted, his gloved hands clenched at his sides. "But it's because I love him that I don't want to make him mine. At this point--"
He stopped, whatever trace of paleness he previously possessed replaced by pink. "At this point, I just want him to be happy," Arthur murmured, his blond bangs obscuring his half-lidded eyes, his hands clenching further until he feared his palms would bleed. "I have no guarantee Alfred is in love with me, or that he'd even swing my way. That being said, I don't want to force him into loving me."

I don't want him to look like that again. To experience that pain again. I don't want him to suffer, grieve, or despair.

"You'll be content even if he ends up with someone else?" Kiku wondered out loud, jolting the Brit out of his thoughts as if he was electrocuted. The Japanese male had removed his mask, allowing his roommate a glance at his expression. He appeared saddened, along with something else unable to be translated. Swallowing thickly, Arthur nodded. "Yes. I don't want to force him into loving me if his heart resides elsewhere. That wouldn't be fair to him at all, and if I disregard his opinions and future for my own personal gain, I'd be just as bad as the NYPD."

I've been selfish in one of my motives, my motive to make Alfred mine. I haven't considered whether he would want to love me or not, I've just been acting on my own accord without taking his feelings into account.

While he tried to kiss me, I don't know if he did that out of love or desperation. If his thoughts were so chaotic and miserable he wanted to escape by any means necessary. Though I was saddened when his phone went off, I was kind of glad because I didn't want him to kiss me only to regret it later on, destroying our friendship permanently.

…To be honest, he probably considers me a friend and nothing more.

"However, it's not as if I'll stop being 'England'," Arthur acknowledged with a shrug of his shoulders in an attempt to lighten the mood, a determined smirk playing against his cheekbones. "I'll fight to bring down the NYPD and America, to make the world a place where Alfred can find happiness."

Kiku appeared hesitant, but nodded once more at the Brit's statement. "Hai, Arthur-san."

After going over the plan one last time, Arthur left the dorm with the cylinder bag and his bag reserved for theft in tow.

I've gotten this far, it's too late to turn back, he thought as he slipped and side-stepped across and between people, apologizing all the while. Naturally, it wasn't long before he stood at the back entrance of the Metropolitan Museum, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu envelop his senses.

"You're just jelly 'cuz my English is gooder than yours~"

"If I ask, will you tutor me? Kirkland-sempai?"

"When my parents died while we were in high school, I had no one around to help me. Mattie was in Germany for a study-abroad program, so I was by myself until you and your mom stepped in to give me support."

"Didn't think you went for the hero type, Artie~"

"It's time for you to re-join the living. Don't worry, my dorm is in this same complex, and you can borrow some of my clothes since people will recognize you in your old-man clothes."
"Like people painting the NYPD as a villain, America as a voiceless puppet, and England as a hero?"

"I'd never let myself get involved in that kind of mess."

"Crazy people don't know they're crazy, and since I know I'm crazy I'm not crazy, isn't that crazy?"

"Arthur."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry for this, but please don't leave me. Please."

Even so, Arthur couldn't help but laugh a little, barely managing to smother his laughter with his hand over his mouth.

The only path left to me is straight ahead.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

When Alfred arrived at the headquarters for the New York Police Department, the last thing he expected was to be escorted to a dark room full of computers and situated in front of a laptop.

"W-what's this about?" he questioned, unable to stop his nerves from deteriorating. He ran all the way to the NYPD headquarters from a possible-date-thingy with Arthur after being told that England had struck, so why wasn't he out there looking for him?

Did he get captured and they want me to interrogate him via-webcam? He hypothesized, biting his lip as he readjusted his white mask with blue stars out of paranoia it would fall off, the bright light of the monitor making him squint as he wasn't wearing his glasses. Does 'O' want to contact me all of a sudden? Seriously, what's going on here?!

All his questions vanished as soon as a strange image popped up on the screen. A strange image featuring a white backdrop with a single black letter in the middle:

'E'.

England, he growled internally, his gloved hands turning to gloved fists at his sides, his eyes twitching at the thought. How dare you impersonate 'O'? England's helper that Oya theorized about must have told him about the security camera infiltration, so he used this to get my attention. If that's the case, did England's helper tell him of 'O' and I's plan?

He couldn't help but gasp when he heard a recorded message escape from the laptop.

"Greetings to both the NYPD and New York's famous 'superhero', America," the message began, the speaker's voice indiscernible thanks to vocal modification software. "This is England."

From there, Chief Zwingli paused the audio. "We received this message shortly before calling you," he disclosed, rubbing his temples to stave off headaches (most likely caused by computer screens in dimly-lit rooms). "The source was unknown, but, based on the content, it's from England."

"Did you guys check your computers for viruses or infiltrations of any kind?" Alfred interrogated, leaning away from the screen and crossing his arms over his chest.

Vash shook his head. "We've checked all our technological systems that could be potentially hacked, yet we've been unable to uncover which system was violated by an outside source," he revealed, catching the American by surprise. "As a precaution, we've changed our legitimate I.P addresses,
So they haven’t yet determined from which system was the source, the bespectacled blond thought, his blue eyes narrowing. *Given the I.P addresses and system codes are limited to myself, 'O', and those in the NYPD, it's logical to assume that the culprit is someone in that group. I'm eliminated as a suspect of course, since it's against my morals and I'm not at things like hacking and whatnot. 'O' is eliminated as a suspect since he's trustworthy, made it clear he's on my side, and would have nothing to gain from betraying me. Vash is eliminated since he's well...Vash. So has to be someone else working as a mole and providing information. Either that, or England's helper is England's equivalent of 'O'. Now that's a scary thought.*

"-erica? America!" Vash shouted, making Alfred jump and nearly topple over in his seat. "I asked if you wanted to continue with the audio."

"Oh? Right, sorry," he apologized, scooting closer to the screen. "By the way, I think you should interview some of your co-workers and subordinates, just to make sure none of them are leaking information on purpose."

The Department Chief nodded. "Sounds logical. Quite a stretch for you, I'm sure." He remarked sarcastically, ignoring the superhero's indignant squawk as he pressed play.

"As you've probably figured out, yes, I have infiltrated your system in order to leave this message behind," England continued, his obnoxious British accent still coherent even with the technological manipulation of his voice. "In regards to that, let me just say that New York's finest have poorly placed their faith. Much like how New York's civilians have poorly placed their faith in all of you."

Alfred's fists somehow clenched tighter, until he feared his gloves would rip or his nails would pierce through the skin of his palm, whichever came first. *You bastard. You don't know anything about who we are, what we do, or-*

"Don't worry. I trust you."

"Though I wouldn't concern myself with those matters if I didn't feel like I had to."

"While I don't know how they died, I know how it feels for people to suddenly leave. I know it hurts you, leaves a scar on your heart, and makes you think it was your fault they left.*

…*What we fight for*, he resumed mentally, his throat drying up as he continued to think, his stomach knotting up with every second he spent listening to England's electronic voice. *You have no idea. You have no reason to fight. You could never understand what motives me.*

"You, 'America'."

He immediately jolted out of his thoughts when he heard that voice say his name, causing his teeth to grind and his blood to boil.

"You claim to be a hero for justice who handles all criminals without discrimination or personal bias, and yet you work with the NYPD?" England questioned. "You follow their orders without question or hesitation, discarding your own conscience for the sake of doing what is deemed 'justice' by your debauched superiors? Are you stupid enough to follow what they say, or are you just naïve? Are you oblivious to the sins they've committed, or are you just in denial? It's obvious you have a difficult enough time abiding by your own rules. Or is it possible those little morals of yours are just for"
show? A little self-gratification to satisfy your hero complex?"

Alfred didn’t realize he had been gripping the sides of his chair until he heard a small ‘crack’ emit from the wood, causing him to relinquish his hold and quirking a cautious look from Chief Zwingli.

"Would you like for us to stop the video?" Vash asked, stepping back out of paranoia when the hero shook his head.

"No," 'America' replied, taking another deep breath in another attempt to calm himself. "Let him finish. I assure you I can handle this, sir."

The blond officer nodded, stepping a bit further away as he wasn’t entirely convinced.

"What is it you hope to achieve by working with them? If you hope to change things through doing their dirty work, you’re only encouraging them to act unethical knowing you’ll clean up their mess," the Brit continued, as Alfred rubbed his temples as England was his personification of the worst migraine ever. "They're shallow and pathetic, valuing things like 'reputation' and 'public image' over what is justice and truth. You cannot change them, but they possess potential to be reborn."

The American raised an eyebrow at that statement. What did he mean by that?

"Someone once told me that I should visit more sites of New York," the British thief resumed, oblivious to Alfred's thoughts and confusion relating to his previous statement. "So I shall start at where it began. New York's Police Department is destined for greater chaos."

_Potential to be reborn? Start at where it began? Destined for greater chaos? Is he insane? What the hell is he talking about?_

"Wait," Alfred began when the audio ended, as he stood up from where he sat and turned to face Chief Zwingli. "How long has it been since this video was discovered?"

"Almost forty minutes," Vash confirmed after a glance to his watch with a perplexed expression. "Why do you ask?"

Alfred turned pale and practically bolted out the door. "He's going to the museum, again!"

"What?!" the Department Chief exclaimed, following the hero. "What makes you think that?!"

"He's going where it all began, back to the museum where our troubles really started!"

_He can't be sure about this, right? It's bad to strike in the same place twice, no matter how much you rationalize it! Even so, he's pretty confident in his accusation_, he thought, sighing a bit as he rubbed his temples again. He decided he would return home to Switzerland, and to his younger sister, Lili, once he put this obnoxious thief behind bars, as he had no idea how much longer he could take this stressful nonsense about heroes and villains. _At least the press can't say we didn't try._

The officer grabbed his radio and began directing through the communication device. "Department Chief Vash Zwingli requesting backup from the Special Investigation Division's Major Case Squad," he barked over the radio as he followed America and got in his police car. "Repeat, Department Chief Vash Zwingli requesting backup from the Special Investigation Division's Major Case Squad. There's high chance of a 10-21/10-31 at 1000 5th Avenue! Repeat, high change of a 10-21/10-31 at 1000 5th Avenue!"

'England', Alfred thought as he sat in the police car heading for the Metropolitan Museum, his eyes
narrowing behind his mask as he stared out the window. His heart twitches in his chest when he
cought sight of Central Park, his gaze lingering on the Bow Bridge he visited earlier with
Arthur. *What do I hope to achieve? I'll make a world where Arthur can find happiness. I've
gotten this far, it's too late to turn back.*

Even so, Alfred couldn't help but laugh a little, barely managing to smother his laughter with his
hand over his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: For those of you who haven't been keeping up with this story on
fanfiction.net (my primary medium for uploading), I'm tremendously-sorry for the delay
in updating. For the longest time I've been wanting to update, but my primary issue was
trying to copy and paste chapters directly from fanfiction.net (as I tend to do last-minute
alterations using the site's word processor as opposed to my original Microsoft Word
documents), something that took me an embarrassingly-long time figuring out. But hey,
I managed to do it. So expect chapter 10 to be uploaded tomorrow. Also, those codes
Switzerland says at the end can either indicate a crime in progress or a burglary,
whichever term you prefer. I also don't know how the structure of the police, so I'd
appreciate it if someone left a review about that so I could edit this later. Anyway, please
favorite/follow at your leisure as I'd like you to continue on this journey with me. Please
don't hesitate to leave a review (whether positive or negative, as I appreciate
constructive criticism), especially considering I'll try doing this sort of thing from now
on.

Until then? Stay awesome.
It was quiet.

Almost a little too quiet for the likes of a certain Briton.

Since he had arrived in the Metropolitan Museum, Arthur's nerves had been stretched like a bungee cord. His heart was thumping in his chest, every footstep he took sounded as loud as a gunshot, and he was unable to stop his hands from shaking.

Get ahold of yourself, Arthur thought semi-coherently as he stood beside the security room door, quietly removing the glass cylinder from the bag Kiku gave him. It's not like this is your first time. Hell, this heist should be easier than the last one.

He inspected the container for any cracks or blemishes that could have prematurely released the gas, a smirk etching itself onto his cheekbones when it passed his inspections. He placed the cylinder on the ground and nudged it so that it would roll into the room undetected. As soon as someone stepped on the cylinder and cracked the glass, the masked blond closed the door to prevent the amounts of nitrous oxide from escaping into the hallway.

Though a series of sickening 'THUMP's indicated that everyone inside had been rendered dizzy enough to fall unconscious, he slowly opened the door as a form of precaution. Precaution was always a virtue to abide by.

The Briton entered the security room and maneuvered his way over the bodies, setting each guard up on a chair and removing the rope from his bag so he could tie the men up. While he had confirmed their lack of consciousness, they could have been faking it to lower his guard.

Stuffing fabric in the guards' mouths to muffle their speech and quadruple-knotting the material around their limbs definitely took a decent portion of time to do, but in the instance that the men came to, it would take more time for them to undo the knots and remove the fabric than it would for
them to simply unlock a door. Arthur may have made a few mistakes in the past (like jumping out of two-story windows or kissing commercialized idiots in broad daylight), but he wasn't stupid.

So far, the biggest risk I've taken is the message sent to the NYPD, the Englishman continued to think when he finished with the security guards, flipping open his pocket-watch communicator so he could alert Kiku. As it was a move designed to enrage America.

"You want to what?" Kiku said, looking up at Arthur with disbelief written across his expression from where he sat near his desk. He shook his head. "I'm afraid I may have misheard you, Arthur-san. Please repeat yourself."

"I need to provoke America," Arthur repeated, his hands in his pockets as he cascaded his emerald gaze across the jewelry his Japanese roommate was working on. "That way he can act as rashly as he always does, but in a way that benefits us."

The brunette sighed, taking off his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose. "How would his rash actions benefit us in any way?" He wondered out loud, resting his hand on his cheek. "Isn't one of the main reasons you hate him because of his rash actions?"

The Brit's brow furrowed when thinking of the American nuisance, nodding in agreement with his statement. "Yes, but if we purposely provoke him, we can manufacture a scenario that will result in him looking like a fool."

"And what kind of scenario could we manufacture?" The Japanese asked, curious to hear what his roommate's plan was. He couldn't stop the surprise from dawning on his features when the blond gestured to the fake Etruscan jewelry currently residing on his desk.

Considering Arthur had kissed America two hours ago and caused the press to forget the Metropolitan Museum incident in favor of the America fiasco, he had been forced to remain inside their dorm when the pictures went viral. Since then, he proposed that the next item to steal should be none other than the Etruscan jewelry, as it was valuable (dating from fifth-century B.C and made of materials ranging from glass to gold) and the new highlight of the museum's collection. As a form of precaution, Arthur had gone off and began making replicas for the jewelry, which Kiku had already begun tweaking.

"The answer lies with the replicas," the Briton stated simply, relishing the look of realization that replaced the Asian's previous look of surprise.

"Stage one has been completed," 'England' informed the masked image visible on his communicator as he stepped out of the security room, closing and locking the door in the process. "The guards have been knocked out, bound, and gagged. I'm about to head to the highlights' section of the museum, meaning that the Etruscan jewelry cannot be far ahead. Any sign of America?"

The Kitsune shook his head, relief spreading through the Englishman's system like a drug injected into his veins. "No sign of America-san. Though keep your guard up just in case he decoded your message earlier than initially intended."

Arthur nodded. "Alright. Don't hesitate to contact me in case something goes awry." He reminded, closing the communicator and slipping it into his pocket when his partner agreed.

I doubt he decoded the message faster than anticipated, he shrugged, walking up the stairs to the second floor where the jewelry was located. He listened for the sound of police sirens and kept his eye out for an obnoxious personification of commercialism just to be on the safe side. With his emotions running wild it'd be difficult for him to think properly, much less deduce where I am at
He grimaced when thinking of how true the words in his message to America were. How he was stupid for discarding his conscience for the sake of indulging the whims of hypocrites, and naïve for trusting them. How he followed their orders without question, and was oblivious or in denial to the fact he was being used. *His mindset is calculable and yet his actions are not, making him the worst type of enemy: an unpredictable enemy.*

Though Arthur would never say it out loud, that scared him more than anything else. The idea that he could figure out how someone's mind worked all he wanted, but was powerless when it came to that person's outward conduct. Not everyone acted with their brain, some acted with the belief of their hearts.

And America's heart believed in New York's police.

*You idiot,* the Brit scoffed internally, picking up his pace when he caught sight of a *'Highlights of the Collection'* sign hanging over an entrance not too far from where he was. *They'll use you up and throw you away like a piece of garbage when you're no longer needed. Like all the dirty work you've done for them was meaningless, like you don't matter in the world.*

A soft sigh escaped from his mouth when he saw the Etruscan jewelry resting in a glass case, glad that he had enough foresight to disable the lasers surrounding the artifacts while he was in the security room, again.

He removed the glass case and began wrapping the items in fabric, depositing them into his theft bag when they were protected. After taking the artifacts (consisting of disks, pins, rings, and a necklace) and slipping them into his bag, he removed the replicas he made and had Kiku check for last-minute adjustments beforehand.

*It's probably for the best that I do this,* he thought grimly, missing the sensation of his communicator vibrating against his hip, as he was too focused on putting the fake jewelry in the glass container the original jewelry previously rested in. *This way, the NYPD will begin to lose their faith in him.*

The British thief placed the glass cover over the fake artifacts, stifling a gasp when the lights turned off and a sudden rush of wind passed by his face.

A moment passed before he tenderly touched his left cheek, shock registering itself in his eyes when he saw blood on his black gloves, and a knife embedded into the wall facing him.

Arthur spun around to face the intruder, his mask barely concealing his panic when seeing nothing but an open window. He silently removed a gun from his bag, keeping a finger on the trigger in case he had to shoot. "Who's there?"

A low laugh echoed throughout the room, sending unpleasant chills cascading down the blond's spine. His eyes darted all over the room in an attempt to find the source of the sound, unable to decipher its origin as the highlights' room was pitch-black, save for the light of the full moon shining through the open window. "Your worst fear, 'England'."

*This isn't America,* 'England' thought, stepping backwards as he continued to look for the person, repressing the urge to shake as it would be letting this intruder win. He couldn't allow them to see him in a state of fear. *Nor are they someone in the NYPD, as no one in the police force would try to take me down without backup.*
He swallowed, for once wishing that this person was America. At least then, he could have an idea of his enemy's strengths and weaknesses, and improvise a plan based on his data. Was this what they meant by his worst fear, being unable to act accordingly given he was facing an unknown enemy?

"I said what you are, not what you aren't," Arthur replied, taking a huge gamble by closing his eyes. Perhaps he could determine the voice's whereabouts by relying more on his ears than his eyes? The room was spacious, meaning that there had to be a point where the voice was coming from as it bounced off the walls. "You know who I am; it's only polite you tell me who you are."

Another low laugh, though it came from a different side of the room than before. How could they move so quickly? "You know who I am, 'England'. America has told me quite a bit about you."

The Englishman's eyes opened and widened behind his mask. "Wait, are you-?"

He was cut off by the sound of rustling fabric, vaguely registering the sight of a figure dropping from the ceiling. The figure walked closer, obscured by the shadows of the room, as Arthur held his gun in front of himself to prove he wasn't defenseless. He bit his lip when realizing how shaky his grip on his weapon was.

The figure clad in black stopped, darkness still obscuring their face. "You've guessed correctly," they said, a voice modifier hiding their voice. "And yes; I am O."

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

Alfred internally grimaced when he saw 'O' climb from the roof of the Metropolitan Museum, panic biting at his nerves as he watched the male skillfully maneuver his way down the side of the building and swing through an open window in the highlights' section of the museum. As the museum was unused to the rapid attention it had received from the public, they didn't have enough time to repair the lunette window England broke.

Just thinking of England made his insides burn, as the superhero's gloved fists clenched at his sides. So, he was trying to lure him out, huh?

The American glanced down at his cellphone reserved for his hero duties, his white mask with blue stars unable to hide his surprise at seeing a single letter pop up on the screen:

'O'.

Why is he calling me now? He thought, answering the phone when he received a nod of approval from Vash sitting beside him in the police car, wondering if he'd be able to hear him over the sound of the car's siren. I didn't have enough time to tell him about the video, is it possible something else happened? Maybe he intercepted the video from the NYPD so he could personally view it, and he wants to talk to me about that?

Regardless, it was Oya. He couldn't just ignore his right-hand man, especially when he could provide crucial information. With that in mind, Alfred answered the phone. "Hello?"

"America," the voice, always dubbed by technological software, greeted the blond situated in the vehicle. "Did you view the video?"

"Yeah, I did," he said, looking through the window of the car in case he saw something England-related that would require Chief Zwingli to stop. "I take it you got into the system so you could see it too?"
"You've gotten more perceptive," 'O' complimented. "That's good to know. Yes, I hacked the system so that I could see it for myself. Have you already determined England's location?"

"Yep," the American affirmed, his blue gaze hardening when remembering it. "We're on our way. It won't be long before I'll get my hands on him."

**And when I do? He'll run out of swear words to describe how badly he's screwed.**

"You must not act unreasonably."

That statement caught him off-guard. "What do you mean by that?" He asked, a light eyebrow rising from beneath his mask.

"If you act with your emotions instead of with logic, then you'll only be playing into his hands," Oya explained, quirking Alfred's confusion further. "Allow me to handle this; I'm near the Metropolitan Museum already, so you need not worry about my estimated time of arrival."

"How will I be playing into his hands? I'm not understanding this, 'O';" the masked blond addressed, running a hand through his hair in exasperation.

"From what I've heard from you, England is not to be taken lightly," the voice acknowledged as Alfred leaned back in his seat. "He is a strategist; analyzing his opponent's movements and methods of thinking, and using them to his advantage. He's encountered you before, so chances are that he'll use your flaws against you."

"What flaws do you think he'll use?" The superhero wondered out loud as Chief Zwingli turned off the siren of his police car so that they could catch England by surprise when they arrived at the Metropolitan Museum.

"No offense America, but while you're intelligent, you've been known to let your emotions get in the way," 'O' admitted, a hint of guilt present even through the voice manipulator. "With that in mind, why else would he deliberately send that message to you if not to wind you up?"

His eyes widened, understanding and shock co-existing with his anger. England decided to toy with his emotions to gut a reaction out of him?! He wanted to use him as a puppet, how typical for someone by the likes of him! And to think England had the nerve to say that the NYPD was using him, the hypocrite.

**That bastard,** he growled internally, snapping out of his red stupor by the small crack of his phone. He really needed to stop almost breaking phones. **He'll regret this.**

He couldn't stop the small laugh that escaped his throat. "Okay," he smirked, staying in place when the police car stopped a short distance from the museum. "Go in there and scare the hell out of him."

"Got it, America."

"Oh, and 'O'?"

"Yes, America?"

"Make him squirm."

That had been almost thirty minutes ago, and Oya had snuck into the Metropolitan Museum through the lunette window about three minutes ago. In Alfred's opinion, that was three minutes too long.
I know this is his first time in the field, he thought distastefully, keeping a firm grip on his gun in case the worst happened and he had to use it. Precaution was always a virtue to abide by. But I'm not sure if this is the best time for him to start. While I have faith in him, I wouldn't want to risk him getting personally caught up in all of this.

The thing Alfred envied about Oya was the fact that he hadn't given the public a name or a face to associate with him. No one outside the NYPD knew that America, New York's famous superhero, had a right-hand man to help him. Because Alfred had given life to 'America', the public knew to praise America for the successful capture of criminals, and knew to bash him with hate for the failed attempts at capturing criminals. And, because America and the NYPD worked hand-in-hand, the glory and the negativity caused both of them to suffer, even if the fault rested entirely with Alfred.

But that's the price I had to pay, he continued to think, hoping nothing but the best for his partner-in-crime-fighting. So I have to go about making sure I don't make mistakes, to prevent the NYPD from suffering because of my inability to stop criminals. It's a double-edged sword, but it's one I'm grown comfortable with using.

His facial muscles felt uncomfortable when his features contorted into a frown. And yet it's one that England wants to use to his advantage. He thinks that if he causes the public to hate me, they'll hate the NYPD too. And that won't be good no matter how you look at it.

He made a mental note to repair his gloves later, as his palms had ripped open due to the intensity of his fist-clenching. He's the only criminal I haven't been able to catch so far, and he's been using that to his extent by making myself and the NYPD look like fools. But it won't be long before he's put behind bars, before he's everybody's fool.

The American's face returned to its default happy look, though this time not by default. Surely, with someone like him gone, Arthur can smile more often, right?

His thoughts were broken when black smoke broke through all the windows and engulfed the area in darkness.

"You guessed correctly," he said, still unable to get used to his mobile voice modifier connected to his attire. He knew it would have been easier to simply purchase one off the internet, but it was always more fun to make contraptions like this by hand. Not to mention that, since he made the replicas for the Ganymede jewelry, he had more time devoted to his more personal interests. Regardless, it was strange for him to move around with a lightweight, fully-functional modifier stored on his person. "And yes; I am O."

'England' laughed. "You're 'O'?" He managed to say between bouts of laughter, one hand holding onto his stomach while the other hand rested firmly on his gun. So he was appearing confident to hide how badly he hated the thought of being unable to anticipate an enemy's moves? Typical move, but a move nonetheless. "Well, glad to meet the person behind the letter. Somewhat. Portable voice modifier?"

'O' nodded. "I made it myself. I'm rather good with my hands," he commented, motioning to the knife still embedded deeply into the wall. The thief's free hand went from his stomach to his cheek, as if remembering he was hit. "As you experienced first-hand before, no pun intended."

If the Brit hadn't been wearing a mask, he would have assumed he made a sour expression based on
the tone of his voice. "That was uncalled for," he grumbled, his emerald eyes narrowed behind his black mask with silver tree branches. "You should have at least bought me a drink before making a pass at my face."

Oya repressed the urge to laugh. This was the dreaded England who was the bane of America's existence? While America had super-human strength, it seemed this villain's weapon was a combination of his mind and sharp tongue. "I apologize," he drawled, wondering if his sarcasm could be detected through his machinery. "I'll make sure to purchase an alcoholic beverage of some kind before doing so."

"Glad to know there's some semblance of manners in this god-forsaken era," the blond shrugged, his gun unwavering in his grip. "I feared for my generation. You've brought hope into my life again."

"That hope will have to be diminished soon," Oya revealed, as all seriousness (or whatever seriousness was visible beneath that mask of his) left the thief's expression. "As I have been assigned to capture you."

A lengthy silence passed, broken by another laugh from the Brit.

'O' wondered if the curious tilt of his head could be seen from the shadows he purposely surrounded himself by.

"That won't do," 'England' started, as he ran a hand through his tousled blond locks, his gaze unwavering even as his hand on his gun began to. "That won't do at all."

"I'm afraid you have no choice, 'England'," 'O' informed, stepping a bit closer but not to the point where he could be fully seen. If he was seen, then-

"Interesting thing about that," the British male went on, oblivious to Oya's sentence, as he reached into the pocket of his black tailcoat and pulled out a glass ball full of…dark smoke? "Can you guess what this is?"

Oya's eyes widened in fear behind his black fabric mask. He extended a hand. "Wait, don't use that thi-

His thoughts were broken when black smoke broke through all the windows and engulfed the area in darkness.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na

Arthur stumbled near the broken lunette window and climbed upwards with his heist bag, keeping a firm grip on the walls as he traveled up the side of the building. He assumed that, since the museum was unused to the rapid attention it had received from the public, they didn't have enough time to repair the lunette window he broke before. He also assumed that 'O' had shot the knife from that particular direction, through the window was the route he took in order to get inside and catch him by surprise. So, if he came that way, surely someone else could escape that same way?

That was what he was betting on, at least, as he didn't think the black fog trick would work so easily.

"It's a standard smoke bomb," Kiku informed as he set the glass ball inside the Briton's theft bag. "With black coloring to ensure a good escape. Effective, very easy to make, even easier to use as you just throw it to break the glass and release the substance."

"I'm not sure when I'll use this," Arthur admitted as he cast another glance to his bag. "It'll be good to have just in case, I'll make sure to use it only if I'm in a tight spot."
He raced across the rooftops with his heist bag in tow, as he kept his eyes peeled for the student dorms of NYU. When he was sure he was out of reach from the police, he slowed his pace until he stopped on the roof of a building. Arthur took a moment to breathe, as he suddenly felt lightheaded due to lack of adrenaline, and, after making sure no one was around, he swapped his tailcoat, green dress shirt, and tie for his white undershirt. He stored those articles of fabric into his bag, along with his gloves and mask.

For now, at least, I'm okay, he managed to think semi-coherently, unable to remember how he got back to his dorm as the world blended in swirling colors through his hazy mind whirling with adrenaline and exhaustion, only remembering how soft his bed felt beneath his aching body when he collapsed on the mattress. I'm okay.

His eyelids grew heavy on his face, the dull ache of his arms and legs increasing with every pulse of his heart. His reserve of energy had run its course and enabled him to evacuate the Metropolitan Museum in the face of an unpredictable adversary, and left him weary and shaky beneath his comforter.

"I just..." Arthur spoke dazedly, unsure what corners of his brain and body were still functional enough to even facilitate (albeit somewhat) proper English. "I just...hope Alfred's okay...w-wherever he is..."

And he succumbed into the arms of Morpheus, the inner-mechanisms of his mind truly an enigma to him as he dreamed horrifying dreams (if such things those atrocities could be called) of mechanical voices permeating throughout rooms of blackened smoke, the smoke of which dug into his lungs and nearly suffocated him like a python wrapping around its prey before swallowing it whole.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So it turns out there's an episode of the original Batman T.V show from the 60s (with Adam West), where Batman's best friend turns out to be an anti-hero named 'The Green Hornet', who happens to have a Japanese sidekick. Yeah, I squealed too. Totally didn't see that coming.

Please don't hesitate to favorite/follow as I'd like you to continue on this journey with me, I'll try to update soon. Please also don't hesitate to leave a review, as my heart leaps a bit everytime I see someone commented on my story. Positive/negative comments are welcome, as I appreciate constructive criticism.

Until then? Stay awesome.
Alfred stared at the pixilated image on his phone, his face pale with a slack-jawed expression residing amongst his features. After a moment, he leaned back in his chair as a groan escaped from his lips, the pixilated image of the Metropolitan Museum exuding black smoke still engraved into his brain.

He picked up his coffee and sipped at it, barely registering the familiar taste burning into his tongue as he was still trying to comprehend the situation at hand.

This is just getting ridiculous, the American thought, glancing around at the other people present in the Starbucks' café out of habit. Since England had made his first debut with the Ganymede jewelry, America and the NYPD had been receiving vast amounts of negative recognition, so his paranoia had heightened with every picture of 'America' plastered in the media as someone could figure out the hero's secret identity. How long does England plan on bothering us?

A second glance to those at the café confirmed his suspicions, as all were on their phones and looking at the images of the smoke-bombed Metropolitan Museum. Another groan escaped his throat as he rubbed his temples. I swear, these acts are nothing but big performances to him.

"You claim to be a hero for justice who handles all criminals without discrimination or personal bias, and yet you work with the NYPD?"

"Are you stupid enough to follow what they say, or are you just naïve? Are you oblivious to the sins they've committed, or are you just in denial?"

"It's obvious you have a difficult enough time abiding by your own rules. Or is it possible those little morals of yours are just for show? A little self-gratification to satisfy your hero complex?"

He scowled, his grip on his Styrofoam cup tightening until a small 'crack' forced him to relinquish it. Yet, as much as I hate to admit it, his methods are effective.
The second strike at the Metropolitan Museum had occurred the previous night, yet rumors and images supporting said rumors had spread like wildfire across the internet. While he had no idea who was responsible for the pictures, they were posted onto the same website responsible for both the original Metropolitan and the America fiasco photos. Taking that into consideration, it was logical to assume that England, or more over, England’s helper, was responsible for the smoke pictures uploaded to the internet.

He ground his teeth when remembering that, unable to stop wondering why he hadn't received some kind of message from the NYPD telling him to stop interfering with England.

*They don’t want their reputation to be tarnished any further,* Alfred thought, clicking on other websites to see if they had photos of their own, mentally sighing in relief when such wasn't the case. It would have been bad if multiple sources had their own pictures of last night as that would mean a lot of people witnessed the event, but thankfully the situation could be much more manageable considering it was the same set of photos on each site he visited. *The actions the police took during the Metropolitan heist made that clear, though it ended up backfiring in their faces. Still, so long as I keep interacting with England I risk the chance of further humiliating them, so why haven’t they talked to me about it?*

"If you hope to change things through doing their dirty work, you're only encouraging them to act unethical knowing you'll clean up their mess."

*Is it possible that he’s…somehow right? Am I nothing but a show dog to them? If that's the case, why haven’t they said anything when it's clear I’m only hurting them?*

The American shook his head in a futile attempt to shake away his thoughts, as he took another swig of his drink. *What am I thinking, taking a criminal's words into account when it's clear he wants nothing more than to ruin me? He's rotten to the core, the type who won't hesitate to use my weaknesses to his advantage; I'd only be helping him if I started thinking like him!*

The concept sent chills down his spine. To share the same mindset with a criminal…he'd never stomach the disgrace.

*I became a hero for two reasons, and two reasons only,* the bespectacled blond recalled, standing up and throwing his cup away when he finished. *Reason number one was to repay my parents for their deeds and ensure their sacrifice wasn’t in vain by preventing people from dying, families being torn apart, and lives being destroyed.*

His gaze softened behind his glasses, his heart tugging uncomfortably in his chest. *Reason number two was to help Arthur. To make a world free of unnecessary hardship and pain so that he could find more reasons to smile.*

Alfred exited the Starbucks café with his phone, still viewing the Metropolitan smoke pictures as he began walking down the street. A quick glance in the direction of Central Park caused another squeeze in his chest cavity, his cheeks heating up when recalling the events of yesterday afternoon.

*It’s so strange to think all of that happened yesterday,* he continued to internally monologue within the depths of his mind, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose as they were starting to slip. *A lot of crazy stuff’s happened as of late, it's easy to forget how much time has passed.*

Alfred's walk stopped for half a second before he resumed, the reason being he had remembered what he almost did to Arthur.
What would I have done if my phone hadn't gone off? He wondered, his blush worsening against his cheekbones and his pulse speeding up. Would I have really-?

His face erupted into fifty shades of red as he furiously shook his head a second time. No, no, no! Friends don't do that to each other, no matter how close they are! And while I have nothing against people who play for the same team, guys don't go off and kiss other guys out of nowhere!

Had he been near a wall, he would have rammed his head against it so that he could release the blood pooling in his face.

T-t-though it was really strange, he acknowledged mentally, using his blond bangs to somewhat conceal the crimson state of his facial features. I-I've known that Arthur isn't as masculine as other guys I've known, but for some reason he was actually kind of...beautiful.

This time, he slapped his own cheeks so that hopefully the pain could distill his train of thought that was steadily going into a weird, weird tunnel. And another thing, guys don't think of other guys as beautiful!

"Alfred, should I be concerned as to why you're hitting yourself?"

The American dropped his phone and jumped, partly because he didn't expect to be called out in public, partly because for a minute that familiar accent reminded of-

"-England?" Arthur finished Alfred's thought, somehow catching the bespectacled blond even more off-guard. He blinked a few times to register what happened, only to see Arthur standing across from him with his fallen phone in his hands. "Why are you looking up pictures of England on your phone?" The Brit wondered out loud, showing the image currently residing on the phone screen to Alfred. While the screen hadn't cracked (thank God), his fingers had accidentally clicked on a picture of England when he lost his grip.

"Oh, that," the taller blond laughed, scratching the back of his head out of embarrassment. "Everybody's been raving about him nowadays, with the Metropolitan heist and the smoke from last night."

Alfred was curious in regards to why Arthur suddenly paled. "Smoke from last night?" He questioned, quirking a light eyebrow to rise against the American's forehead. "Where did you hear about that?"

It was Alfred's turn to pale, though he hoped the bushy-browed Briton wouldn't notice. "Again, everybody's been raving about it. Supposedly some pictures were leaked onto the 'net, so it could just as easily be a fake."

Arthur nodded, handing him the phone. "Yeah, probably," he agreed, following Alfred when he pocketed his phone and continued to walk. "So what are you doing out and about?"

"Needed my caffeine fix," the bespectacled American grinned, prompting a facepalm from his friend. "Hey, I caught you in a Starbucks once, so don't act like you're innocent either!"

"That was at a last resort and you know it," Arthur retorted when he removed his hand from his forehead, wincing when his fingers grazed a certain part of his face. "In any other circumstance, I wouldn't be caught dead in that place."

The shorter blond failed to notice the uneasy look on the taller blond's face at the sight of his cut.
"What happened to your cheek?" Alfred asked, pulling the Brit aside so that they wouldn't hold up the crowd and taking his face into his hands. He lightly skimmed his thumb over the smooth cut, oblivious to how badly Arthur was blushing beneath his touch. "I don't remember that being there, yesterday."

*At this point, all Alfred knew was warmth. The warmth of the diminishing sun, the warmth of Arthur's cheeks, the warmth of his own heart beating wildly within his chest cavity. He couldn't speak, he couldn't phrase anything into words, the only thing he could think was one sentence:*

*More than anything, I want him to be happy because I-*

Surprise overtook his features when the British boy wretched out of his grip, his features a bizarre mixture between paleness and vibrant red. "I-I was trimming my hair and cut my cheek with scissors," he explained, averting the American's gaze for unbeknownst reasoning. "Trust me, I'm fine."

Alfred's brow furrowed in a worried manner, but his expression vanished as a fake smile arose to mask his concern and disappointment(?). "Got it," he said, pulling on the male's sleeve so that they could walk some more. "Though if there's any place that needs trimming, it's your eyebrows~"

"My eyebrows are fine!" Arthur snapped, his arms crossed over his chest as his face continued to heat up.

The American rolled his eyes, a genuine smile replacing the fake one as he observed the pouting Englishman beside him. "Size 48 eyebrows aren't really in style, Artie~"

"Neither are Captain America pajamas," Arthur countered, a smirk etched onto his features. "While you're twenty-one, you still behave like a child."

"This coming from the guy who has a closet-full of Harry Potter merchandise and can quote 'Sherlock' word for word," Alfred taunted, ruffling Arthur's blond hair and relishing how even the tips of his ears were red. "Seriously, Kiku got you into 'Black Butler' and you holed yourself up in your dorm for a week!"

"That show was good," Arthur deadpanned, pouting when Alfred burst into laughter. "S-shut up! Don't forget that when we were asked what our career goals were, you said 'four words: genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist'!"

"Hey, those are pretty good goals," the bespectacled blond shrugged, much to Arthur's chagrin. "You're just mad because you haven't decided what you want to do, yet."

"I've been pre-occupied as of late," Arthur began, eyeing his American friend when he opened his mouth to protest. "With things aside from studying and marathoning T.V shows!"

"Things like what, if you don't mind my asking?" Alfred responded in a 'oh really?' tone as he doubted the statement. "Enlighten me~"

"T-t-things which require a lot of my time, nowadays!"

"Things like what? Cosplay?"

"No."

"Crossdressing?"
"No."

"A lover?"

"N-no!"

"Damn, and here I wanted to see how that would turn out, since I'd be interested in meeting a guy up to your standards," Alfred mock-sighed, provoking (yet another) vibrant blush to overtake the Brit's pale cheekbones. "Bummer."

"You shouldn't joke about things like that," Arthur mumbled, looking away out of embarrassment. Alfred was surprised to find that the Englishman's line-of-sight trailed in the same direction as Central Park. "What if someone overheard you?"

The American felt a small pin-prick in his chest, though he brushed it off. "What about it?"

Arthur snorted lightly, his eyes half-lidded as he continued to look away, a strange smile playing against his features. Not necessarily happy, but not necessarily sad either. "You wouldn't want someone to get the wrong idea, would you?"

_What's with that look you're wearing?_ Alfred thought, glancing to the Briton as they continued to walk. _I know it wouldn't bother me, but why would it bother you?_

He grimaced internally, his hands turning to fists at his sides. _It hurts me to see you look like that. That's why I've gone so far and done so much as 'America'; to make a world where you can live happily._

A soft sigh escaped him, unheard by the blond beside him. _But why does it seem like my efforts are always futile? In spite of how many criminals I put in jail, how many bad influences I catch, he remains the same. Regardless of how far I reach and try to grab him, he always slips away like water through my hands._

Alfred bit his lip as he turned to look at Arthur, wondering what the source of the expression on his face was. That wistful, almost longing look that made the male's features soften yet harden at the same time, that made him look older than he was.

Just seeing that face made him remember something. Something that always made his heart feel like it had broken and repaired incorrectly.

Alfred never wanted to see Arthur cry again.

_Alfred was exhausted._

_All day, he had been receiving phone calls from the NYPD to chase after criminals, to the point where he found it easier to simply wear his America attire beneath his normal attire in case he had to change!_

_While it was a million times easier playing the part of 'America' in college than it was in high school, he still found it difficult to manage his superhero duties while balancing homework and classes. Combined with the fact that he had a few morning classes, he was more than ready to collapse into bed for a couple hours._

_A yawn escaped from his mouth as he readjusted his shirt, paranoid that the fabric would ride up and reveal his superhero outfit, uncharacteristic signs of tiredness present on his person and ranging..._
from his glasses askew on his face to the sluggishness of his speed.

"I'll say goodnight to Arthur and then I'll go to sleep," he reminded himself as he exited his dorm and headed downstairs to the floor where Arthur and Kiku lived. His groggy mind barely registered his trip until he found himself at the door, where he knocked twice.

He wasn't surprised when the door didn't open; after all, it was an ungodly time at night/morning, it was logical to assume that the two had already gone to sleep.

What did surprise him, though, was the fact that their door was unlocked.

That's odd, he thought semi-coherently as he turned the knob and opened the door, stepping inside and quietly closing and locking the door behind him. Arthur's always cautious about keeping the doors locked; I wonder why he'd forget this time?

He trudged through the hallway, making sure to keep his footsteps light and quiet considering he knew how pissed off Arthur (and surprisingly Kiku) could get when woken up. If the Briton was awake, then he'd say goodnight and all that. If not, he'd go away. Simple as that.

What he wasn't anticipating was coming close to Arthur's door, fist raised to knock on the door and everything, only to stop as he heard muffled sobs on the other side of the door.

It was probably his sleep-deprived mind that was responsible for the warm ball of weird emotions that swelled in his chest at the sound. It was also probably his sleep-deprived mind that was responsible for him slowly opening the door.

He had no idea what to expect. Maybe Arthur curled up on the floor with his laptop, crying into tissues because of 'Sherlock' season three? Maybe on the his the edge of his bed facing his T.V, mouthing 'You have your mother's eyes' while watching 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' part two? Maybe in the closet on his phone, shaking his head while trying to deny that 'Black Butler' season two happened?

He honestly expected those things were more likely to happen.

Instead, he saw Arthur with his back to the door, sitting beside his window. His shoulders were slumped as if the world was dumped onto him, his skin a mess of pale and pink from his tears. One hand covered his face and muffled his sobs, while the other hand held his cellphone to his chest. Alfred had no idea how long he stood in the doorway staring at the Englishman situated by his window, how long he heard his ragged breathing and soft weeping. All he knew was how badly his heart cracked into pieces when Arthur turned to look at him, tears clinging to his eyelashes and streaming down his cheeks, his gaze deep and full of despair.

The American felt whatever pent-up feeling in his chest release when he walked over and hugged the Brit. He felt Arthur's arms wrap around his upper back, felt his fingers dig into his spine, felt his face bury into the fabric of his shirt. Alfred rested his chin on top of Arthur's head, kept one hand around his waist, and the other hand on the boy's back to keep him steady.

Again, he had no idea how long it was until Arthur finally met his bespectacled gaze, embarrassment and guilt swimming in pools of emerald. He looked like he wanted to say something, but Alfred beat him to it before he could open his mouth.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," he insisted, catching the Briton off-guard based on the widening of his eyes. "Trust me when I say that."
Out of the years he had known Arthur, he had only seen him cry tears of sadness once. That time had actually been four months ago.

Another soft sigh escaped him, as he figured he might as well voice his thoughts.

"I wouldn't care about people getting the wrong idea," Alfred answered to break the silence, arousing his confusion when Arthur looked back at him with widened eyes. "People could think whatever the hell they wanted and I wouldn't care. Whatever you meant by all of that."

Another moment of silence passed between the two, broken by the Brit's laughter.

Arthur laughed as they walked, attempting/failing to smother his laughter by covering his mouth with the palm of his hand. "You're such an idiot," he managed to say through his fingers, the sight of his smile making the world seem a bit duller by comparison for an instant. "You really are."

Another moment of silence passed between the two, broken by the Brit's laughter.

"No I don't," Arthur stated, crossing his arms with a smirk in vain efforts to mask his crimson skin. "You're a delusional twat as always, Jones."

"But I'm your delusional twat, Kirkland~"

I'll continue to use 'America' as my sword, Alfred thought even while they continued to walk together back to NYU, talking and playfully-arguing all the while. And even if 'England' attempts to twist my thoughts and ruin my plans, I'll take him down. With 'England' out of the way, criminals of all kinds will no longer mock 'America' and the NYPD. Instead they will fear them, causing crime to diminish and making New York safer.

Then, and only then, can Arthur live in peace.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: That's it for this chapter, although head to fanfiction.net if you want to read some of the bloopers I originally wrote. Hope you enjoyed this installment, I'll update again soon :) 
Until then? Stay awesome.
Arthur stared at the pixilated image on his phone, his face pale with a slack-jawed expression residing amongst his features. After a moment, he leaned back in his chair as a groan escaped from his lips, the pixilated image of the Metropolitan Museum exuding black smoke still engraved into his brain.

How is this even possible? I wouldn't have believed this was real if it wasn't Alfred that showed it to me, he thought, rubbing his temples as he could feel the beginnings of a headache forming beneath his skin, his brow furrowing with every second his mind dwelled on the pictures at hand.

He had left NYU to attend to some personal business, but he ended up bumping into Alfred and forgetting his mission by getting caught up in cheerful smiles and fake-arguments. He hadn't even realized he returned to his dorm earlier than anticipated until Kiku woke up and asked him about it before tending to his morning health routine!

Is it possible that these pictures are fake? No, it'd be too coincidental to have fake pictures of this exact scenario occur the night after, Arthur dismissed internally, his expression softening at the thought of his American friend who had managed to brighten up his gloomy mood that had been plaguing him all morning. Even so, neither America nor the NYPD would have taken photos of that night, considering they wouldn't want a repeat of the first Metropolitan heist. While they wouldn't hide information from the public like they did before, they wouldn't go out of their way to inform them about it, either. I'm only curious in regards to who took the picture and posted it
onto the website responsible for all the other pictures, and why that site in particular. I couldn't have done it because I headed back to NYU immediately, and would have probably gotten caught by the police had I decided to stop and snap some pictures. Kiku couldn't have done it because he was here the entire time, and, as 'O' is America's helper, he would have nothing to gain from leaking the photo onto the internet when it would obviously bite America in the arse.

The blond rested his elbows on his desk, pressing the weight of his torso onto them as he looked out the window. Since the second Metropolitan incident, the school grounds had been clear of press craving to get a glimpse of the America fiasco's mystery man. Such things didn't matter to them anymore, what with new material to publish and potential victims to mock.

Namely, America and the NYPD again.

He bit his lip, resuming his reminiscence. 'O' was the one factor I didn't take into account; I didn't expect him to go into the field by himself, even if he probably did have reinforcements on standby. However, it's not like this is necessarily a bad thing, he continued mentally, pulling up his laptop so he could get to work on Ailateh. After all, everything is going according to plan; As far as the public knows, America is a fool for sending the police out on a wild goose chase for artifacts that were never stolen, and a selfish prat for using a smoke bomb to hide his mistakes and make it look like it was a valid crime. Considering the Metropolitan heist has been recreated (for the most part), all I have to do is sit back and wait for the press to bash on the police and New York's famous superhero.

The Brit couldn't stop the smirk rising against his features. His gaze cascaded over the bidding offers set up for the Etruscan jewelry on the black market website, the light of his screen reflecting in his emerald eyes and dancing off the ceiling. Even though the second Metropolitan heist happened the previous night, he had already set up a product profile for the Etruscan jewelry as he was that confident his plan would work. Granted, there were a few variables he didn't take into the equation, but he took what he got and used it to his advantage. It's not like anyone will believe America if he says he really did send the police out to stop a thief. After all, it's clear that the NYPD forced him to keep silent about the first heist; who's to say that he's not being fed lies to preserve what semblance of a reputation both he and the police still have?

"And by the time it's revealed the Etruscan jewelry is nothing but replicas, it'll already be too late," he mumbled, clicking on the profile of a bidder to get a good idea of what kind of criminal they were. "Word will get out that the same crime occurred by the hands of the same criminal, making the police and America seem even more ineffective. And it won't be long before the NYPD will be forced to disband due to their diminished image in the eyes of the public and media."

There were only two things keeping the New York Police Department alive, one of them being reputation. Reputation was essential to keeping the police alive, as it would be difficult for the people to cooperate with them if both the public and media viewed them in a negative light. That was why the police were so reluctant to get rid of America in spite of how many errors he made. Not only did he catch criminals without being paid by the police (instead being paid thanks to his costume's product placement), but he boosted their public image with every criminal he captured and gave everyone a face to associate with 'justice'. After all, which was easier to like? A group of people dressed in black with guns strapped to their hips? Or a smiling, patriotic superhero?

However, the police being involved with America was a double-edged sword, as America had much more power than he realized. Because of this, the NYPD purposely kept certain tidbits of information away from him, as one false move on his end could result in everyone's downfall, not to
mention that, if America somehow realized how much authority he possessed, he could use that as a weapon to wield against the police if they didn't change things in his favor.

The second thing keeping the New York Police Department alive was funding. This was self-explanatory, as items like guns and cars weren't cheap in the current economy. While there were foundations created for the purpose of raising money, it simply wasn't enough to afford the costs ranging from paychecks to settling lawsuits. Several times in the past, members of the force had been accused of accepting money from politicians on the grounds that the police find loopholes and arrest political opponents, but those kinds of situations weren't nearly as uncommon as they used to be.

Rumors have been spreading all over the internet, claiming the NYPD is guilty for being bribed by the mafia, Arthur continued to monologue within his mind, reading up on the profiles and absorbing as much information as he could. Supposedly, the mafia 'funds' the police, and in exchange the police turn their heads away from the mafia's crimes. I'd investigate those rumors myself if I could, however, the only problem is discovering which mafia would be sending financial support.

The idea that multiple mafias fund the police isn't a theory to be overlooked, yet the mafias in New York are extremely territorial, always trying to ruin one another so that their group can end up on top. He mentally shrugged, creating another internet tab so he could check for any articles regarding the black smoke from last night. Therefore, the idea of multiple groups joining together, as opposed to the idea of a singular group, is laughable.

When realizing his thoughts, Arthur shook his head in an attempt to dissuade them. But all of that is speaking hypothetically. The point is, if I cut off one of the two roots, that opens the possibility of the other root being cut, causing the whole plant to wither up and die.

"The first step is diminishing the way the public and media view America and the NYPD," Arthur reminded himself, his expression lighting up when catching sight of some new articles already published on the internet, his hand resting on his cheek as he visited various websites and briefly skimmed over their contents. "The next course of action will be determined once the current tasks at hand have been cleared."

"Ah, so the tasks at hand relating to last night's heist?" A voice interrupted Arthur's train of thought, causing the Englishman to look from his laptop and sigh in relief.

"Precisely, Kiku," the Brit replied, adjusting the angle of his computer screen so that the Japanese could see from where he stood in the threshold of the bathroom, fresh steam still emitting from the room even though the Asian had finished showering five minutes ago. "At the moment, our priority is pitting the public and media against the police and America."

"We shall strike while the efforts of both New York's finest and New York's superhero are focused on getting the people's opinions in their favor," the brunette acknowledged, quirking a nod of agreement from the blond. "Causing their opinion to lessen, resulting in more damage control, rinse and repeat."
"You couldn't have phrased it better," Arthur grinned, rolling in his chair so that he was facing his laptop again. "Articles and pictures relating to last night have already sprouted, meaning it won't be long before we go again."

"Pictures?" Kiku asked, resulting in a bushy brow rising against the Briton's forehead. "Where were they posted, and by whom?"

"I'm not sure," Arthur admitted, his eyes narrowing as he remembered the events of the previous evening, his grip on his wireless mouse tightening a miniscule amount. "All I know is that they used the same website you used to post the original Metropolitan pictures."

"That same website was responsible for the America fiasco pictures as well, right?"

"Yes. Neither of us have been able to determine who posted those photos as well."

"Do you think it could have been 'O'?"

Arthur exhaled through his nose, opening the blinds of his window and looking outside. It looked like it might rain. Perhaps he should go off tomorrow, instead? "Again, I'm not sure," he murmured, his features turning to stone when recalling what day it was. "It's extremely likely that 'O' would have been the one responsible for the America fiasco pictures, as it would draw the attention off the NYPD and the Metropolitan heist."

The Brit smiled grimly, the feeling of failure flooding through his system. "I encountered 'O' last night, as a matter of fact."

If Arthur had been looking at Kiku, he would have seen his brown eyes widen. "You did? So that explains why my security system feed was disconnected again."

"It was disconnected a second time? I assume it was under the same conditions as last time, yes?" Arthur commented, provoking a nod from his partner-in-crime. "And yes," the Englishman affirmed, his hands in the pockets of his pants as he looked back at his roommate. "Though I didn't get a look at his face, nor did I hear his voice. He had a portable voice modifier."

It was the brunette's turn to sit down, only he sat down on the couch. The Japanese hugged his knees to his chest, his brow uncharacteristically furrowed. "I knew those things were in existence, but I didn't think he would go so far to hide his identity. Based on the pictures on the internet, you used the smoke bomb I gave you?"

The Briton folded his arms over his chest, grimacing when remembering how badly the smoke infiltrated his lungs and nearly suffocated him. He didn't want to imagine what 'O' had to deal with, especially seeing as though the blunt of the bomb was targeted on him. "Yes," he answered. "It surprised me that 'O' recognized it. He tried to get me to stop, but I already put the jewelry in my bag and put the replicas in the glass case, so he was my only obstacle left."

Kiku nodded again. "Based on his technological prowess, I'm not surprised that he recognized it. Smoke bombs are easy to make, even easier to use after all. Though why would he have gone into the field on his own?"

"Probably to catch me off-guard," Arthur notified, slumping in his chair with his face in his hands at the humiliating memory. The memory of weakness in the presence of the enemy…he should have anticipated that scenario and properly prepared for it! If he had taken every scenario into account, he could have used some form of counterattack that didn't take the form of a smoke bomb! "He knew I was only used to America, and he used that to his advantage by facing me directly."
Don't know how America got his hands on a strategist, he mused mentally, checking in on the Ailateth internet tab to check on the bidding progress on the Etruscan artifacts. A part of him was surprised to see that Russia had the highest bid again, but another part of him had a feeling it was to be expected. But that was a one-time trump card. Now that I've faced off with 'O' once, I can better prepare myself for next time.

"I see Russia-san has the highest bid on the artifacts a second time?" Kiku remarked, drawing Arthur out of his thoughts with statement of confirmation. "How peculiar. It seems he has an affinity for rare items."

"What person doesn't?" The Englishman expressed, accepting the (presumably) Russian's online bidding offer with a click of his mouse. The amount of tea he could buy with that kind of money was unfathomable. But no, he wouldn't use the money for tea (tempting as it was, and by God, was it tempting). He had a better goal in mind. "I think it was Ciel Phantomhive from 'Black Butler' that said when something is truly lost, one can never get it back again?"

The Asian replied with a(nother) nod. "Hai, Arthur-san," he noted, removing his arms from around his knees. "Though really, one of these days we should have another anime marathon. Perhaps we could invite Alfred-san as well?"

Arthur couldn't stop the rapid heating of his cheeks when reminiscing the earlier morning, as he hurriedly answered with a yes and exited the dorm as he had some business he had to attend to, what with Alfred not being around to distract him. He made sure to bring an umbrella and the wrapped bundle of magic books he had purchased with Alfred, only he stuck those in a plastic bag given it had started to rain.

He barely registered his trip to the Bronx from NYU, his trip blending into fleeting moments of time as he dwelled in his memories from before. The Brit vaguely remembered stepping into a cab and directing them in a specified location, but the rest of the trip was drenched in nostalgia like the top of his umbrella was drenched in rainwater.

"I've been pre-occupied as of late," Arthur began, eyeing his American friend when he opened his mouth to protest. "With things aside from studying and marathoning T.V shows!"

"Things like what, if you don't mind my asking?" Alfred responded in a 'oh really?' tone as he doubted the statement. "Enlighten me~"

"T-t-things which require a lot of my time, nowadays!" Arthur stuttered, repressing the urge to touch his cheek given it stung as badly now as it had the previous night.

"Things like what? Cosplay?" Alfred questioned, an impish grin residing amongst his features.

"No." Arthur shook his head, picking up his walk so that he could keep up with the tall American.

"Crossdressing?" The bespectacled blond wondered out loud, resulting in a furious blush from the shorter blond.

"No." The Briton managed to say without faultering.

"A lover?"

Arthur's heart stopped in his chest and the air slipped out of his lungs, but he coughed out an "N-no!" before Alfred could notice.

"Damn, and here I wanted to see how that would turn out, since I'd be interested in meeting a guy
up to your standards,” Alfred mock-sighed, provoking (yet another) vibrant blush to overtake the Brit’s pale cheekbones. “Bummer.”

“You shouldn’t joke about things like that,” Arthur mumbled, looking away out of embarrassment. Though Arthur wanted to look anywhere but at his friend, he was surprised to find that his line-of-sight trailed in the same direction as Central Park. “What if someone overheard you?”

“What about it?”

That statement shocked him, though he snorted lightly before he could stop himself. He continued to look away with half-lidded eyes, “You wouldn’t want someone to get the wrong idea, would you?” He inquired with a wistful smile.

You, who I want nothing more than to see smile.

You, who shouldn’t be involved with someone by the likes of me.

You, who would be happier with someone else. Anyone else.

“I wouldn’t care about people getting the wrong idea.”

That sentence caused what felt like an electrical shock to spike through his system, resulting in him looking back at Alfred with wide eyes.

He couldn’t breathe because it felt like his heart was trying to escape from his rib cage. He couldn’t speak because it felt like his tongue had tied itself into knots. He could only stare, stare in vain hopes of possibly conveying whatever the hell it was he was experiencing at the moment.

You, with whom I-

“People could think whatever the hell they wanted and I wouldn’t care. Whatever you meant by all of that.”

It took him a moment for his awe-struck brain to comprehend the American's statement, cold realization sinking into his system as quickly as the paralysis had. He did his best to hide his disappointment behind a laugh, however true or false it sounded. He honestly had no idea whether it was legitimate or fake at this point.

Of course.

“You're such an idiot,” he managed to say through his fingers. “You really are.”

Why would I expect anything else, you idiot with whom I’ve fallen in love with?

When he blinked, he found himself staring at two familiar mounds of stone instead of the cushiony backseat of a cab or the optimistic grin of an American.

Right, he thought, setting the bag on the ground but not relinquishing his grip on the books. It gave him some form of reminder, some semblance of feeling through his numbed senses. I wanted to come here earlier, but I didn’t. I meant to, but I-

His grip on the bag of books slackened between his fingers as he remembered why he was here, how he came to be here.

It all started with a phone call.
He had been reciting some lines from Hamlet's soliloquy ("To die, to sleep--No more--and by a sleep
to say we end,"), only to be interrupted by the opening theme of 'Doctor Who' emitting from his
phone. He would have been lying if he said he hadn't nearly tripped over his own feet.

"Hello?" he began when he picked up the phone, sitting beside his window as it was a lovely
evening; the full moon had risen, spilling light throughout his room and making everything seem
ethereal in his eyes. "Yes, I am Arthur Kirkland. Who is this?"

"Department Chief Vash Zwingli, Mr. Kirkland," the voice (a chief of the NYPD, he presumed) said
on the other end of his phone. A thick eyebrow rose against the Briton's forehead. His pulse started
to thunder in his ears as he began to worry. He had gotten used to this sort of feeling, especially
when he was fifteen years old.

Nothing could have prepared him for what he could have heard after that sentence.

That had been the only time he had ever allowed Alfred to see him cry.

That time had only been four months ago.

"I regret to inform you that both of your parents have passed away," he quoted, sitting down on his
knees as he faced the tombstones dotting with droplets of water. After a moment, he unsheathed his
umbrella and held it over the stones, not caring of how much messier his hair would become when it
dried. "Your father while in prison, your mother due to unknown circumstances. Your father's body
will be transported out of Riker's Island Correctional Facility in two days to Woodlawn Cemetery to
where your mother will be transported."

His heart was breaking. It was breaking but it made no sound, like a flower blooming but giving off
no scent. He couldn't register the repeated questions of "Are you alright?" and "Should I contact
another relative of yours?" that reverberated through his phone. He only held the phone to his chest,
not even realizing how much he was crying until he felt arms wrap around his body and the faint
smell of AXE deodorant invade his senses. Until he buried his face into an oversized Captain
America shirt and felt someone put their head on top of his.

Until he felt himself start to cry.

Arthur managed a smile, though he honestly had no idea whether it was legitimate or fake at this
point. "I managed to get you some books for your birthday, mum," he explained, motioning to the
mound of wrapped books next to his mother's stone. "I thought you would like them since you found
magic fascinating. I picked them out with Alfred, as a matter of fact."

Silence. There was silence, save for the gentle pitter-patter of water against rock and grass.

While he liked the silence, he had a special brand of hate reserved for it too. The same silence that
engulfed his apartment he used to share with his parents located across the hall from the Jones', that
caused the spider webs to form on his mother's bookshelves and dust to cover his father's spectacles.
The same silence that made him move out and get a dorm at New York University, to escape the
insanity that plagued him during the day when he'd swear he heard his father calling his name, to
escape the nightmares that haunted him during the night when he'd wake up and walk to his parent's
bedroom only to see nothing but folded blankets.

The same silence that brought comfort in the best of times, and madness in the worst.

"I've managed to keep up quite the façade, mum," he confided, confusing the tears on his face for the
rain, confusing the difficulty of swallowing for allergies, the paleness of his skin for the cold. "I
haven't told Alfred anything. About you being dead, about me being England, about me being in love with him. I've kept it all to myself. And-

"But I'm your delusional twat, Kirkland~"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for this, but please don't leave me. Please."

"Like people painting the NYPD as a villain, America as a voiceless puppet, and England as a hero?"

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. Trust me when I say that."

"I wouldn't care about people getting the wrong idea. People could think whatever the hell they wanted and I wouldn't care."

His heart tightened up in his chest until he felt like his last breath would come out in a gasp. He lost his grip on his umbrella held over the graves, allowing the water to spill onto the stones. He grasped at where his heart was in vain efforts to rip it out of his chest, hoping that maybe the agony would leave a gaping wound.

"A-and it hurts," he choked out, the sudden intake of air causing him to double over in a fit of coughing. "I-it h-hurts so badly I-I feel like I'll explode! L-like my heart's impaled by an icicle, and it's so cold but makes me feel warm at the s-same time! L-like whatever walls I-I've p-put up are crumbling! I-I don't know what to do, a-and it scares me!"

Was it possible for someone to reach and tug at the clouds? To extend their fingers and barely scrape at the sky without gravity restricting them? He felt like the pressures weighing on his shoulders would send him tumbling back down before he even got a chance.

More than anything, he couldn't bear this. This feeling of utter...decay. Like he was rotting from the inside out, frozen in horror as he couldn't do anything about it. After a childhood of chess and a lifetime of watching people from the sidelines, observing them enough to figure out their mindsets, he grew to realize his complete fear of helplessness. The situations with 'O' and America only gave him a bigger picture of how badly his fear disabled him, forcing him to make rash and hasty decisions that would bite him later on.

He broke into another coughing fit, hating how weak he must seem in front of his parents. "I-I know how much A-Alfred loved you, mum," he spoke hoarsely, rubbing his eyes to remove traces of his tears. If anything, he probably increased the redness of his eyes. "S-so I've k-kept this a secret from him, s-since he never a-asked. Thank God he never a-asked."

Arthur swallowed, cringing at how swollen his throat felt. Really, how could he be so weak? It was a miracle enemies like 'O', hell, America hadn't caught him by now! "A-and I want him to be happy...b-but I want him to love me. A-am I selfish for wanting so much from him when he's done s-so much for me? I-I don't want to lose him, but I-

The blond forced himself to stop, as he rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. "I am such an idiot," he muttered, his eyes narrowing between his fingers. "I over-complicate everything."

A soft exhale of breath escaped in a puff of smoke in front of his face. It was so hard to believe it was summer, given how cold it could easily become. "That aside, I-I don't want to ruin us," he whispered, his fingers retracting from his head and forming into fists at his sides. "Or what's left of us. I honestly don't know anymore, I feel like something has changed between us, but I can't discern what it is for the life of me."
He's hiding something from me, that much is certain, he managed to think semi-coherently, blinking to distill the rainwater from his eyelashes. Whatever it is, I hope it's nothing serious.

After a moment, he scratched the back of his head, aware of his previous emotional downpour as heavy as the rain. A soft blush adorned his features, though he felt a bit...better, bizarrely. Yet another thing he was unable to discern for the life of him.

"Two things are certain," he thought out loud, standing up with his umbrella. "I'll take down the NYPD for the both of you. So that neither of your deaths were in vain, and that the NYPD receives the swift hand of justice through dissolution. And, in that dissolution, a new police force will emerge, one free from the corruption and hypocrisy that took your lives away."

He smiled a genuine smile, his muscles aching in his cheeks as the gesture seemed to alien to him after what felt like an eternity. "And, in that dissolution and rebirth, Alfred can find happiness."

With that, he planted a kiss on his hands and pressed them to both of the tombstones, leaving the cemetery with his umbrella over his head and the gentle squish of puddles beneath his feet.

Four months ago, mum and dad died, the Briton thought, stepping outside the entrance of Woodlawn Cemetery. He glanced over his shoulder, back at the stones sitting in the ground with a bag of soaked magic books serving as a marker. With a determined face, he looked forward. He would have to get used to looking forward, as it was the only path left to him as of this time on.

And, four months ago, Arthur Kirkland died and was reborn as 'England'.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Yep. Hope you enjoyed that huge serving of angst. Big shout-out to the mysterious Anon that's been commenting on my work, it's been a joy seeing you around.

Thanks for reading this chapter, I'll update soon with the next one. Until then? Stay awesome, sweethearts :)
It had been thirteen days since the original Metropolitan Museum heist had taken place, catching New York completely off-guard and sending the NYPD spiraling into chaos. Why did the thief take the Ganymede artifacts in particular, when they obviously had the skill to steal more? How did they manage to get past the security and take the guarded items? Most importantly, who was responsible for sneaking in, robbing the museum, and slinking under the radar of both the NYPD and America, New York's famous superhero?

A week passed before photos taken from a Metropolitan Museum security camera were anonymously leaked onto the internet, photos that showed America was there at the time, and gave the world an appearance to associate with the criminal: a black tailcoat that swirled behind his frame like the feathers of a crow, a black mask with silver tree branches that entangled and entwined mesmerizingly, and a red Tudor rose that glowed in his lapel like blood. The source responsible for the images only used one word in the description:

'England'.

The name had taken the media by storm, as rumors began to spread and theories began to emerge from all corners of the internet. 'England'? Was this the criminal's official name, or was it made up? Was this person the real thief, or was it an imposter taking the credit for the original's work? By the thief taking the name 'England', did that mean that they were intending to become the enemy of America? Did America even know anything about this 'England' character?

It didn't help that America and the NYPD refused to relinquish information to the public, as it didn't help settle their questions and curiosities in the slightest. Why was the NYPD keeping silent about the whole affair? Was the NYPD forcing America to stay quiet? Wasn't it their job to inform people about criminals at large? What was the point of keeping a police force if they couldn't even stop a thief? If they were hiding information now, what other kinds of information did they hide before?

It was the decision made by the police to not reveal information about the Metropolitan heist that
unwittingly set a domino-effect into motion. The more knowledge they hid, the more negative their image became. Everyone began to view the NYPD as a villain for deliberately keeping information classified when the public deserved to know about this 'England'. Everyone began to view America as a voiceless puppet, who, in any other situation, wouldn't have hesitated to tell the truth about the heist, but was having his freedom of speech restricted by the police.

Everyone began to view 'England' as a hero instead of a thief, as he was the one who showed how far the NYPD would go to preserve a semblance of their reputation, which was rapidly going down the drain.

Nine days after the heist, the New York Police Department finally relented and decided to hold a press conference at the NYU’s School of Law, where they would answer questions relating to the heist, but not relating to 'England'. While America was there, he claimed he was unable to recall much information about the incident because of how suddenly the event had given him recognition, therefore rendering him mute in regards to 'England'. Because of the original stance the police had taken, no one was sure whether America was being honest or if it was another lie fed to him by the police so that he could remain quiet. The whole idea of the press conference sounded sketchy, again because of the original stance the NYPD had taken. Some viewed them as a group of individuals trying to apologize for their actions, while others viewed them as a group of cowards with their backs against the wall. The whole situation was being treated with varying forms of caution on all sides; the police because one misstep could result in their foundation being broken beyond repair, America because another mistake could result in serious repercussions later on, the public and media because some craved to ignore the wrongdoings of the NYPD while others wanted a coup d'état to overthrow the current police force.

However, the Metropolitan Museum heist was swept under the rug around the same time the press conference took place, as everyone's attention was caught by the circumstances of the America fiasco.

The same day the Metropolitan press conference occurred, America had left during the fifteen-minute intermission. However, photos relating to his disappearance were leaked onto the same website responsible for the original Metropolitan heist images, photos that revealed him kissing a man. News of this event spread rapidly throughout all forms of media, considering how rare it was for America to reveal personal information about himself. While the superhero had been working with the police for seven years, he was notorious for never giving away anything pertaining to his legitimate identity. Any knowledge of his would be worth weight in gold, as criminals of all kinds would want any help to escape his 'fists of justice'. He couldn't afford to slip up, no matter how big or small the information was.

Of course, the press jumped with the idea of finding someone who could possibly know the man behind the mask, uncaring of the repercussions of their actions if they ever did find out. To find the man America kissed was to find a potential link between America and who he really was, so everyone was determined to discover who it was he kissed. When confronted about it during the second half of the press conference, America claimed he had no idea who the person was, yet again making it difficult to determine whether the statement was true or false. So, what with the kiss happening in Washington State Park (the park in the same area where the conference took place), people flocked to the park and kept lookout for anyone resembling the mystery man seen in the pictures. It seemed that their curiosity wouldn't burn out until they got to the bottom of it.

That is, until the Metropolitan Museum went up in black smoke.

Two days ago, pictures revealing the Metropolitan Museum exuding black smoke had been leaked onto the same website responsible for the Metropolitan heist photos, England photos, and America
fiasco photos. Like the Metropolitan heist, it caught New York off-guard and sent the NYPD spiraling into chaos, sweeping the America fiasco under the rug and redirecting everyone's attention back onto the police. Aside from the black smoke, there were only two differences between the past predicament and the current one:

'England' hadn't infiltrated the museum, and nothing had been stolen.

It was true; there were no pictures leaked onto the 'net (aside from those featuring the smoke), the security cameras showed no sign of 'England', and there were no missing artifacts.

However, the pictures pertaining to the smoke showed images of America and the NYPD in the background, serving as evidence that they were there. Though some held their doubts about the authenticity of the photos, others held their doubts about the authenticity of America's intentions. 'Is he as reliable as we've thought, or is he just as bad as the NYPD's been as of late?' 'How do we know he didn't just set up the situation to win back our trust?' 'What if this is all an elaborate plan to make himself and the NYPD look good again?'

Those were the questions asked in the newspapers, implied by reporters, and lurking in the internet. All over New York, quite possibly the world, people wondered about America and the NYPD's intentions; whether they were looking out for their civilians or for themselves, whether they could be trusted or not.

People could sense the tides of change coming their way, and only swallowed in nervousness and anticipation.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

To say that America was surprised when Vash told him they would be having another press conference was an understatement. The moment he heard that, he couldn't help but stare at the police officer as if he had grown two heads, his surprise evident even with his mask on.

"What's with that look?" Vash questioned, crossing his arms over his chest. "What, did you think that we'd just sit back and let this situation get even more out of hand?"

America blinked out of his daze. "A-ah, no," he said with a sheepish smile, embarrassment prevalent against what facial features of his were visible. "I-I'm just a bit shocked that we'd make a move so soon."

He's such a liar. The officer thought with a roll of his eyes, opening the door to his police car and slipping into the driver's seat, turning the key in the ignition by the time the superhero sat beside him and put on his seatbelt. "Glad to hear you have confidence in our skills," he drawled sarcastically, pulling the car out of the NYPD parking lot and driving. "But after taking the current circumstances into observation, the Commissioner thought it would be best for us to make a move as quickly as possible."

"Wouldn't want another repeat of the first Metropolitan heist," America acknowledged, provoking a nod of agreement from Vash. "It was bad enough that the press bashed us once; to do it again under the same basic premise as the first would be humiliating."

Officer Zwingli snorted lightly, his green eyes narrowing the longer he dwelled on the topic. "That's for damn sure," he commented, keeping an eye out for where the second Metropolitan Museum press conference would be taking place. "Our support is going downhill again, just like the first time. If we take advantage of the situation by being honest from the start, I doubt it'll be as bad as before."
Silence enveloped the police car, unusual given America was in the car, of all people. The silence was broken after a minute by the sound of the officer sighing.

He hit the brakes of the vehicle when encountering a stoplight, and turned to face America.

"Listen," Vash began, drawing the hero out of his thoughts as he met his gaze. "I can tell something’s been up with you since that night. What happened at the museum? As far as I know, 'O' went into the museum instead of you."

The superhero looked away with half-lidded eyes, his hands turning to fists at his sides. For a moment, he seemed at odds with himself, as if he was conflicted with whatever thoughts (if any) were going through his mind. "You're right," he murmured, glancing at his hands. Vash tried not to notice how there were small rips in the gloves, indicating that his grip had been so strong the night of the second Metropolitan incident that his fingernails cut through the fabric. "'O' did go into the museum in my place for the purpose of catching England off-guard, but still-"

The American stopped himself, running a hand through his blond locks out of exasperation. "I just—it sounds silly, but I feel hurt at how the media's been portraying me, lately."

The Department Chief glanced back to the road, pressing gently on the gas of the car when the light turned green. "Sometimes I forget that you're technically not part of the police," he admitted as he focused on driving, quirking another surprised look from the hero. "So you technically have nothing to lose when it comes to the press badmouthing you. But, considering you work alongside us, you should expect to get backlash from things you couldn't prevent."

America nodded, resting his back against his seat. "I know," he spoke, his head residing against the window. "I guess it goes to show how much I still have to learn."

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Sometimes I forget that he started when he was in high school, Vash thought with a grimace, turning the wheel in the direction of where they were going. Even though 'America' didn't reveal any information about himself at the time, it was easy to tell his age based on his gangly limbs and fluctuating voice. At least, it was easy for Vash to tell his age as he remembered what it was like experiencing the bitch that was puberty.

I can't help but wonder what would make him want to become a hero, especially at so young of an age.

His grip on the wheel tightened, his brow furrowing. Lilli's around the same age he started working as 'America'. She's fifteen, now. How is she fairing in Switzerland with my mother?

While it may have seemed he wore his trademark scowl, one would have noticed how that scowl was softer than it normally was given the person occupying his thoughts.

When his parents divorced several years ago, his father remained in the U.S while his mother moved to Switzerland, soon adopting a homeless girl from Lichtenstein named Lilli. In spite of the eleven-year age gap and an entire ocean between them, he had become very fond of her due to her innocence and kind heart, her gratefulness formed after years of hardship and living in the streets.

All the memories he had with her were happy ones filled to the brim with smiles and laughter (even if a majority of the smiles and laughter came from her). He lost count of how many times she thanked him whenever he let her keep an animal she found, how many pictures she asked him to draw because she thought they looked cute, how many clothes (even if they were rather girly in his opinion) she made because she knew how frugal he was.

Yet, because of the eleven-year age gap and an entire ocean between them, he didn't have many chances to visit her. He tried to Skype and message her at every opportunity, but it still didn't
diminish the fact that, if something bad happened to her, it happened an ocean and several countries away.

*I became a police officer so that I could prevent bad things from happening to people, and families from being torn apart,* he recalled, stopping the car and undoing his seatbelt when they arrived at the designated area for the conference. He cast a quick glance to America, noting how pale the skin visible from his mask was. *Though I'm here separated from an important member of my family, while he's here probably because bad things happened to him.*

In a very, very weird way (that he would prefer to not dwell on given how weird it was), America kind of reminded him of Lilli. They shared a similar yearning to help, a similar wish to protect others, a similar need to disregard themselves for the sake of others.

Countless times, Lilli had extended her hand to people that didn't deserve to be helped, like America had. Countless times, Lilli had shown kindness to those who didn't deserve kindness, like America had. Not once had Vash seen either Lilli or America give up on someone, whether it was Lilli trying to bandage an injured animal, or America offering a criminal a second chance at a normal life.

*They're both selfless in their own ways; it's a bit concerning,* Vash thought, locking up the car while keeping his eye on the masked American. He was unable to discern for the life of him what kind of thoughts (again, if any) were running through his mind at the moment. He could only assume they were bad based on his poorly-concealed facial expressions. *I know that Lilli experienced hardship, which contributed to the way she is now. But what about America?*

Vash rubbed his temples to stave off an oncoming headache, having a bizarre feeling that he would be doing that a lot more often given the occupation he decided on. As the newest recruit in the police force (and the youngest at the age of twenty-one), he was assigned to the not-so-serious jobs like ticketing cars or patrolling the streets of New York.

However, he didn't think that running after a lanky kid running after a purse-snatcher was in his current job description.

Especially if that lanky kid was wearing red, white, and blue spandex, for crying out loud.

*They had better pay me overtime for this,* he internally groaned, giving the teenage boy another once-over as he was trying to determine the guy's sanity. Even though he had taken the purse-snatcher into captivity and took the kid into the police station until his parents could arrive, the kid refused to change out of his attire. No sane person dressed in red, white, and blue spandex and ran around trying to tackle purse-snatchers at eleven P.M, no matter how good of an idea it would seem at the time. *I'm pretty sure he's either high or just stupid.*

"Listen, you've gotta believe me when I tell you that that guy stole an old woman's purse," the spandex-freak expressed, his eyes wide behind a white mask decorated with blue stars. He nearly whapped Vash's head from how many obscene hand gestures he was using, as he stood up and began reenacting the event. "He was all like, 'hand the purse over, granny!' and she was all like, 'oh noooo, someone help meeee!',' he continued, oblivious to how badly the police officer was trying not to laugh. It was midnight and he hadn't had coffee, give him a break.

"So I went over there and was all like, 'not on my watch, you dastardly fiend!', so I chased him and then you showed up and here we are!" He finished with a flourished wave, the sight almost making Vash break his poker face. Almost. "You okay, dude? You look like you're in pain."

"I'm appalled, that's all," Vash managed to say while maintaining a straight face, trying to think of
serious things. Criminals. Violence. Death. Guns. Teenage boys with cracking voices prancing around with spandex. More guns. "Why did you think chasing after a mugger at eleven P.M wearing that was ever a good idea? You could have gotten hurt, hell, you could have gotten killed. So why did you decide to go after that guy?"

The boy faltered, probably confused at why Vash wasn’t getting on his knees and praising him as a hero to New York city, or whatever the hell went through his mind as Vash’s mind was still trying to get past the freakin’ spandex. "Because a hero can’t stand and watch while the good get hurt,” he explained, catching the officer off-guard. "A hero always protects the innocent and delivers justice to the bad guys!"

A light eyebrow rose beneath Vash’s officer cap. People still believed in that kind of stuff? Didn’t this kid know that the world wasn’t divided into simple sides like ‘good’ and ‘evil’? That there were knights that broke the rules and pawns who betrayed?

“That’s not really a valid answer,” Vash deadpanned, the boy being the one to be caught off-guard now. "I'm asking why you personally decided to go after that guy. Don't give me some generic answer like 'heroes do this' and 'heroes do that'. What's your reason?"

Again, the boy faltered. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, his gaze deepening for a moment. Inwardly, Vash grimaced. He had heard of this kind, before. The kind of people who couldn’t differentiate fantasy from reality, the kind of people who become vigilantes for the sake of living a life out of a comic book, the kind of people who would gradually stop and take off their spandex outfits and paper masks when the realization of danger sunk in.

*I'm not surprised,* he thought, standing up from his seat and putting his hand on the boy’s shoulder to bring some form of comfort to him. **He is just a kid after all.**

What did surprise him was the look on the kid’s face when he looked up. Beyond the white mask dotted with blue stars, he wore an expression of fear. Genuine fear swam in his eyes, practically swallowing him whole save for underlying sadness, underlying pain.

"Because I couldn't stand and watch while the good got hurt," he answered, determination clear in his tone in spite of how badly his voice shook, his gaze unwavering and facing Vash directly. "Because I want to protect the innocent and bring justice to the bad guys."

Only once did police officer Vash Zwingli drop his poker face in the presence of this teenager, this boy who went out of his way to help someone even at the possible cost of his life. This kid who didn't have a police badge or a certificate from the police academy, who lacked a car or a gun, but made up for it in the resolve he possessed and willingness to change things.

Only once did police officer Vash Zwingli pat the kid on the back, a wry smile playing against his features. "Okay," he chuckled, removing his hand and going to his desk. He removed a pen and poised it over a notepad. "What should I call you when you help us out here at the NYPD?"

The boy paused, blinking a few times in concentration. After a minute, a figurative light-bulb flashed over his head. "America!"

"America?" The officer repeated out loud, wondering why he would choose that for a superhero name. Did he want to be like Captain America or something? Perhaps he was a little too patriotic…

Apparently so, the teenager nodded. "America!" He exclaimed with a fist-pump. "God bless the land of the free!"
Vash rubbed his temples to stave off an oncoming headache, having a bizarre feeling that he would be doing that a lot more often given the occupation he decided on. Was it too late for him to move to Switzerland with his mother?

"Hey," he called out before he could stop himself, wondering why his mouth decided to talk without his mind's consent at a time like this. The conference (which was taking place at the NYU's School of Law, like the first Metropolitan press conference had) was going to start in less than ten minutes, so why was he dilly-dallying when they could be making last-minute changes to their Commissioner-approved answers?

America looked back at him, and, for a moment, Vash thought he was back in his police office with a notepad scribbling 'America' in messy handwriting around midnight. He had that same expression as before, a confusing mixture of fear, sadness, and pain.

"Hang in there, you got that America?"

For a moment, he saw a glimpse of that boy from before. The same surprise and shock intermingled, as he blinked to register what it was he said. This time was different, though. He wasn't some gangly teenager dressed in red, white, and blue spandex with a plastic mask, he was a superhero. He was New York's famous superhero, who showed extended his hand to those who didn't deserve help, who showed kindness to those who didn't deserve kindness, who never gave up on someone in spite of how far gone they were.

And, for a moment, America displayed a little bit of himself (not like Vash would ever admit it). He smiled a wry smile and nodded. "Got it, Department Chief Zwingli."

The officer decided to let his poker face fall just one more time, as he returned the expression and followed him inside.

_Sometimes I forget that he started when he was in high school, but I guess it goes to show how much I still have left to learn._

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Hope you enjoyed this chapter, though I apologize for how schmaltzy that ending was; I think I developed lactose-intolerance due to its cheesiness. Anyway, I'll update soon with the next chapter, so until then? Stay awesome.
If one thing could be said about Arthur Kirkland, it was that he was prideful as hell. He had always been that way; if he ever scrapped his knees after falling off his bike (which didn't happen often as he rarely ventured outside), he would always stand up on his own regardless of how badly his skin was bleeding and bruised. If someone insulted him at school (which didn't happen often as he rarely socialized), he would always stand on his own and fight with his sharp tongue and sharper mind. If he was ever beaten at a game of chess (which had never happened as he always won at chess), it was to be assumed that he would assault his opponent with a barrage of strategical commentary until his enemy backed down or made a foolish move he could use to his advantage.

Which is why it pained him deeply, hurting more than any mortal wound and harsher than any insult, when Kiku confined him to bed yesterday.

_He had woken up with a heavy, painful feeling in the back of his throat, one that caused him to grimace whenever he swallowed. His arms and legs felt like chunks of lead stapled into a torso, numbed by goose bumps and the cold. Although his forehead was burning up, he was forced to cocoon himself in his blankets from how frozen the rest of his body felt._

_It's probably nothing serious_, Arthur managed to think in his heat-induced haze, as he dragged his feet over the edge of his bed and tried to stand up, violent coughing fits forcing him to sit back down again. _Even if it is, I won't allow my body to stop me from my plans for today._

A glance to his phone confirmed his suspicions; _The New York Times_ had recently updated the schedule for the second Metropolitan Museum press conference, stating that it would start in less than thirty minutes at NYU's School of Law. Considering he hadn't been able to go to the first Metropolitan press conference, he wanted to go to the second one so that he could spy on America incognito.

"Arthur-san?" Kiku's voice spoke through the door, making whatever blood present in Arthur's face
drain. Whenever he got sick, the Japanese always went into a sort of maternity mode, which was both hilarious and disturbing every time he caught the flu or a cold. "Are you alright? It sounds like you're trying to cough up a lung."

"I-I'm fine, Kiku," Arthur assured, hoping that the Asian couldn't detect the hoarseness of his voice or the wavering of his tone. "I-I was just getting up so that I could go to the press conference-"

The word 'surprise' couldn't begin to describe what he felt when the door busted open, leaving Kiku standing in its wake armed with a surgical mask, rubber gloves, and an entire box worth of medicines and ointments underneath his arm.

He pointed a gloved hand towards the box he carried, and pointed to Arthur with 'no-nonsense' clearly written in his expression.

Arthur swallowed--grimacing again when he did so--in nervousness and fear of the things soon to come.

That had all happened yesterday. He had missed the press conference because his body just had to go off and get sick, causing him to stay in bed with Kiku fretting over him like a child. And he still hadn't gotten any better.

This is so humiliating, the Brit thought distastefully, hating how cold the plastic tip of the thermometer felt against the underside of his tongue. He inwardly cringed when he removed the thermometer and checked the temperature. 38 degrees Celsius/100.4 degrees Fahrenheit stared back at him on the digital screen. I'm a twenty-two year old man who is both a thief and an enemy of the NYPD, but I'm rendered helpless because of being sick?

The Japanese glanced at the temperature and shook his head, 'tsk'ing all the while. "You still have a fever," he informed, standing up so that he could wash the thermometer off in the Englishman's bathroom. "So I'm afraid you haven't recovered, Arthur-san."

The blond groaned, holding his head in his hands. "This is the second time I've been unable to go the press conference," he mumbled, removing his hands and staring out his bedside window to observe what was going on down below. This time yesterday, people were gathering around the School of Law, varying from newspaper reporters to college students whose classes required them to attend the event. He had seen them all loiter around aimlessly until police officials allowed them inside, to where America and all his superiors were-! "How am I supposed to observe my enemy's movements outside of my England guise without going to their publicity stunts?"

Kiku rolled his eyes, returning to Arthur's bedside and applying a cold towel to his forehead, sending goose bumps trailing up his body. "No need to be so dramatic," he lightly chided, laughing when he earned a non-threatening glare from his English roommate. "It's likely that reporters have posted what happened on the internet, so you only need to look online to see what you missed."

"Yes," Arthur nodded, pressing the towel into his face with the palm of his head, a moan of pleasure escaping his raw throat given how good the cold felt against his heated skin. "But still…"

It's one thing to see America and the NYPD as England, he reflected, his brow furrowing with every second he spent dwelling on the subject. But it's another thing to see America and the NYPD without them knowing who I am. It's more personal that way; a sense of surrealism that they can't touch you.

He shrugged on the inside when taking the events of the first conference into consideration. It was
probably for the best that I didn't show up; America would have recognized me from before and wouldn't have let the kiss go unnoticed.

"As your partner-in-crime, roommate, and friend, I refuse to let you wander around when you're still weakened," the Japanese reminded, provoking another groan from the Brit. He ignored the negative reaction from the blond, instead piling another blanket onto his shivering form. "How do you expect to defeat America and the NYPD if you can barely leave your bed?"

A low grumble protruded beneath the blankets, quirking another small laugh from Kiku. "If it'll help you out, I'll get Alfred-san to come over and take care of you~"

The Asian could faintly register the Brit's head shaking in disagreement beneath the covers. "Don't you dare," Arthur coughed out, hating how scratchy his voice sounded to his own ears. "I wouldn't want him to see me like this."

The Englishman could practically see his roommate smirk. "I doubt he'd think differently of you simply because you're ill," Kiku acknowledged, his voice muffled because of the fabric covering Arthur's ears. "If anything, your love 'o meter will skyrocket thanks to him taking care of you~"

"S-shut up," the blond retorted half-heartedly, burying his face in his pillows in a futile attempt to hide how badly he was blushing. "I don't need help to get better; I'm perfectly fine taking care of myself."

To be honest, he had no idea where that pride kink in his personality came from; it was a ridiculous notion to assume that things like 'pride' were genetic. If that were the case, it couldn't have been from his parents because they knew when it was better to let go and move on, considering they had to relinquish a lot of pride in order to move from England to the United States. While it was a more reasonable idea to assume it took shape from the people he was surrounded by, it couldn't have been from Kiku because he understood when pride acted as a sword more than a shield, and it couldn't have been from Alfred as even he was aware of the difference between self-esteem and arrogance.

He couldn't help it, though. He assumed that, if his dealings with self-esteem/arrogance could have come from any source, it would have come from no one from himself and the situations he faced. **When everything started crumbling around me, my pride was the only thing that kept me together,** Arthur thought, his eyes growing half-lidded against his pillow sheets, his grip on his blankets tightening until his knuckles turned white. **While Alfred helped me at every opportunity, there were certain things I had no choice but to keep him in the dark about. Another reason why I can't afford for him to see me like this.**

"Hello, Alfred-san? It's Kiku."

That voice jolted him out of his thoughts as if his brain was struck by electricity.

The Briton lunged from beneath his covers, his face burning bright at the prospect of what might happen, his nerves twisting into knots over and over again. His Japanese roommate was a good distance away from him, his iphone held to his ear with a mischievous grin etched onto his features.

"I'm sorry to intrude on you so suddenly, but it's relating to Arthur-san," he notified over the phone, dodging a pillow that Arthur threw with ease. For a person whose immune system had been rendered weak due to a childhood spent inside and was currently fighting a fever, he had surprisingly good aim. "He's been sick for the past two days and I need to run a few errands. Could you please drop by and keep an eye on him until I return?"
The brunette continued to dodge, duck, dip, dive, and dodge the pillows the blond was bombarding him with, all the while keeping the phone pressed to his ear as he replied accordingly. "Ah, yes. Please excuse the noise in the background, it's nothing to worry about. Yes, I'll see you soon, Alfred-sun."

He hung up and glanced at the exhausted Englishman, who was trying to steady his breathing and rubbing at his sore arms. "He'll be here shortly."

Arthur collapsed into his pile of pillows, groaning a third time as he covered his face. "Why would you do that, Kiku? What errands do you need to run?"

"Technically, they're errands for Japan," Kiku replied, resulting in the flustered Brit to look up from his hands to his accomplice. "After you've watched all the footage and read all the articles pertaining to the second metropolitan conference, we'll need to create a plan of attack on the off-chance that America and the NYPD reclaim their positive image. Until then, I'll scope out the surrounding areas for potential museums to 'visit'".

'England' nodded in agreement, grabbing his phone so that he could read the articles and watch the videos sooner. "Right. I'll make sure to do so when Alfred isn't around."

'Japan' smiled a miniscule amount when he heard a knock emit from the door of their dorm. "That must be him. As difficult as it will be, you must behave yourself, Arthur-san~"

For reasons other than a fever, the Briton blushed to the tips of his ears. "J-just go, already!"

Yesterday sucked.

There was no point in denying it.

Alfred expected for the press and public to be pissed off at him for the Metropolitan Museum going up in black smoke; it was a situation they felt he could have prevented (which he could if he had simply gone in 'O's place, though he had no idea what might have happened then), so he anticipated for them to be at least a little upset.

Sadly, Alfred was never good at predicting people's methods of thinking, unlike Arthur.

"Let's review what's happened so far," Vash said before the press conference was to start, as Alfred listened in. "Even though you tracked England's location down and we secured the perimeter, pictures still got out of the museum going up in smoke. Because of the fact that England didn't appear on the security cameras, the guards were knocked out with the same substance as before, and the jewelry was still there, people assume that you tried to reclaim your reputation as a hero by sending the police to a location where you knew England had struck before, knocking out and tying up the guards, and setting up a smoke bomb to make it look like England was there but he got away before you could catch him. In other words-".

"I screwed up," Alfred finished, facepalming. "I screwed up big time. How did they come to assume that it was me, again?"

"They've based it on our actions from before," the Department Chief admitted, crossing his arms over his chest. "Because of what we did to maintain our public image, our relationships with the public and media have been strained to say the least. The public felt like they deserved to know about a criminal on the loose and started wondering what other kinds of information we've hidden from them. The press took advantage of the people's emotions by publishing more slander directed
towards us, increasing their influence on civilians and their profits in one move. Because of our past decisions, not everyone views the NYPD as a force for justice and you as a hero. To answer your question, they assume it was you because they want someone to pin the blame on, someone that they used to consider as New York's golden boy, someone who they already harbor dislike towards as you represent the police."

"And nobody wants to think England was actually there because so much of the media considers him a hero," the American divulged, his skin pale beneath his mask, his hands tightly clenched into fists at his sides. He really needed to repair his gloves. "That he's a savior for showing the world what the NYPD and I will do to keep us in everyone's favor."

Disgusting, he thought, biting his lip to give him a semblance of feeling save for the twisting of his stomach. He baited me to make a move without considering the consequences and I took it! It doesn't matter whether we show the video he sent us on the night of the second heist; they'll think it's a fake to reinstate their trust.

His gaze hardened behind his mask when remembering his words, his message designed to evoke pathos and make him run amuck with unadulterated anger. While it was better to have Oya infiltrate the premise and catch England by surprise, that was a one-time trump card. No doubt that England would prepare himself in case it happened again.

All in all, he had achieved nothing except cause unnecessary suffering for the NYPD, make England look like a hero, and himself like a fool.

He is truly…despicable.

"-ERICA? America!" Vash shouted, making the American nearly jump from where they stood backstage. "I said to keep calm, okay? Regardless of whether the public or press will like it, you know the truth about what happened that night. Don't let that truth be tainted by their ignorance, you got that?"

Alfred nodded, the weight of his head feeling as heavy as the weight in his heart. No matter what, he had to do this. He couldn't sit back and let England achieve his goal (if any) without a fight.

They were in this mess because of his incompetence; he drew this double-sided sword, now it was time for him to attack.

Needless to say, yesterday sucked.

Regardless of how many times he tried to convince them otherwise, the reporters and audience members asked him questions relating to his failure, all with the same unrelenting vigor one would expect from a pack of vicious carnivores. 'Did you really think that England would strike the same place twice, or did you use that to your advantage by re-creating a crime?', 'What did you hope to gain from knocking out the guards, tying them up, and releasing a smoke bomb in the first place?', 'Was the police in on this sham of yours to reenact the first Metropolitan heist, or did you use them like they've used you?'.

With all that in mind, Alfred's mood brightened up when he heard his phone go off ('I'm Proud to be an American' by Lee Greenwood, unlike his superhero phone that played 'Hero' by Nickelback) and the caller ID revealed it to be Kiku.

"Hey, Kiku," he greeted after a moment, one hand holding his phone to his ear while his other hand dried his hair with a towel as he had just come out of the shower. The bespectacled blond set his phone on speaker as he shuffled through his drawers for something to wear. "How's it going over
"I'm sorry to intrude on you so suddenly, but it's relating to Arthur-san," the Japanese confessed, making Alfred's heart tighten in his chest while numerous scenarios ran through his mind. What if he got hurt? Was whatever happened so bad that Kiku had to call in Arthur's place? "He's been sick for the past two days and I need to run a few errands. Could you please drop by and keep an eye on him until I return?"

A sigh of relief escaped from the American as the panic in his system vanished. "Thank God," he laughed, scratching his head from embarrassment. "I thought something terrible happened to him. Sure, I'll be there shortly."

He registered what sounded like a pillow colliding with a rolling chair, quirking a light eyebrow to rise against his forehead. "Uh, everything okay over there?"

"Ah, yes. Please excuse the noise in the background, it's nothing to worry about. Yes, I'll see you soon, Alfred-san."

His confused expression only deepened when the Asian immediately hung up. But, he decided it'd probably be best to get going as quickly as possible, as Kiku was probably being pelted with pillows at the moment. That sort of thing tended to happen whenever someone tried helping Arthur when he wasn't feeling well.

*He always gets all flustered when someone tries to lend him a hand when he's sick,* Alfred thought with a small smile, that smile turning to a slight grimace when remembering being on the receiving end of his pillow-ammunition. For a person whose immune system had been rendered weak due to a childhood spent inside and was currently fighting a fever, he had surprisingly good aim. *It's kind of cute.*

Whatever color present in his face increased tenfold when realizing his thoughts, as he shook his head in an attempt to dissuade said thoughts and opened the door to his dorm.

*No, no, no,* he addressed internally, heading down the stairs to Arthur and Kiku's dorm, mistaking the rapid beating of his heart and the flushing of his cheeks for the speed in which he was traveling. *Friends don't think of each other like that, especially close friends!*

The American didn't realize he had arrived at the dorm until he felt his knuckles knock against the wood. He soon regretted the speed in which he left his dorm, his eyes growing wide behind his glasses as the fact sunk in that he'd have to take care of Arthur with things like feeding him or possibly bathing him!-

He found difficulty swallowing when the thought of Arthur, with cheeks awash in red and half-lidded eyes, crossed his mind.

*He didn't realize his fists had clenched on the railway until he felt a gentle squeeze from someone's hand force his grip to relax, his bespectacled sapphire eyes encountering seemingly-endless pools of emerald staring at him. Arthur's eyes were no longer hidden behind sunglasses, instead uncovered and reflecting the red and orange of the setting sun, wide with worry and uncertainty.*

*The tall blond wondered if Arthur's touch was always so comforting, if it was possible to drown in the deepness of someone's expressions, and if it was natural for his heart to race so fast in his chest.***

*Alfred brushed some strands of messy blond hair out of Arthur's face, curious as to how/when the distance between them diminished so much.*
He didn't realize he had cupped the Briton's cheek until he felt his fingertips skim the boy's cheek.

At this point, all Alfred knew was warmth. The warmth of the diminishing sun, the warmth of Arthur's cheeks, the warmth of his own heart beating wildly within his chest cavity. He couldn't speak, he couldn't phrase anything into words, and the only thing he could think was one sentence:

**More than anything, I want him to be happy because I-**

Once more, he shook his head in an attempt to dissuade his thoughts and stepped inside when the door opened, wearing a smile to not concern Kiku as the Asian stepped into the hall to leave, and to mask how badly his heart was tugging in his chest cavity.

"He took some Tylenol yesterday to help diminish his fever, but it only kicked in when he went to sleep," the brunette explained, handing him a list of what had happened so far in case he forgot. "He hasn't taken any more today because he's convinced the medicine's still working on his immune system, so make him take some more if his conditions worsen. In the worst-case scenario, don't hesitate to call a doctor."

Alfred nodded, accepting the paper and storing it in his pocket. "Got it," he beamed, saluting the Japanese enthusiastically to conceal how much he hoped the worse-case scenario wouldn't happen. "You can count on me!"

His aura of confidence vanished when the door closed, leaving an aura of nervousness in its wake. More than anything, he didn't want to experience another big screw-up like he had with the NYPD as America, especially if it involved Arthur's well-being.

**While I know it's silly to be over exaggerating over something like a fever, I can't help but feel scared I'll make some kind of mistake,** Alfred mentally confided, grabbing the bottle of Tylenol and walking to Arthur's bedroom.

It seems like I've done nothing but make mistakes, mistakes that have cost others dearly. I wouldn't want to see someone like Arthur experience unnecessary hardship or unnecessary pain because of me. I...don't know if I'd be able to bear it if that happened.

"Alfred? You've been staring into space for a while now, are you alright?" That voice, that same voice that reached out to him from behind a door all those years ago, interrupted his train of thought.

The bespectacled blond blinked, registering the sight of Arthur clad in blankets on his bed, a sheepish smile overcoming his features as he scratched his head.

"Sorry about that, just thinking's all," he reassured with a wave of his hand, setting the Tylenol bottle on the Brit's bedside table. "So you got sick again, huh? What'd you do this time?"

All the color temporarily drained out of the boy's face. Temporarily.

"Stood out in the rain, nothing more," he huffed, provoking a 'oh really' look to overtake the American's facial features. "But you know how weak my immune system is; apparently my body can't take longer than twenty minutes."

"What were you doing that required you to stand in the rain for at least twenty minutes?" Alfred wondered out loud, glancing outside to check on the current weather status and missing the sad look that adorned Arthur's face for a split-second. "I doubt you were singing."

"As a matter of fact, I was," Arthur proclaimed, making Alfred double-over in laughter. "I was! It was raining, I was in New York over by Broadway, I couldn't help myself!"
"S-so you mean to tell me," Alfred managed to say, wiping a tear from his eye as he redirected his gaze to his sick friend with a genuine smile lighting up his features. "That you happened to be over by Broadway while it was raining, so you decided to sing in the rain?"

Arthur looked him with a serious expression. "Yes."

Alfred proceeded to hold his stomach as his laughter became too painful for him to endure sitting up straight (or slouched-over, as Arthur always nagged him about sitting up straight instead of hunched over all the time). "Y-you," he started, his face hurting from how badly he was smiling. "Y-you are the geekiest guy I've known by far."

Once more, he missed an expression cross the Brit's features. A brief look of happiness that lasted as quickly as it left.

"Seriously though, how'd you end up sick so suddenly?" Alfred asked when his laughter died down, his eyes bright as he rested his hand on his cheek, his curiosity increasing when noting how the Briton played with his fingers to avoid having to meet his gaze. "Allergies or something?"


He reached over and ruffled the blond's locks, relishing the indignant squawk that emitted from the boy. "As long as you're okay, okay?"

"Stop flirting with me, Jones," the Englishman rolled his eyes, a slight grin playing against his cheekbones. "Be grateful that I'm not shoving a pillow in your face."

The American cascaded a glance to the pillows currently surrounding the Brit, swallowing in mock-nervousness. "Yeah, those pillows of yours are weapons of mass destruction."

"Be afraid!" Arthur exclaimed (or as well as one can exclaim with a sore throat) as he held a pillow over his head like he was preparing to strike Alfred down, his face scrunches up in a way that he probably thought looked intimidating when it was really as intimidating as an kitten. "Be very afraid!"

Alfred laughed again, scooting his chair away from the blond's bedside with his hands in surrender. "Spare me, please," he joked, sprawling dramatically against the back of his chair when Arthur's pillow hit him squarely in the chest. He extended his hand outwards as he pretended to sputter and cough. "R-rose…bud."

Arthur rolled his eyes again, covering his mouth with his hands in vain efforts at hiding his grin. "Your acting is as terrible as your English, Jones."

"You just jelly, again."

"I'd rather be Nutella, thank you."

"D-did you just-?"

"Yes."

Neither of them could maintain a poker face for much longer, as they proceeded to laugh again. Alfred had never been able to really hold a poker face against Arthur, or anyone else really. The only one who he'd been able to maintain an appearance of steel with was England, but England was a… different case.
England was a walking contradiction that was for sure; sometimes, his plans felt elaborate and well thought-out, while other times they felt simple and improvised. Sometimes, his actions were easy-to-read -Alfred able to anticipate his responses with ease- but sometimes his actions caught him completely off-guard as he struggled to grasp with what just happened.

What really got to him were England's methods of thinking. He couldn't even begin to fathom what went on in his mind! Whenever he tried to get a grasp on what went through his head, England went off and did something that contradicted what he previously assumed and slipped through his fingers like water.

His actions were calculable but his mindset was not, making him the worst type of enemy: an unpredictable one.

That epiphany came to him when he and Arthur were watching 'The Dark Knight' together on the Brit's laptop, as Arthur had never seen the movie before and agreed to watch it if Alfred watched a few episodes of 'Black Butler'. That epiphany came to him when he was watching the movie and he heard a monologue from the Joker that didn't seem too big of a deal before, but now startled him:

"'Don't talk like one of them. You're not! Even if you'd like to be. To them, you're just a freak, like me! They need you right now, but when they don't, they'll cast you out, like a leper! You see, their morals, their code, it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you. When the chips are down, these... these civilized people, they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster. I'm just ahead of the curve.'"

Once more, he found himself unable to maintain a poker face when Arthur suddenly turned off the movie shortly after that monologue was spoken, surprise and shock clearly visible against his facial features as he blinked to register how pale both he and Arthur had become.

"I-I took that Tylenol earlier," the Brit yawned, his skin still pale for unbeknownst reasoning. "S-so I'm feeling kind of tired."

Alfred smiled weakly and released a breath he had no idea he was holding. "Right," he agreed, closing the laptop and putting it on the blond's bedside table after unplugging it. "How are you feeling?"

"I can talk, at least," the British boy informed, rubbing his throat carefully. "And I'm not in as much pain as before."

"That's good to hear," Alfred replied, fluffing up the pillows and covering the Englishman's form with blankets when he rested his back against the headboard. He tried his best to ignore how Arthur's light locks shimmered like gold in the faint moonlight, or how his eyes glowed like emeralds amongst the shadows of the room. "See? It's not too hard when people help you out."

Arthur pretended to pout, crossing his arms over his chest and prompting the American to laugh.

"I'm glad," he yawned when Alfred's laughter died down, his hands now folded in his lap as he looked out the window with drowsy eyes. "I'm very glad."

Alfred's smile still lingered, his eyes bright as he rested his hand on his cheek, looking out the window in vain efforts to find where it was Arthur was looking. He couldn't help but wonder why his line-of-sight trailed in the same direction as the Bronx. "What for?"

There was smile, again. The same smile that made the Englishman look far older and wiser than he actually was, though it was much softer than its predecessor was; happier, bathed in the lull of
sleepiness, and tinted with another emotion he was unable to place. "When you walked in here, you kind of…scared me. You were quiet and sad even though I was right here, and I was worried about you."

"S-sorry about that," Alfred apologized, guilt eating at his senses. He had scared him? Caused him to worry? But he said he was glad, so what was the problem? "I-I was just thinking, like I said before."

"I know." Arthur gazed back at him, and the world seemed to dull in comparison. While he had seen that strange smile a handful of times, it was with him staring into space. He had never been on the receiving end of that look, before.

It was…beautiful.

He yawned again, his eyelashes fluttering against his skin as he closed his eyes. "I'm very glad that I can still make you smile."

Alfred's eyes grew wide behind his glasses as he continued to stare at the male, even though it was obvious he was in a medicine-induced sleep. He couldn't stop himself from observing the Brit's relaxed features, from the gentle rise and fall of his chest to the lethargic grin residing against his expression and pulling at the American's heartstrings. All the while, his mind kept playing that last sentence throughout his brain like a record player stuck on repeat:

"I'm very glad that I can still make you smile."

He couldn't even begin to describe the warm sensation blooming in his chest, causing his pulse to thunder in his wrists and his blood to pound in his ears. It felt like the thing he'd experienced back at the Bow Bridge, when it was sunset and everything was so comforting and he almost-

Alfred must have caught Arthur's fever for feeling these bizarre bouts of conflicting emotion, for feeling this bizarre blur between his wants and needs, for these contradictions between his mind and heart.

Alfred most likely caught Arthur's fever; that would be the only explanation for him leaning down and kissing him in his sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: The stone has been disturbed, and begins its descent; only time will tell to what actions may arise, and what ending may come to fruition as a result of its momentum.
When Arthur woke up the next morning, he could tell that something was wrong.

It couldn't have been from his sickness; if anything, his fever had diminished and he could speak much better than yesterday. His surroundings were essentially the same, what with his laptop perched on his bedside table and the medicine bottles lining his shelves. As far as he could tell, everything seemed fine. Yet, in spite of it all, he couldn't dismiss the lingering suspicion gnawing at his senses.

Perhaps something to do with Alfred, Arthur internally noted as he (reluctantly) stuck a thermometer under his tongue, wincing at the cold metal pressed to the bottom of his mouth. He cascaded his gaze towards the empty chair positioned beside his bed, his brow furrowing at the unusual sight. Whenever I got sick, he always stayed by my side until I got better, regardless of how much I pestered him to go home. He's never left early before, so why would he leave now?

A 'beep' from the thermometer interrupted his thoughts, as Arthur removed the item and looked at the temperature. 37.3 degrees Celsius/99.2 degrees Fahrenheit stared back at him on the digital screen; hopefully, his temperature would meet Kiku's standards and allow him to finally leave his apartment after three days of rest.

The Briton stood up and stretched, relishing how his toes curled and his muscles burned at the unfamiliar movement, as he walked over to the restroom and stripped for a shower.

I only remember up to the Joker scene in 'The Dark Knight' movie, he thought as his blond locks turned brown under the water, a pleased sigh escaping his mouth at the sensation of warm water easing his tense shoulders and upper back. Other than that, the events of last night are a Tylenol-induced blur.

"Don't talk like one of them. You're not! Even if you'd like to be. To them, you're just a freak, like me!
They need you right now, but when they don't, they'll cast you out, like a leper! You see, their morals, their code, it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. I'll show you. When the chips are down, these... these civilized people, they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster. I'm just ahead of the curve.”

Just the thought of that quote sent shivers down his spine.

Never in his life did he imagine he would find someone who summed up his ideas in a single monologue, much less someone like the Joker from the Batman franchise. He tried his best to contain his joy at the concept of someone understanding him, and yet he couldn't contain how pale he had become as Alfred was beside him. If he showed his happiness, that would only make him look suspicious in the eyes of his friend; the logical response at the time was to let him appear horrified at the monologue as opposed to thrilled.

He couldn't understand why Alfred became so pale at the quote, considering the American had probably seen the movie a million times. Yet another thing he couldn't discern for the life of him, Arthur supposed.

_I vaguely remember Alfred and I talking about something, though I can't remember what it was_, the Brit continued to think as he tended to his bathing ritual, turning off the water and stepping out of the shower when he finished. He took a towel and wrapped it around his waist, using a hand-towel to dry his hair. _After that, I think I fell asleep. All I could remember from that was this strange dream I had-

His train of thought derailed there, replaced by his face draining of color and the feeling of his blood turning to ice in his veins. Arthur grabbed a clean set of clothes and changed in an attempt to dissuade his mind. However, as his grip on the fabrics became shaky, it became clear that such wishes were fruitless ones.

_The area was silent, save for the gentle pitter-patter of rain colliding with the concrete sidewalks. The cloudy skies overcast the area, bathing its surroundings in shadows and varying shades of black. The street was vacant, save for the Englishman currently defying the current color scheme by carrying a green umbrella over his head, and breaking the silence by singing 'London Bridge' under his breath._

_"-Build it up with silver and gold, silver and gold, silver and gold," he murmured, casting a glance towards the sky as he extended a hand, catching a few raindrops in his palm. A soft smile enveloped his features considering he tried to catch the rain in his hands quite often when he was a child living in England, where there were more rainy days than sunny ones. "Build it up with silver and gold, my fair lady."_

_He continued his walk, too caught up in his song to register the sound of footsteps trailing behind him._

_"Silver and gold will be stolen away, stolen away, stolen away," the blond sang as he retracted his hand and kept a firm grip on the handle of his umbrella, swaying a bit with the nursery rhyme, oblivious of the steadily-increasing sound of footsteps echoing closer and closer. "Silver and gold will be stolen away, my fair lady-"_

_Arthur stopped, in both the song and in his movements, when a pair of arms wrapped around his waist and pulled him close, forcing him to drop his umbrella as his back collided with a solid chest before he could react._

_"Ello, love."_
That was all he could think before he was spun around and kissed, barely registering the sight of America over the obscurity of the situation. Even so, he couldn't help but melt a little into the kiss, as it was surprisingly comforting and their mouths seemed to fit perfectly together.

The kiss ended as soon as it began, leaving the Brit dazed and confused on his feet. He stepped back after a moment, his hands turning to fists at his sides as he glared at his American nemesis, unable to explain why his palms were sweaty and his heart was racing within his chest.

America only smirked, causing Arthur's blood to boil. "A fitting part of the song for someone like you."

The Briton rested his face in his hands, recalling how he had woken up shortly after America said that in his dream. He had woken up in a cold sweat, completely alone in the darkness of his room, and was unable to stop touching his mouth as he could have sworn something felt off. Something about the kiss felt so real, it was disorienting. Although the likeliness of him actually being kissed in his sleep was practically non-existent, his lips still tingled with the dream-induced foreign sensation. At first, he felt embarrassed that he dreamt of America kissing him, of all people. But then, he grew curious as to why he dreamt of America kissing him, of all people.

At the time, he assumed it was probably because he made the mistake of kissing America in the past, and the answer was good enough to lull him to sleep again. But now, the notion didn't deter the paleness of his skin or the shakiness of his limbs in the slightest.

Now that he thought about it, that obscure dream was probably the source of his lingering suspicions instead of Alfred leaving early.

A small sigh escaped him as he sat up and grabbed his phone, opening up internet tabs relating to articles of the second Metropolitan press conference with one hand, and getting ahold of his laptop with his other hand.

*Listen to me, wasting precious time thinking about a kiss that didn't even happen when I have more important matters to deal with,* the Englishman thought with a frown, as he accessed internet tabs dedicated to video footage from the second conference on his laptop, his mouse feverishly clicking away to gather as many varying resources as possible. *I can't let something like that distract me from what I need to do. I won't stop until all the tasks at hand have been cleared.*

While the video footage was loading, he opened up one last tab for the Ailateh portion of the Ayuramih website to check on the status of his stolen artifacts, his green eyes scanning over the screen to check for anything he missed. Surprise overtook his features when he saw a notification in his message box. With a shrug of his shoulders, he clicked on the message and pressed play on the video footage so that he could listen to the audio while he read the notification.

"-In regards to the second Metropolitan Museum incident-

**Subject: Unknown**

**From: Russia**

Привет, England.

"-Rest assured that I, America, had no intention of re-establishing myself or the New York Police Department's reputation in any way, shape, or form, by attempting to capture the thief known as
'England'-"

You have become quite famous in the past few weeks, да?

"-However, I do intend to bring him to justice for the crimes he's committed, for the sake of New York City and its civilians."

Quite remarkable how quickly news can spread in this day and age; it has the potential to be both a blessing and a curse, depending on who uses it.

"Did you really think that England would strike the same place twice, or did you use that to your advantage by re-creating a crime?"

"What did you hope to gain from knocking out the guards, tying them up, and releasing a smoke bomb in the first place?"

"Was the police in on this sham of yours to reenact the first Metropolitan heist, or did you use them like they've used you?"

Allow me to get to the point: I would like to meet you, England.

"The NYPD and I received a message from England around 8:29 P.M on the night of the second Metropolitan heist three days ago, which gave us clues in regards to where he would strike next-"

Not through a computer screen, but face-to-face.

"We deduced that he would return to the Metropolitan Museum of Art as he did on the first of June, and, after investigating the premise, discovered the security night guards bound and gagged. Inside sources informed us that England was at the museum and used a smoke bomb to escape."

While we are criminals, we shouldn't have to hide behind aliases and façades. We are civilized gentlemen, capable of conducting conversations beyond websites like 'Ayuramih' and 'Ailateh'.

"How does that explain the fact that he didn't show up on the cameras and no artifacts were stolen?"

Have no fear, England; do not feel pressured to show your face or reveal your identity.

"The NYPD is investigating all the cameras and artifacts in the section where England was spotted; they will report their findings in due time."

I only ask that we meet in person so that we may discuss a potential business partnership I have devised, one that will benefit the both of us.

"How do we know this isn't just a hoax to get the public's opinion in your favor?"

If you are interested in my proposition, please open the document attached to this message, which will specify the date, time, and location of the meeting. It will also specify on what items (if any) to bring.

"Because the NYPD and I know the truth; and that truth cannot be tainted regardless of whatever happens. And I, America, will not stand idly by and watch as crime runs amuck in our city, as families are ripped apart and lives are destroyed, as the innocent and weak are crushed by the wicked and the strong!"
It's your move now, England.

"It's your move now, England."

Arthur stared at his computer screen, his eyes wide as he contemplated the current situation at hand. He minimized the screen so that he could view Russia's message and the conference video simultaneously. The video had ended with a shot of America from an iPhone, seriousness present in all aspects of the hero's appearance from the straightness of his posture to the clenching of his fists. To be honest, the image had majorly caught the Brit off-guard.

In the four months 'England' had existed, Arthur had maneuvered it so that his crimes weren't high-profile ones. He had to create a reputation for himself as a criminal, otherwise, if he committed crimes like the Metropolitan heist on his first try, it would look like he was taking the credit for someone else's work. And yet, even though his acts weren't worthy of the responses he was getting with the Metropolitan incidents, America had still showed up and tried to stop him.

Every time, one way or another, America had never failed to worm his way into Arthur's plans, and he always did it with the same '100% American' smile and 'I'M THE HERO' attitude. There had been less than a handful of times where a retort had gone a little too far and America had lost his cool, but it had never been to the point where America looked so determined to bring him down like he had on the iPhone image.

Surely, this was the turning point in this game of chess; as of right now, he could easily turn around, drop the England guise, and let the persona wither out and die before things got out of hand. If he made that move, he could live the rest of his life devoid of the troubles one would associate with America and the NYPD. He had planned on attaining his Master's Degree at NYU when the semester started in the fall. After that, there was a world of possibilities open for him.

However, he could continue forward just as easily. He could read Russia's attached document and proceed based on its contents, and walk down the path with 'Japan' as his shield and 'England' as his sword. He could avenge his parents' deaths by bringing shame to America and dissolution to the NYPD, create a new police force devoid of the hypocrisy and corruption that ripped his family apart, and in turn, make New York a place where he and Alfred could live happily.

If he was caught, then everything would have been for naught. His future would reside in a prison cell, Kiku would probably meet the same fate, his parents' deaths would have been for nothing, he would never see Alfred again, and the world would know no change. The same people would benefit from standing on the heads of those they took advantage of, and the same people would cheer them on. An endless cycle of hate with no beginning or end, only continuation.

Arthur cast his gaze towards his 'England' mask resting next to him on his bed, the sunlight making the silver tree branches shimmer and the black fabric strands look like liquid ebony. His eyes grew half-lidded at the sight. How long would he continue to live like this, slinking around in the darkness with his brain as his only weapon? How far would he have to go to keep anyone from finding out the truth? How many lies would he have to tell to Alfred?

The idea of lying to Alfred pained him deeply, hurting more than any mortal wound and harsher than any insult. Alfred believed in him as much as America believed in the NYPD. If Alfred ever found out-

He swallowed, not wanting to even imagine it. And yet his resolve tightened with every instant he thought of the American. Whatever it was that Alfred was hiding, that was probably the reason for his forced smiles and sad looks in his eye. And if living one more day as 'England', taking one more precautionary measure, and telling one more lie would take him one step closer to Alfred living a life
devoid of whatever pain he felt, Arthur could live with it.

The Briton couldn't stop the determined smile that worked its way onto his features, as he looked back to his computer screen, closed the tab dedicated to the second Metropolitan press conference video, and clicked 'Ok' on the Ailateh tab so that he could view Russia's business-related document.

Now then.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Sorry for this chapter being so short, but it was a thing that needed to happen. I'll make sure to update soon with the next installment, so until then? Stay awesome.
With ragged breathing and adrenaline rushing through his veins, Alfred woke up.

His mind was still warped from the nightmare he had woken up from, so he sat up and rested his back against his bed’s headboard when he registered the shadows encasing his room, his senses going into fight-or-flight in the instance he had to defend himself.

Though his thoughts were a pathetic excuse for coherency, his dorm room was as quiet and serene as it was when he fell asleep. Nothing was displaced, nothing was missing, and there were no signs of infiltration by any enemies. When taking those factors into consideration, the American fought to catch his breath in an attempt to calm himself. His hand slipped over his chest as he struggled to regulate his pulse, his T-shirt damp with cold sweat and sticking lightly to his back.

After a moment of gathering himself together, he stood up and ran a shaky hand through his tousled blond locks to remind himself that everything was fine, the cold hardwood floor tattooing goose bumps on his skin.

The adrenaline still coursing through his system made him almost think otherwise for an instant. Alfred always hated the surreal feeling of waking up from a nightmare, as it made him jumpy and paranoid like he was after watching horror movies.

He doubted a horror movie could ever scare him as badly as that nightmare, though.

A soft sigh escaped from his lips as he ran his hands through his hair again, shivers spiraling down his spine when he closed his eyes and saw the face peering at him from the dark corner of his mind.

"It was just a dream," he murmured, taking deep breaths to calm down. "It was just a dream. Artie's alright, there's nothing to worry about."

The guilt pooling in his stomach threatened to differ, the unpleasant sensation causing him to bite his
Ever since he left Arthur's dorm two hours ago, he had been plagued by nightmares. The same nightmare, playing over and over in his mind until it threatened to rip his skull apart. He didn't want to acknowledge what he had done to resign himself to such a fate, as it would mean acknowledging that he had-

Blood swarmed into his cheeks and heat invaded every fiber of his being, making Alfred stiffen from where he stood in his room. The concept...made him feel conflicted for unbeknownst reasoning.

A soft, exasperated sigh escaped him as he sat on the edge of his bed, his face in his hands as he reluctantly confronted what he had done. His heart was thumping in his chest, his stomach was twisting into knots, and he couldn't stop touching his lips as he tried to comprehend the fact that he had kissed Arthur!

His knees supporting his forearms grew wobbly, forcing him to sit upright. Alfred rubbed his temples to stave off his oncoming headache, a grimace etching itself onto his features.

_I'm such a terrible friend_, he thought with another exasperated sigh, as he reached over and grabbed his glasses. _I shouldn't have taken advantage of Arthur, especially while he was sleeping._

His eyes softened behind his glasses at the thought of the Brit. He had looked so calm and peaceful, with the moonlight shimmering against sandy-blond locks and making his green eyes glisten like emeralds amongst the darkness, and that smile...

Alfred couldn't help but wonder if he would die young from how often his heart felt strained at the sight of that smile, legitimate and brimming with happiness, unrestrained by wistfulness and pain. It was a glimpse into Arthur himself, his mind and soul; an opportunity to see his true self. However, it was a rare glimpse.

Again, it was all connected with that accursed number: fifteen. Arthur was fifteen when he suddenly changed, when he built a wall to protect himself from getting hurt even if it meant limiting the windows to his psyche, when his inner spark significantly diminished.

A part of Alfred considered the possibility that the lessening of Arthur's smiles was due to him growing up; while some held onto the more childlike aspects of their personalities, others deserted their innocence and embraced the cruelties of the world, becoming corrupted from the inside-out. That was a possibility that Alfred rejected; he knew that Arthur was better than that, stronger than that. He knew he wouldn't succumb to that path so easily.

But if that wasn't the answer, what was?

The American rested his head against his bed's headboard again, blowing some blond strands of hair away from his eyes.

"Even so," he continued, mentally berating himself for being so weak-willed. "None of that justifies what I did; I'm supposed to be a hero for justice who handles all criminals without discrimination or personal bias, I shouldn't abandon my morals because of Arthur, whether he's a main reason for me becoming America or not."

Alfred's words caught in his throat when he realized what he said. That was essentially the same sentence spoken by England twice; the first time in the video he sent to the NYPD on the night of the second Metropolitan heist-
The second time in the nightmare he had woken up from a few minutes prior.

He had long lost the feeling in his legs. Since he started running, his limbs had become numb with the strain of his muscles. His breath came in shallow pants and disappeared in puffs of smoke in front of his face as his lungs burned with each heave that felt an instant heavier than the last. He barely registered the sensation of the morning summer air nipping at his face given how flushed his cheeks were.

I have to reach him, the blond managed to think semi-coherently in spite of his dulled senses, his hands clenching and unclenching themselves into fists at his sides, his eyes searching amongst the fog for the back of that familiar head of blond hair he had come to like. If I can't reach him now, I don't know if I'll be able to-

He shook his head, hoping to shake his negative thoughts along with it, his brow furrowed as he increased his speed, uncaring of the worrying state of his legs.

No, he decided, cringing a miniscule amount at how badly the wind had picked up and how hard the chilled air clawed into his cheekbones. I can and will make it in time!

Any semblance of thought evaporated from his mind the instant he spotted the subject of his thoughts standing by himself in the distance. He was dressed in black formal attire, his back to Alfred considering he likely stared into space.

"Arthur," Alfred breathed, a relieved smile etched onto his expression at the sight of the Brit alive and unhurt, contrary to the fears that previously inhabited his conscience. Ignoring how his bones seemed to groan in agony at the concept of moving, he ran forward and wrapped his arms around the smaller blond, pulling him close until Arthur's back rested against his chest. Alfred buried his face in the hair of his friend, his best friend, his companion, not giving a damn of whether or not he was crying as long as the bushy-browed Briton stayed put in his embrace. Surprisingly enough, the Englishman didn't even struggle at the idea of interacting so intimately with the American. Unusual, considering he would normally squirm and shout colorful profanities that would cause even a sailor to blush. But as long as he was here, alive and well, Alfred couldn't care less.

"Oh Arthur," he mumbled, his cheeks hurting from smiling so much. "I was so scared that he finally got to you. That you were-

"Stolen away like a treasure?"

The entire world ceased to exist, with the exception of Alfred and the boy he held in his arms. Everything dulled in comparison, melting away into the background and becoming nothingness.

Though his brain had begun to feel like mush in his skull, it took him less than a second to piece it together. His sky-blue eyes widened behind his glasses as the younger male turned around in his arms, a black masquerade mask decorated in silver tree branches obscuring his face with the exception of his forest-green eyes.

"What did you do to Arthur?" Alfred interrogated, his gaze narrowing at the sight of the thief, anger lacing a majority of his voice to hide the panic lying underneath, his grip on the criminal tightening ever so slightly. "What the hell did you do to him?"

A low chuckle escaped from the Englishman as he stomped harshly on Alfred's shoes, relishing the satisfying screech of pain that escaped from the hero before he spun around and shoved him away,
successfully escaping his grasp in the process.

"The better question would be what I haven't done to him," England acknowledged, removing the Tudor rose from his lapel and twirling it between his fingers, a smirk growing amongst his features as he savored the panicked look in his enemy's eyes given how rare it was for the hero to be without some form of backup plan. Thankfully, the villain always had a backup plan thanks to his loyal sidekick. "Would you prefer to know that instead?"

"Where's Arthur, dammit?!" The American superhero shouted, repressing the strong temptation to throttle the thief's little neck until it snapped like a twig. With his inhuman strength he could very well do it. Watch the light fade from his emerald eyes that resembled his beloved Brit's.

Though if he did something like that, would that make him just as bad as the criminals he had caught in the past? Would that make him just as bad as England? As bad as the people who-

"As much as I'd love to see you without arms or legs attached to your body, you're much more useful to me alive!" Alfred informed, interrupting his own train of thought. "Now tell me where Arthur Kirkland is, unless you want to end up six feet underground!"

The villain standing across from the hero shook his head, 'tsk'ing all the while with that same cocky smirk permanently engraved on his face. "You acknowledge the contradiction between what you're doing and what you're saying, right?"

"What do you mean by that?" Alfred questioned, keeping a firm stance on the ground to prevent himself from shaking in rage. He had no idea how much longer he could put up with the lunatic without giving into his homicidal urges. Just the thought of Arthur hidden somewhere, possibly being stored in the cargo hold of a plane or shoved into the claustrophobic space of a trunk, made his heart squeeze until he felt like he'd pass out.

He didn't want to imagine Arthur possibly being dead.

"You claim to be a hero for justice who handles all criminals without discrimination or personal bias, and yet you threaten to kill me simply for the disappearance of a close friend," the thief said, plucking a crimson petal off the Tudor rose held in his hand and letting it fall to the ground. The Englishman couldn't help but have his grin stretch wider. "It's obvious you have a difficult enough time abiding by your own rules. Or is it possible those little morals of yours are just for show? A little self-gratification to satisfy your hero complex?"

"Shut up!" The tall blond screamed, lunging forward and grabbing the villain by the collar of his black tailcoat, his blue eyes narrowed behind his spectacles. "Stop stalling for time, you bastard! Either you tell me what you did to Arthur or you can say goodbye to living!"

"Now how can I say goodbye to living if life isn't embodied into a person? It's as abstract a concept as personifying a country!" The English criminal remarked in a nonchalant tone of voice, raising his hands in surrender after seeing the (uncharacteristically) serious glint in the hero's expression. "Alright, I'll say this much for certain," He began, removing his mask with his smirk still existing on his face.

'England' loved the look of horror and realization that dawned on the hero, given his face unconcealed was a patchwork of flesh from both his original skin and the former Arthur Kirkland's skin. The fact that thief had stolen Arthur's emerald-green eyes and jabbed them messily into his own eye sockets probably caused more psychological damage towards the hero than he initially intended.

How wonderful.
“N-n-no,” Alfred managed to whisper, losing his grip on England's tailcoat and falling to the ground, staring up at the dark figure before him, staring into the unblinking eyes of his deceased friend. "N-n-no, y-you d-d-didn't-"

“But I did,” England interrupted, crushing the Tudor rose in his hand so that the petals slipped through his fingers like blood, all the while looming over the so-called 'hero for justice' who was rendered helpless like a mere infant. "He died screaming for you to rescue him. He died believing you would find him in time and save him like the 'hero' you claim to be. And I must say...his eyes are the ultimate jewels in my collection."

He felt sick in all aspects when remembering the nightmare. How powerless he felt in comparison to the thief, how he couldn't dissuade those horrific images of England with his patchwork face.

*I know I should have experienced some guilt from my own subconscious,* Alfred dwelled internally, picking up his phone and opening up his notepad; whenever he had a nightmare, he would write it down in order to somewhat get it off his chest. Before, he used to always text Arthur about it, but as Arthur was cranky when he got woken up (not to mention it would be awkward to discuss the contents of his dream and how he came to have the dream) the American decided it was better to use this method of writing his dreams down. *But that was pretty messed-up.*

With that, he opened up a new note on his notepad (labeled as '6/17/xx'), and began to type out what he experienced.

**Though if there's one thing that I'm curious about,** the bespectacled blond started within his mind, as he looked over the finished text. Everything seemed in order with what he had seen, so he saved it a few times to prevent it from being deleted. *It's why I dreamed of England when I should have dreamt of Arthur.*

His brow furrowed as he leaned his hand on his cheek, staring into the brightly-lit screen as if it held the answer to life, the universe, and everything. *Is it possible that it was a stress-related dream instead of a guilt-related one? That would make sense, considering all the craziness that's been going on as of late…*

A sigh of relief escaped him this time, a small smile quirking at his cheekbones. "That's probably it. From trying to catch England, to trying to convince the public I'm not some diabolical villain, I've dealt with nothing but stress for the past few weeks."

With that logical explanation in mind, Alfred exited out of his notes and opened up the photo album on his phone, finally locating the picture he was looking for after a few minutes of searching as it was the oldest picture he had on his phone.

It was a picture taken of when he and Arthur first met, way back when they were kids.

What had happened was that Arthur and his family had moved from England into the same apartment complex as Alfred and his family. It was about a week before Arthur's sixth birthday (April 23rd), and his mother wanted Arthur to make as many friends as possible in America so that he wouldn't feel homesick, so she invited all the kids around his age to his birthday party.

That photo in particular was taken when Arthur opened up Alfred’s gift to him (something he spent all the money in his piggy bank to get him), which was a stuffed animal that looked like a flying mint bunny. Apparently, the stuffed animal resembled one of his imaginary friends that he left back in England, because the Brit was so happy he burst into tears. The picture just showed a small Arthur smiling and crying tears of joy with a green bunny plush held to his chest, with Alfred sitting next to
him with a happy (albeit confused) look on his face. He wouldn't have been surprised if Arthur still had the stuffed animal since he never let it out of his sight and took good care of it.

The picture was originally in Alfred's scrapbook, which he had come across while he was packing up to go to university. It struck a small cord in him and brought waves of nostalgia back, so he took a picture of it on his phone and kept it with him.

*Whenever I wonder about why I decided to become America,* Alfred thought, pink blooming amongst his previously-pale features. *I look at that photo and remember why. Because I want to make a world where he can smile like that all the time, without restricting his true self at all. Even if it's something as small as putting the bad guys behind bars, I want him to live without the pain of the past, without feeling like he has to involve himself with matters like the NYPD or England, without fear of being hurt or-*

He blinked, seeing the patchwork face and lifeless green eyes from his nightmares, and inwardly shuddered.

*Being killed,* he swallowed, refusing to blink out of fear he'd see it again, his grip on his phone increasing until he heard his phone case crack a little bit. He groaned, considering he really needed to stop almost breaking his phones with his super-strength. He set the phone aside and grabbed his laptop so he could search up articles relating to the second Metropolitan press conference, as it was obvious he wouldn't be able to sleep well if those kinds of nightmares plagued him. *Even if I end up getting hurt or worse, I'll protect him from villains like England to the best of my abilities.*

As he accessed various websites and blogs, he couldn't help but smile. Ever since the second press conference, there hadn't been as many anti-America and anti-NYPD supporters as before. As footage of the conference was 'leaked' and rumors began to spread, people were starting to reconsider the possibility that maybe America and the NYPD didn't have their own agenda, maybe they were actually looking out for the public instead of themselves, and maybe England wasn't as big of a hero as he had led the people to believe. While it was a small amount of people on the internet saying such things and producing such articles in favor of the police, it was good to know that not everyone was thinking the worst of them.

*Chances are that, with his popularity diminishing and the NYPD reclaiming their followings, England will feel cornered and begin to panic,* Alfred thought with a smirk after several hours of overlooking websites and resources, the beginnings of sunlight filtering through his window and cascading off his glasses. He leaned back in his bed with his laptop, his hands behind his head as a form of cushioning. *When that comes, he'll be forced to make a move that will change everything.*

Surely, this was the turning point in this game of chess; as of right now, he could easily turn around, drop the America guise, and let the persona wither out and die before things got out of hand. If he made that move, he could live the rest of his life devoid of the troubles one would associate with England and the NYPD. While he made a good income from the product placement on his America attire, it wouldn't be hard for him to get a job as a paid intern or something along those lines. He planned on attaining his Master's Degree at NYU when the semester started in the fall. After that, there was a world of possibilities open for him.

However, he could continue forward just as easily; he could wait for England to make his move and proceed based on the choices he made, and walk down the path with 'O' and the NYPD as his shields and 'America' as his sword. He could continue on his mission to decrease New York's crime rates and, in turn, make New York a place where he and Arthur could live happily.
A part of him felt that, as a superhero, it would be wisest to keep people like Arthur at a distance to prevent him from getting hurt. Alfred swore that the main character in the anime Arthur made him watch said that once something was truly lost, one could never get it back again. The contents of his 'dreams' (if such dreams they could be called) only increased the need for that sort of thing to happen.

"The better question would be what I haven't done to him."

"He died screaming for you to rescue him."

"He died believing you would find him in time and save him like the 'hero' you claim to be."

But…there was that other part of him, the part of him that was selfish. The part of him that didn't want to ostracize himself from Arthur, the part of him that didn't want to lose connection with his friend, his best friend, his companion. And Alfred mentally berated himself for that, as again, it went against his morals regarding favoritism! Sure, he was human and it was natural, but he unsheathed this sword of his own will, he didn't want someone as important as Arthur to possibly suffer more because of his own selfishness!

If he gave into his selfishness, his lust, his greed, would that make him just as bad as England? Thieves were the epitome of selfishness, lust, and greed, why else would they steal? What other things could possibly motivate them to the point of burglary?

I doubt England could ever have something to fight for, Alfred thought as his gaze grew half-lidded behind his glasses. I doubt he could ever have motives worth his freedom or his life.

A quiet yawn escaped him, as he only now realized how exhausted he was. Taking that into consideration, Alfred closed his laptop and removed his glasses. He blinked drowsily when he turned on his phone and set an alarm that would give him a few hours of much-needed rest. In regards to him...kissing Arthur, Alfred figured it would be best to not bring it up.

I don't know how much longer it'll be until I'll have no choice but to keep Arthur at a distance, he acknowledged, burying himself in pillows and blankets in an attempt to block out the increasing amounts of sunlight. So, until I do that, I don't want to mess things up between us. While I still have no clue why I decided to...kiss him, I'll try to refrain from doing something that could be regretted later on and destroy our friendship permanently.

Alfred smiled a bit, oblivious to how wistful his smile appeared.

He probably considers me a friend and nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Remember how, in chapter two, I said that I initially planned for a much darker chapter than what I inevitably put out, and that I'd tell you which chapter it is? Well, this was it. Imagine how different the story's vibe would have been if I had decided to use this chapter for chapter 2.
Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter and I'll try to update soon with the next one.
Until then? Stay awesome.
Let it never be said that Arthur Kirkland didn't try to learn Russian.

The morning before, he had received a message from Russia requesting that they meet in person to discuss a potential business partnership, and had been sent a document pertaining to the date, time, and location of the meeting. The only downside regarding the entire situation was that Russia had only given him a little more than a day to decide whether he would like to accept the deal or not, forcing Arthur into a metaphorical corner until he made a move that would probably end up biting him in the arse later on.

Or end up being one of the best decisions of his life. Fate was a bipolar mistress, after all.

On the one hand, if Russia could afford the prices of both the Ganymede and Etruscan artifacts, then was logical to assume that money was no object to the man. Someone by the likes of him would undoubtedly help Arthur in his plans, whether he would purchase the artifacts or straight-out finance his schemes as a form of sponsor. Not to mention the fact that, assuming that Russia was a criminal himself instead of some corrupted politician with an affinity for rare artifacts, if he could maneuver past the police and America without being caught, he was definitely someone that Arthur would want as an ally.

On the other hand, this entire proposition could very-well be a trap set up by the NYPD to lure him out. It wasn't unheard of for cops to pose as criminals to gain the trust of their targets, especially if it could result in someone like 'England' (who was quickly becoming recognized as a world-renowned thief, thanks to the internet) being put behind bars and multi-million dollar jewelry being put back in museums. It also wasn't unheard of for the police to bargain with criminals to lure out other criminals so that the police would get them; 'to catch a criminal, one must think like a criminal', right?

Taking those factors into consideration, the entire concept was akin to a game of chess; however,
unlike the rounds Arthur had made before, he had no idea what his opponent was like. It wasn't America, someone who Arthur somewhat had a chance of holding ground against as long as the hero's emotions didn't make him act without thinking. It was similar to the situation of the second Metropolitan heist, the situation with 'O'; his opponent (if he even had one) was someone who was unreadable, in mind and body. Someone who he was unable to predict, even if his predictions were entirely off (as even a slim chance of him being right was better than nothing), someone who rendered him powerless. Completely and utterly powerless.

And that scared him.

He could predict someone's mindset to his heart's content, but he could only watch their outward conduct and hope for the best. He had grown up by himself, isolated because of his cultural differences (funny accent, strange eyebrows, affinity for black magic and tendencies to burn water whenever he tried cooking), with chess as his only company when Alfred wasn't around. Arthur lost count of the many hours he spent playing chess, to the point where it could be assumed that chess and tea to him were like comic books and cheeseburgers to Alfred; in other words, a drug.

He hated not knowing what his opponent was like; for someone who lacked in the physical department, his brain was his only real weapon he could wield. Sure, his sharp tongue could prove to be a formidable foe, but that only worked for so long and so well. Limiting him in knowledge regarding his enemy was like trying to stuff a moose into a blender: strange, painful, and a generally-awkward experience for everyone involved.

Those same words could be used to describe Arthur's attempts at learning Russian.

"Zdrá?" Arthur wondered out loud, as he clicked the audio recording and listened in with his headphones. "Zdrávstv?"

"Zdrávstvujte?" Kiku supplied with raised eyebrows, wondering if this was some form of joke being administered by his British roommate; surely the blond wasn't pretending to be so helpless at learning basic Russian phrases, right?

The Japanese facepalmed when his roommate exclaimed with 'Zdrávstvujte! That's what it is!' with legitimate surprise. They had been at it for over two hours, how could he be so bad at this?

"Arthur-san, have you ever tried to learn a second language before?" the brunette questioned, unable to mask his confusion. He stood up from where he previously sat beside Arthur on the couch and walked to the kitchen, emerging a few seconds later with a tray of tea.

The Brit glanced away, embarrassment prevalent against his expression. "I'm fluent in Elvish from 'Lord of the Rings', but I don't think that applies here."

"I'm afraid it doesn't, Arthur-san."

"Dammit."

"Did you ever take a second language course in high school?"

Arthur groaned, his face in his hands at the thought. "I thought it would look nice on my resume, so I took a class in French," he admitted, a mixture of shame and frustration evident in his tone. His expression darkened in remembrance. "But I dropped the class after one semester since the language's pronunciation was all over the place with its 'fwas' and 'dohns'. It didn't help that the teacher's aide was a complete frog."

Even with his headphones on, Arthur could still hear Kiku snickering quietly, causing the Brit to roll
his eyes in mock-annoyance. "Well, how did you come to learn English so well?"

The Asian took a sip of his tea. "Keep in mind that I moved here from Japan when I was twelve, Arthur-san. So I tried learning at every opportunity; I listened to songs in English, watched movies and anime in English, and practiced writing and speaking whenever possible. However, why are you so insistent on learning Russian phrases when Russia-san can speak English and you're facing difficulty with it?"

Arthur shook his head, his hand on his cheek as he re-read the foreign words and their translations. "If I meet with Russia and greet him in his native tongue, that could demonstrate my willingness to cooperate and become partners with him."

**However, he could easily interpret it as me mocking him,** the Englishman thought with a click of his mouse, listening to the correct pronunciations of the phrases. **And the last thing I want is an enemy outside America and the NYPD. Regardless, I ideally want to learn more than simple Russian phrases; that way I can understand him if he decides to speak plans conspiring against me in his native tongue.**

Kiku nodded in agreement. "That makes sense, Arthur-san," he replied, taking a sip of his tea. "It would be in our best interests to remain in his favor, as he could open a lot of doors for us if we move accordingly."

It was the blond's turn to nod, still listening to the brunette through his headphones. "He initially sent the message to us yesterday morning, however, his document has given us until tonight to decide and meet with him at the specified location."

"May I read the document?" Kiku asked, standing up and taking the printed copy of the document off the Briton's desk. He sat back down on the couch and overlooked the page's contents. "The meeting will take place at 273 Brighton Beach Avenue on June 18th, at 9 P.M. Use the word 'Rossiya' at the reservation desk. Bring neither the Ganymede nor the Etruscan artifacts with you. I cannot help but find that suspicious, as he's gone out of his way to bid on the artifacts only to request that you not bring them at all."

"Probably because Brighton Beach is patrolled by the NYPD's 60th Precinct," Arthur acknowledged, his hand on his cheek as he continued to listen to polite Russian phrases. "It would be foolish to try going there with a bunch of stolen artifacts in plain sight; it'd be asking to get arrested. The logical thing to do would be going there empty-handed so that we could scope out the police officers and see if they're potential threats."

Arthur couldn't stop the smirk that crossed his expression as he sat up and stretched, his muscles burning and his toes curling at the unfamiliar sensation. "If criminals like Russia can freely maneuver in that area without any problems, I'd say the police are still as incompetent as ever."

"Are you sure about this, Arthur-san? About seeing Russia-san and possibly becoming partners with him?"

Arthur leaned over and took a cup of tea from the tray. He paused before drinking it, taking a moment to look at his reflection. His eyes grew half-lidded at the sight, considering how tired he must have looked to his partner-in-crime. Arthur had woken up several times in the middle of the night, plagued by that same nightmare of America kissing him, so his skin was a bit paler than normal and his nerves were decently-frayed, especially with the recent development with Russia.

He blinked slowly, carefully taking the recent factors into account. A possibility of being played by a criminal and handed over to the police? Or a chance to even the odds between himself and America,
who had both 'O' and the NYPD on his side?

Arthur closed his eyes, exhaling a soft breath he had no idea he was holding. "Yes," he answered, meeting the dark brown gaze of his friend sitting beside him. "I've no choice but to move forward, as it's the only path left to me now. What about you?"

Kiku smiled, a strange smile that made Arthur feel a bizarre sense of déjà vu as he felt like he, himself, had worn it before. "I promised I would stay by your side to help you achieve your goal," he reminded, his hand over his heart. "I see no reason to break that promise when we've gotten so far."

Arthur grinned, setting his laptop aside and standing up. "Russia wants to meet in about an hour," he notified, glancing at his wristwatch and registering that it was around eight in the evening. He extended his hand towards the Japanese, his grin still etched onto his facial features. "Want to upset the established order and introduce a little anarchy?"

It was the Kiku's turn to grin, as he accepted his roommate's hand and was pulled up.

"Hai, Arthur-san."

"-Anyway, if you're so insistent on it, I would say 'privét'," Kiku advised as he walked down the street with Arthur, his brown eyes glancing at the unfamiliar surroundings of Brighton Beach. It had taken about forty minutes to take a subway from New York University to Brighton Beach, so they had been using all of their time looking for the location Russia specified in the document. "Yet 'zdrávstvujte' works well too, although a little formal."

Arthur raised a thick eyebrow with a smirk. "This coming from the person who addresses everyone with the honorific 'san', even though Alfred and I have told you it's fine to address us by our first names."

Kiku shrugged. "It's a habit of mine I haven't been able to break in the ten years I've lived in America," he admitted, pulling the printed copy of Russia's document from his pocket and unfolding it. "And Alfred-san always gets a kick out of it whenever I address him as 'san'. I take it you feel the same?"

Arthur blushed, though it was unnoticeable in the rapidly-diminishing rays of sunlight. "M-maybe just a little," he divulged in a self-conscious tone, his face burning brighter when his roommate laughed good-naturedly. "H-hey, it makes me feel like an anime character!"

"Gomenasai, Arthur-san," the Asian teased, a small smirk growing against his features. "Daijoubu desu ka?"

The Briton rolled his eyes again. "Spasíbo, horošó."

"You're getting the hang of it," the Japanese remarked, peering closely at the paper due to the aforementioned diminishing sunlight. "I'm glad to hear you speaking something that's not Elvish from 'Lord of the Rings'."

"Hantanyel," the Englishman snorted in a sarcastic manner, provoking another laugh from his friend. After a moment, he stopped. "273 Brighton Beach Avenue, right?"

"Right," Kiku confirmed, stopping as well. "Did you find it?"

Arthur pointed to a decently-sized beige building with a pair of tall metal lamps that illuminated the
gold double-doors leading into the establishment, only labeled as 'National' based on the green lettering above the doorway.

"It matches the address Russia-san gave us," the brunette acknowledged, slipping the paper back into his pocket. "So let's go inside. The worst-case scenario is that we end up looking elsewhere, so we might as well proceed."

The blond walked up to the door, holding it open for his partner and closing it when he entered. The interior was lavish and dimly-lit, the faint candlelight cascading shadows all over the walls and giving off a calm – albeit dark- vibe to the foyer. Their footsteps echoed throughout the room, unperturbed by the dark rugs beneath their feet as the two criminals walked to the reservation desk, where a shaking receptionist resided behind the counter clad in a formal tuxedo and a name tag which read 'Raivis Galante'.

"G-g-good evening, g-gentlemen," the brunette greeted, quirking a thick eyebrow to rise against the Englishman's forehead. "W-what name are y-you listed under?"

Arthur looked at Kiku, who blinked once to signify that it wouldn't hurt to try, then looked back at the receptionist. "'Rossiya'."

Raivis's blue eyes widened and his shakiness seemingly increased tenfold, resulting in the confusion between Arthur and Kiku increasing tenfold. The short male forced a smile. "R-r-right," he continued, raising an arm and pointing to a staircase. "I-i-in that c-case, you'll f-find the V.I.P Suite t-to be the s-site of your r-reservation."

The reaction from the receptionist only heightened the Brit's suspicions. Arthur cast a worried look to Kiku, and, after the Japanese gave a hesitant nod, walked over to the staircase and began to ascend.

Each footstep seemed as loud as a gunshot to the thief as he stepped up the stairs. He grimaced when he finally reached the second floor, directing his line-of-sight back to the first floor where the entrance resided. If accepting Russia's deal was the door between turning away or moving forward, this was surely the threshold.

Arthur swallowed in vain hopes his heart wouldn't leap out of his throat, as he walked down the hall and removed his England mask from the pocket of his jacket at the sight of a sign which read 'V.I.P Admittance Only'. His fingers fumbled with the fabric string for a small amount of time before he pulled firmly and affixed it to his face, catching a glimpse of Kiku doing the same with his Kitsune mask out of the corner of his eye.

There are no signs of security cameras in the hallways, the Briton thought with an inward sigh of relief, as he slipped on his black gloves. And no signs of anyone present in this hallway. Russia probably didn't tell the receptionist of who he would be meeting, only that they were important and that they would require a private room, so that eliminates the possibility of the receptionist realizing our true identities.

In spite of his heart rapidly beating against his rib cage, Arthur managed a smirk. One must never appear weak in front of others, especially those who could prove to be either allies or enemies. Precaution was always a virtue to abide by, after all.

With that in mind, he knocked twice on the door.

"Dobro pažálovat'." A thick (presumably Russian) voice spoke through the thick wood of the door, sending the Brit's nerves to both freeze and electrocute with the weight of the situation.
He was really going all the way with this.

He was going to do it. He was going to accomplish his goals, the tasks at hand. He would re-create New York with the ashes of its police department, for himself, for Kiku, for his parents-

For Alfred.

Arthur took hold of the doorknob and twisted it gently, opening the door. He held a hand over his heart and bowed slightly, the way one would expect of an gentleman from the Victorian era.

"Zdrávstvujte, Mr. Russia," Arthur said, a polite smile adorning his features. "I am England."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Here's the translations for what was said during this chapter:

* Zdrávstvujte= Hello in Russian (polite/formal version).
* Privét= Hello in Russian (informal version).
* Gomenasai= I'm sorry in Japanese.
* Spasíbo, horošó= Fine, thanks in Russian.
* Hantanyel= Thanks in LOTR Elvish.
* Dobro pažálovat= Welcome in Russian.

Needless to say, I had alot of fun researching those phrases since I love languages with all my tiny, black heart :) Also, feel free to check out the bloopers for this chapter on Fanfiction.net, as I still don't know whether or not I should include them in the author's notes on this site, yet; as always, I'm open to hearing what you guys have to say, so feel free to leave a comment regarding if I should have the bloopers included on this website too.

Anyways, I'll try to update soon with the next installment. Until then? Stay awesome.
"Zdrávstvujte, Mr. Russia," Arthur said, a polite smile adorning his features. "I am England."

A mannerly chuckle resounded lowly throughout the room. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you, England," the accented voice greeted, as the thief looked up from his slight bow and registered the sight of a folding screen on the opposing end of the room. "Voyditye."

"Thank you," the Brit replied when his partner-in-crime closed the door, as he walked forward and sat on the black leather couch facing the folding screen.

I anticipated that he would remain reluctant to show his face, the Brit thought as he spotted a chessboard set on the table and picked up the black king, the familiar weight of the piece in his hand enough to soothe his nerves by a miniscule amount. Even though he said he wanted to meet 'face to face'. He's either well-versed in the art of precaution, or he intended to use his possible identity reveal as a bargaining chip.

He cascaded his gaze from the king in his hand to the large shadow visible in the folding screen, his anxiety increasing by a fraction. I wouldn't rule out the possibility of both, to be honest. Regardless of how he intended to lure me out, he still succeeded. Only fate will tell whether or not that was a smart move on my end.

"As I said in the message, you've become quite the celebrity in such a short span of time," Russia began, resting his hand on his cheek based on the positioning of his shadow. "It is remarkable how quickly information can spread, these days."

The Englishman nodded in agreement, his eyes briefly flickering towards the brunette sitting beside him. He was surprised at how tense Kiku seemed, from the rigid-straightness of his posture to the tight clenching of his hands. It came as no surprise to the blond; while the Japanese was excellent at
hiding his emotions, it was only natural that he would be nervous as it was his first time out in the field.

Arthur gently took hold of one of Kiku's hands and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "It has the potential to be both a blessing and a curse, depending on who uses it, right?"

Another laugh from the folding screen. "Precisely. And you have used this knowledge to your advantage by turning the public and press into your allies. Countless have called you a hero, some going as far as calling you a world-renowned thief, while others have pushed their resentments onto your enemies without you lifting even a finger."

**Stroking my ego by praising my successes?** Arthur acknowledged internally, his eyes narrowing as he looked back at the black king in his grip. *I didn't think people still used that tactic. I know he needs to get on my good side to strike this business deal, but what more does he hope to gain through flattery?*

"It isn’t a difficult trick to pull," he notified with a shrug of his shoulders, thick eyebrows rising beneath his mask. "Considering no one can resist a good villain. People can pretend to care about morals, but the truth of the matter is that they admire those who go against what's been pre-established by society. We envy them, in a way."

"Very good answer, I imagined nothing less from you." The Russian spoke, as a small rectangular slit in the folding screen opened up to reveal a large hand slipping through the hole. The British thief couldn't ignore how the muscular fingers were abnormally-pale and tattooed in many, many skulls. The sight alone unnerved him, though he didn't allow his uneasiness to register in his physical appearance.

In spite of the folding screen separating them, Russia reached forward and grabbed ahold of something with ease, as if he could sense the location of what he was looking for. "I also imagine you specialize in this?"

He held up a white king.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

Alfred exhaled a breath he had no idea he was holding, the air appearing as a puff of smoke for an instant before it disappeared. He wrapped a towel around his waist as he stepped out of the shower, a pleased grimace etching itself onto his expression when he stretched his strained arm muscles.

*If I had known that Mattie had so much heavy stuff with him,* he thought as he popped a few chinks in his neck and opened the door, droplets of water disappearing into the carpeting of his room. *I definitely wouldn’t have volunteered to carry all his belongings by myself.*

*The American wasn't able to stop tapping his foot, as to provide some form of outlet for the pent-up nerves he was experiencing at the moment. While he had talked to his older brother through cellphones and Skype, he hadn’t seen him in person for about seven years!*

*He left for Germany shortly after mom and dad died,* Alfred recalled mentally, his eyes half-lidded behind his glasses at the memory. *Since he applied for an international scholarship that was too late to back out of. Every time he tried coming back, something kept popping up that interfered with us seeing each other, whether it was due to schooling or his part-time job as a doctor.*

*He grinned, all the negativity previously visible in his aura vanishing. Though he applied for a*
position at Mount Sinai Hospital so he could get in the 'States again, and he brought his fiancé with him so he could get married soon.

At first he had no idea what to think of his brother's fiancé; when he met him (via Skype, of course), Alfred thought that Matthew and Gilbert were completely opposite of each other, and that they'd never get along. But, it turned out that the confidence/arrogance that the German/self-proclaimed Prussian emitted was a façade to hide his shyness, and that he was a surprisingly-sweet man to his lover.

It also helped that Alfred threatened to bust both Gilbert's kneecaps with a rusty wrench if he hurt Matthew in any way. Definitely helped, as a matter of fact.

Although it took a bit of difficulty finding the Canadian (as Matthew was a wallflower compared to Alfred), he caught sight of the twenty-three year old blond with his soon-to-be husband of twenty-five years and waved them down, shouting 'MATT! MATTIE! MATTIKINS! OVER HEREEE!' so that he could be heard amongst the crowds of the airport.

"Geez, Al," Matthew laughed when he walked over with Gilbert in tow, a soft smile adorning his features. "Glad to see your larynx is still fully-operational."

The American blinked. "English, please."

"He's glad you're still as obnoxious as ever," Gilbert translated, 'kesesese'ing when Alfred pouted and cringing when Matthew punched him lightly on the shoulder. "Hey, I'm just the awesome messenger; don't shoot me for something you said, Birdie!"

"Anyway," Matthew continued with a roll of his eyes, as he leaned forward and hugged his younger brother. "I'm glad to see you, Alfred. Sorry I came so late."

Alfred returned the hug and ruffled his sibling's hair for good measure. "It's okay, bro," he responded, pulling away with a smile on his face. "It's good to have you back at the Big Apple; Artie and Kiku missed you a lot."

"How are they doing? I haven't seen or heard from them since I left, unfortunately," Matthew mentioned as he tugged forward his bags. While his upper-arm strength was better than the average male (since he was a reign of terror on the hockey rink), it wasn't as impressive as Alfred's superhuman skills. He glanced around to see if Gilbert was within hearing range, before speaking a little quieter than his default whisper. "Did you tell Arthur about mom and dad-"

"No," the American interrupted, guilt eating at his system when he realized his mistake. He scratched the back of his head before grabbing one of his brother's suitcases. "Sorry about that, Matt. I mean, I…kind of told him about mom and dad. I didn't tell him the full extent of what happened."

Matthew bit his lip. "You have to tell him eventually, right? He's your best friend and he deserves to know. You can't leave him in the dark about it forever."

Alfred sighed, absentmindedly grabbing more luggage to semi-distract himself. "I'll tell him soon," he expressed, quirking a bemused look from the Canadian. "I will, trust me. Just…not right now, okay? I've been under a lot of stress as of late."

"Okay." Matthew murmured in an unsure tone of voice, casting a wary gaze to his sibling currently bombarding himself with baggage. "Al, I know you're stronger than the average guy, but are you sure you can carry that much by yourself?"
“Totally,” Alfred assured, following behind his older brother so that they could find a taxi soon. “Though Matt?”

“Yeah?”

“Do me a favor and try not dissecting my arm-muscles in my sleep, ’kay?”

“That was ONE TIME, Al!”

Alfred smiled when thinking of his brother, relieved to know that he was in the U.S again instead of across an ocean. Though they weren't technically related by blood (as Matthew was born in Canada and adopted into an American family shortly before Alfred was born), they were as close as any pair of siblings could get, so his absence had created a significant void.

However, the thought was enough to send his nerves on edge. Possibly another person who could end up getting hurt simply by being involved with America, even indirectly. There were people out there who would pay quite nicely for anything—or anyone—that could be America's weakness, who's to say they wouldn't use Matthew? Or Gilbert? Or Kiku? Or-

“The better question would be what I haven't done to him.”

“He died screaming for you to rescue him.”

“He died believing you would find him in time and save him like the 'hero' you claim to be.”

The American swallowed in vain efforts to swallow his current train of thought, his gaze conflicted behind his glasses as his fingernails threatened to pierce his palms from how badly he was clenching his fists. He didn't want to hurt the innocent, that was one of the reasons he became a superhero; to prevent the innocent and weak from being crushed by the wicked and the strong. He'd be just as bad as England if he stood by idly and watched as atrocities continued to occur, as the world continued to move on its axis devoid of any change.

Just thinking of England was enough to make Alfred's blood boil in his veins. The American knew that England would carefully think his next move through ('O' had mentioned how England wasn't to be taken lightly as he was a strategist), but he didn't anticipate him taking so long! If he had known it would take so long, he would have tried luring England out himself with some form of bait. The only question then would be what kind of bait would lure him out...

Alfred ran a hand through his tousled blond locks to stop himself. Really, for the sake of his mental state, he had to stop overthinking things. The ideal time for catching England had come and gone; all there was left to do was wait. If he stressed himself over nothing, that would only benefit England.

And the last thing I'd want to do is help that bastard out, he thought with a frown, his gaze hardening behind his glasses when recalling his message during the second Metropolitan Heist, England's imitation of Oya, England's trap to exploit America's weakness for personal gain. He didn't want to even dwell on the nightmare. After all he's done, and after all I know he wouldn't hesitate to do.

Arthur's sleeping face passed through his mind for an instant, and his heart ached for inexplicable reasoning.

“You have to tell him eventually, right? He's your best friend and he deserves to know. You can't leave him in the dark about it forever.”

Alfred sighed, rubbing his temples to stave off an oncoming headache. He was beginning to
understand how Vash probably felt dealing with him twenty-four-seven.

"I should tell him about it," he mumbled, his chest feeling heavy with regret. Since he had become America, he undoubtedly had secrets that were better off untold, but Arthur…he felt like Arthur was one of the few exceptions to that. He had been there for him when his parents had died, when he didn't have Matt around to help him through it. Arthur tried to preserve any semblance of happiness, even at the cost of his own. It was…the least he could do. "He deserves the right to know about it, regardless of how it might-"

He forced himself to stop, his eyes growing wide behind his glasses.

**…How it might lead to me telling him that I'm America.**

The room seemed so silent, almost deafeningly silent, to his ears. Everything seemed way out of proportion with that realization, with that…concept. If he told Arthur about the truth of his parents' deaths, it could lead to him admitting the truth about him being America. How would Arthur respond to that? Him, Alfred F. Jones, being America, New York's famous superhero? There was no telling with him, it was as difficult to interpret Arthur as it was to interpret England.

That freaked him out. Honestly, England and Arthur being alike? Those two couldn't be more different! Sure, they had a few similarities with appearance and personality, but those were sprinkles of similarity on a cake of complete opposites! England was manipulative and heartless, greedy and a complete villain, while Arthur was-

…What was Arthur, indeed. Incapable of being described, that was what he was. Though if Alfred had to pick a word to describe Arthur (though it was incredibly geeky for him to use this word), he would have to use the word 'excelsior' to describe him. It was a Latin word he learned from his comic books, a common phrase that Stan Lee used, hell, it was even the motto of New York! It translated to 'ever upward', to indicate something or someone above everyone or everything else, to mean that something or someone was unique and-!

A-at least, that was the way Alfred always interpreted the word out to be. Only because Arthur was proudful as hell.

If the worst-case scenario happened and Alfred had to tell Arthur the truth about him being America, how would that all turn out? Wouldn't he become a bigger target in the eyes of criminals like England? If he knew the truth and someone suspected him of knowing America's identity, who knows what lengths people would go to get the information out of him? Arthur had a difficult enough time dealing with the press after the America Fiasco!

That was another thing to take into consideration. Say Arthur found out, but no one, not even England, found out? Arthur kissed America, but how would he react if he discovered he kissed both America and Alfred? Would he be horrified, knowing he kissed his best friend? Or would he-?

Alfred slapped himself in the face, blaming the previous action for the furious blush on his cheeks and the rapid rate of his heart. AGAIN with overthinking things?!

*If I tell him about my parents, I'll make certain that it won't result in me explaining I'm America,* the American decided, opening the door to his dorm to escape the confusion lurking within those walls, uncaring of how tired his body was and the fact that it was around 9:30 in the evening. *That way, I'll preserve at least a little of my sanity!*

He didn't realize he had arrived at Arthur's dorm until he felt the wood of the door beneath his knuckles as he knocked. And he had no idea of what he was going to say, how he was going to
explain everything, etcetera!

He didn't realize the door was unlocked until he had turned the doorknob out of curiosity.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

"It is an interesting method for us to get to know each other better, da?" Russia wondered out loud, making Arthur flinch. "I've always found chess to be such an enjoyable game."

"Yes," Arthur managed to say without stuttering, in spite of how badly he was breaking down on the inside. He had taken Russia's idea for chess on a whim, expecting that he would continue his roundabouts of flattery to get him on his good side, and going as far as allowing him to win a chess game to fully seal the deal, but no; it seemed the Russian had a different agenda, one that allowed him to assert his dominance in their situation, learn more about England, while maintaining an aura of friendliness simultaneously. And it was getting to him, dammit! "Chess is truly a wonderful game to play."

Whenever Arthur played chess, he always played as black considering white went first and, if his opponent made the first move, it would give him a chance to assess the possible outcomes and plan accordingly! As Russia was white, he went first, but he moved with his e-file pawn to e-4, so, naturally, Arthur decided to humor him by moving his black pawn from e-7 to e-5!

At this point, Arthur should have seen where the game was going. But, admitting defeat was never one of his strongest points. If he retracted one of his moves, that meant he was second-guessing himself, and if he second-guessed himself, Russia could interpret it in ways that could bite him in the arse later on!

Russia moved his king-side bishop to c-4, only for Arthur to make a quick decision to move his queen's pawn to d-6. After Russia sent his king's white knight out to f-3, Arthur took a chance at a pining move by getting his queen's bishop to g-4. The white knight was forced to stay where it was, otherwise, Arthur would have had no choice but to use his bishop to capture Russia's queen.

But everything went to hell from there, and by God, did the Brit hate it.

In a nutshell, Russia captured two of Arthur's pawns, and while the Englishman got hold of Russia's queen and set his black king in check, he had no choice but to move his king back to the only safe haven left on the board (e-7). The only thing left for him now was to wait for Russia's knights to claim his king in a checkmate.

He had never tasted defeat in a game of chess, before. In all other games, he had the opportunity to see his opponent's face, read their facial expressions, get somewhat of a glimpse into their mindset! Actions and expressions were two entirely different things; actions were hard to predict if someone's outward conduct didn't correspond with their thoughts (i.e. America), but expressions were different. They gave you a glimpse into someone's mind, even if it was a rare glimpse. Not everyone could create a poker face, and that was a key element to deciphering how a person's mind worked. And Russia…by Russia planting the folding screen, it meant he knew. He somehow knew!

Flattering me was a means to lower my guard, even if for a few minutes, the British thief thought with a mental groan. If only he hadn't been so hasty in his whims, if only he had interpreted the situation entirely and properly prepared for it instead of…acting like he had with 'O', against an opponent he had no idea how to fight against! The humiliation was palpable! And that few minutes was a window of opportunity, so he seized it by luring me into a game of chess as means to assess my thinking skills and determine if I was worthy of this business agreement. Or is it just a means to assess his position in our agreement? That, by beating me in chess, he's higher-up in our
"Before I make this final move, I would like to ask you something, England," Russia informed, jolting Arthur out of his chaotic thoughts. "What do you hope to gain through this agreement of ours?"

**Oh, what the bloody hell do I say to that?** Arthur thought sarcastically, relieved his opponent/possible ally/possible enemy couldn't see his face considering he rolled his eyes a good amount. *It's a difficult question to pose on the spot. Can I phone a friend?*

He inwardly sighed, looking at his king surrounded by knights. He felt a pang of empathy for the king, as he too felt trapped on all sides. But whatever semblance of sarcasm and overall paranoia vanished when he glanced at Kiku sitting beside him, just as rigid with nervousness as he was earlier. He couldn't afford to make a mistake; not now, nor anytime in the future.

Not as long as he was England.

England was his guise, his sword that he decided to wield of his own accord. If he ended up cut, that was the price he had to pay. He didn't mind if he, himself, got injured with it. But if others had to atone for his mistakes, he would handle everything with precaution.

Precaution was always a virtue to abide by. All of this was for a better world, for his parents, for Kiku, for Alfred. All of this was for them, so he had to pretend, at least for a little while. Add another layer to his façade, another lie to conceal.

**And by means to that end-**

"What do I hope to gain through this agreement of ours?" He repeated, his eyes half-lidded behind his mask. A lazy smirk played at his features, hiding his anxiety and paranoia well. After all, one must never appear weak in front of those who could be potential allies or enemies.

Based on the sharp gasp that emitted behind the folded screen, Arthur must have surprised Russia when he tipped his own black king over of his own will.

"Revenge."

*I must become the perfect villain.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Author's Note: Thanks so much for reading this chapter, I'll try to update soon with the next one. It's so strange re-uploading this, as I still remember uploading it for the first time on Fanfiction.net. Ah, memories.

Anyway, until next time? Stay awesome.
Alfred opened the door out of curiosity, stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

"Hello?" He called out, surprised when no one responded. It was unusual for the door to Arthur and Kiku's dorm to be unlocked, especially when there was no one inhabiting the place. The two of them were very cautious people, always checking and double-checking to make sure that nothing was displaced or missing. Since Alfred had first donned his America persona, he had found himself doing the same as a form of precaution.

To be honest, the situation reminded him of the one time he caught Arthur crying in his room about four months ago.

He cascaded his gaze around the living room and poked his head into the kitchen, walking down the hallway when he found no one in the specified areas. Alfred knocked on both Arthur and Kiku's doors, looking inside briefly when no one answered. Arthur's room was still as organized as ever, with his alphabetized books resting on his shelves and his bed properly made. Kiku's room was the same as always, with his black futon stored away in the closet and his anime figurines properly dusted.

With that, Alfred stepped into the hall again and removed his phone, surprised at how it was already almost ten in the evening. He wondered why Arthur and Kiku would be out so late at night, but he dismissed those thoughts as quickly as they came considering they probably wouldn't be too happy if they caught him loitering in their apartment, so it would be wise for him to leave soon.

That was all fine and dandy until he caught sight of some scraps of paper near Arthur's desk.

It seemed as though Arthur had recently stuffed some documents into a shredder, because there were particles of papers residing all over the carpeted floor. Another unusual thing considering how much of a neat-freak both the Englishman and Japanese were.
Unable to contain his curiosities any longer, Alfred got on his knees and picked up a few scraps of paper, peering closely to read whatever it was they said. Due to the fact that they were shoved into the machine, it was difficult to make out whatever message was given:

You have become Quite remarkable blessing I would like to meet you face-to-face conducting conversations beyond websites do not feel pressured that we meet in person will benefit the both of us

Alfred couldn't mask his confusion as he stared at what pieces of paper he had been able to salvage from the carpeting, his brow furrowed as he tried to comprehend the contents. Something about websites and benefitting? Meeting in person?

His brain began creating numerous ideas for what the message could have been about, each idea more obscure than the last. It didn't help that all the other paper scraps were stuffed beneath the printer and couldn't be retrieved. He absentmindedly shoved the paper scraps into the pocket of his jeans, as one idea in particular made his heart both race and stop within his chest cavity, his face both blushing and blanching at the same time.

Is it possible that Arthur is...in a relationship with someone over the internet?

He quickly shook his head to get rid of that concept, wondering why his stomach was twisting itself into knots and why his chest felt like it was decaying a little bit. The idea was ludicrous; while Arthur had come out of the closet when he was in high school, he made it clear that he didn't want to date while he was in school so that it wouldn't affect his focus on education, so-

But it's summer vacation, isn't it? The little voice in the back of his head jeered, causing Alfred to have difficulty swallowing. Technically speaking, he's not in school, so the possibility remains.

The American considered visiting a chiropractor from how often he shook his head, as he was becoming concerned for the welfare of his spine and neck.

T-that's a crazy idea! He thought in retaliation to that obnoxious little voice, standing up and internally berating himself for being so quick to conclude. He walked out of the apartment and locked the door, closing it when he finished. Even if he wanted to date someone, he'd use more practical methods of dating someone as opposed to dating online!

The message did say something about meeting face-to-face, though. It piped up, making Alfred pause in his actions. From what he had gathered, it did mention meeting Arthur in person. Perhaps that was why he had left the apartment so late in the evening? If that was the case, though, why was Kiku gone? And what kind of meeting would require Arthur leaving so young in the night?

A furious blush swept over his skin as the dirty part of his mind took over, making him feel uncomfortable. He couldn't imagine that sort of thing going on, no matter how hard he tried! Maybe it wasn't because he couldn't imagine it; was it possible he just didn't want to imagine it? Arthur was a human, a human with...certain needs, but a human nonetheless! The thought sent his emotions into a frenzy, bizarre feelings ranging from uncertainty to anger to sadness making Alfred want to claw at his scalp if it meant sending those conflicting sensations away.

I don't know what's wrong with me, he thought with an outward sigh, his glasses threatening to slip off the bridge of his nose from how often he was looking down. Whatever Arthur does is his business, I shouldn't involve myself in his personal matters without his consent. And if he is meeting with someone, I should be happy for him, right?
It was still a strange thought, Arthur being in a relationship. For as long as he had known Arthur, Alfred had never known him to be in touch with his romantic side at all. He was the type of person who preferred chess and battle strategy over kissing and dating, who was more likely to read books/fanfiction about romance than actually experience it. The closest he was to discussing relationships was when he was discussing what pairings he had! All of that was why Alfred was surprised when Arthur revealed he was gay when they were in high school.

Alfred blinked once. Then twice. Then once more for good measure, hoping his hearing could improve if he improved his eyesight. "What did you say?"

Arthur looked away, his cheeks blooming in light shades of pink. He played with his fingers to avoid seeing the American's expression. "I'm gay." He stated simply, glancing back up after a moment, nervousness prevalent in his body language from the inward contort of his shoulders to the biting of his lip. "I-I just...thought I should tell you."

The bespectacled blond had no idea how to react. Arthur was the last person he expected to even think about romance or sex. Hell, he seriously thought the Brit was asexual based on his lack of interest! Regardless of that, he couldn't stop himself from wondering how the Briton discovered his preferred gender-

Alfred grinned after a moment, giving the shorter blond a thumbs' up. "Awesome, Artie," he expressed, wondering why the boy seemed so surprised at his reaction. Really, did he think he was going to ostracize him simply because he played for the same team? He didn't see how Arthur was any different now than he was before. "I'm glad that you told me, since it means you trust me. I'm a little surprised, though, since you've never really expressed interested in that kind of thing. Who made up your mind, if you don't mind me asking?"

Arthur's face went from light pink to deep crimson in less than two seconds, fueling the American's curiosity further. The Englishman suddenly found interest in the ground, as he continued to toy with his hands in order to distract himself. "T-t-that's not your concern," he coughed out, as Alfred tilted his head in question. "I-i-it's not your concern at all!"

The bespectacled blond raised an eyebrow with a teasing smirk. "Though isn't it now considered my concern since you told me this in the first place~?"

Arthur's blush deepened, his hands clenching and unclenching themselves at his sides. "I-I'll tell you eventually," he managed to say after a minute of silence, quirking a victorious grin from Alfred. "N-not right now, just...eventually."

Arthur never told him who it was that made up his mind, though he doubted the Englishman still remembered as it all happened seven years ago.

While it was unlikely that Arthur was meeting with someone with romantic/sexual intentions, the thought was enough to make his heart clench. What if they hurt him? Took his emotions and used them to their own benefit? Used Arthur like how England used him during the second Metropolitan Heist?

Alfred had no idea how long he stood in the doorway staring at the Englishman situated by his window, how long he heard his ragged breathing and soft weeping. All he knew was how badly his heart cracked into pieces when Arthur turned to look at him, tears clinging to his eyelashes and streaming down his cheeks, his gaze deep and full of despair.

He couldn't bear seeing Arthur cry once; would he be strong enough to see him cry again? His brain felt like it was scattered all over the place, making it difficult for him to think clearly. So much of him
wanted to keep the male at a distance to prevent him from getting hurt, getting used and abused by criminals like England. But the other part of him was selfish, wanting to keep the male close to prevent him from getting hurt, experiencing pain, faking smiles for the sake of preserving a façade.

But why?

A small portion of his mind kept wondering why it was that he felt that way, why he would want to go so far for someone. Was it because he wanted to repay Arthur for trying to keep him happy when his own spirits were low? Was it because they were best friends and practically family? Was it because England was right with him having a hero-complex, and that he wanted to save Arthur from whatever demons he had?

The rational part of his head kept throwing those excuses around and around, but as he dwelled further on it, he found it less and less convincing. Yes, he wanted to repay Arthur for what he had done back then, yes, he wanted nothing but the best for him as they were extremely close, and yes, he wanted to save him from whatever things hurt him, but why? Why all of that? From what Pandora's box did his emotions and motives originate from?

"Alfred? What are you doing here?"

Alfred jolted out of his thought as if he was electrocuted, looking up to see Arthur and Kiku with their hands in the pockets of their long coats. A thick eyebrow rose against the Brit's forehead in confusion, while the Japanese maintained his usual poker face at the sight of the American.

The bespectacled blond blushed, relieved he had enough hindsight to leave the apartment before they arrived as it would result in awkward conversations. Why had he come there again?

He blanched when remembering his original reason for coming to their dorm. He wanted to talk to Arthur about his parents and the circumstances in which they died. But taking his confusing-as-hell thoughts into account... he figured it would be best to do that at a different time. Or perhaps never. After all, he couldn't afford to make a mistake; not now, nor anytime in the future.

Not as long as he was America.

America was his guise, a tool to wield as means of ensuring the safety of not only innocent people, but those closest to his heart. He didn't mind if he, himself, got injured with its use. But if others had to atone for his mistakes, he would handle everything with precaution.

All of this was for a better world, for his parents, for people like Vash or Oya, for Arthur. All of this was for them. For now, he would cherish the time he had left with Arthur, but if he had to pick between Arthur being safe by leaving him alone or Arthur being in danger by being involved with America, then he would gladly pick the former. At least for a little while longer, he would cherish it all. Until then, it was another layer to his façade, another lie to conceal to keep his loved ones safe.

"Ah, Mattie returned to the 'States today, so I was helping him move in," he acknowledged, scratching the back of his head out of the embarrassment of being caught by the two. "I just came back and wanted to wish you both goodnight."

"It's been so long since we've seen Matthew-san," Kiku spoke as he removed his set of keys and unlocked the door. "Hopefully we can see him soon. Oyasuminasai, Alfred-san."

Arthur followed Kiku inside. "Goodnight, Alfred." He smiled, closing the door.

Alfred smiled back, even though the door had closed. After a moment, he randomly pulled one of the paper scraps from his pocket, the word blessing staring back at him from the palm of his hand.
He clenched his fist, clenching the paper with it, and marched up the stairs to his dorm.

*I won't allow someone like him to get in my way.*

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

Four days.

It had been four days since England had used America's emotions for his own benefit, since 'O' had been sent into the museum to catch England by surprise, and since England had last made a move of some form.

And it was bugging Vash Zwingli to no end.

*It was expected of him to panic with the sudden arrival of 'O', but I didn't think he would take so long to make a move,* the blond thought with a furrowed brow, his papers crinkling a miniscule amount in his grip. *Had the concept of a new enemy never crossed his mind? That there were people aside from America who would undoubtedly try to catch him?*

The first Metropolitan Heist occurred on June 1st, followed by the second Metropolitan Heist on the 14th. There had been a thirteen-day gap separating the two incidents, resulting in numerous theories sprouting about in the Department Chief's mind. Would the second heist have occurred sooner if the America Fiasco didn't snag everyone's attention? If his plan was affected, did the second Metropolitan Heist happen earlier than he would have liked? If not, was England going to strike at thirteen-day intervals, meaning his next heist would happen on the 27th?

Those theories kept spiraling around his mind until he felt himself become dizzy. Then again, this could all be part of England's strategy; to lay low for a long period of time in order to confuse the police and make America paranoid, pinning both of them into a metaphorical corner. All England would have to do at that point would be to tempt both groups with bait and send them chasing after their tails, just like what he did with America and the message during the second Metropolitan Heist.

Whether or not any of that was true, it was almost never a good sign if an enemy suddenly went silent; in the years Vash had worked as a police officer, it usually meant that shit was going to really hit the fan.

Vash groaned, taking a swig of his coffee to keep him awake. It was almost ten in the evening yet he was still at the office, mulling over paperwork that technically wasn't his responsibility to analyze. He knew that it was the Detective Bureau's responsibility to hypothesize and debate over criminal patterns, but he couldn't help himself; he didn't trust the Detective Bureau at all. Not anymore, at least.

The recent decisions involving the Bureau had been questionable, to say the least; when the Bureau was needed, detectives were assigned to work with specified police departments so that the criminal could be caught quicker, but…oddly enough, the Commissioner hadn't given the Detective Bureau permission to act. It was the Commissioner's job as a civilian administrator to serve at the mayor's whim, meaning that the mayor of New York still hadn't deemed England a big-enough problem to involve the detectives.

*Regardless of whether or not they've been given permission to act,* Vash began internally, his green eyes scanning over what information he had been able to scavenge about England. *Their responsibilities involve the prevention and detection of crime; they should investigate him before he does become a big problem. It makes me wonder how many crimes could have been prevented*
if they had enough backbone to move of their own accord.

His eyes grew half-lidded at the reports in his hands, the words resembling blots of black ink as opposed to lettering due to how he was inexplicably overwhelmed by nostalgia. A quiet sigh escaped from his mouth as he set the papers aside. So far, he had only been able to uncover some of America's past recounts of England, which dated as far back as four months ago. Vash himself had written it down, considering he was convinced America's handwriting would be so sloppy it wouldn't resemble English lettering at all! Handwriting aside, Vash had only been able to write down a few tidbits of knowledge in relation to England, such as his skills with disabling security/camera systems or how he was light on his feet.

The Detective Bureau would probably have a lot more information on this guy if the mayor simply grew a backbone and let them at it, the officer dwelled with an internal growl, grinding his teeth at the concept. Or better, if the Chief of the Bureau wasn't so spineless in comparison to his predecessor. The current Chief follows the orders of his superiors and doesn't question their decisions; the department's previous leader would have never let suspicious activity go unnoticed, even if it meant acting on his own.

Vash Zwingli wasn't one to hand out admiration like a teacher handing out gold stars (for if someone wanted his respect, they had to earn it), yet, when he had joined the NYPD at the age of twenty-one, he couldn't help but admire the Chief of the Detective Bureau considering the man was everything he aspired to be as a member of the police force.

The Chief was calm and collected, patient and intelligent, preferring words over violence and unafraid of tackling cases independently. He had single-handedly solved many cases that the mayor wanted to leave the Detective Bureau out of, considering it was his personal mission to make New York a place where people could live happily. To think that he, Vash Zwingli, would be following in the Chief's footsteps years after his role-model resigned…it made him feel wistful for unbeknownst reasoning.

The blond bit his lip as he remembered how whatever trust he had towards the Detective Bureau was lost when his role-model stepped down from his position, allowing the present Chief into power. None of that made sense to the officer; as far as he knew, the old Chief loved his job and was good at it, so why would he suddenly step down?

Vash tried to solve that mystery years ago, but he couldn't find an answer since there weren't enough pieces of the puzzle. It was practically impossible to track the former head now, everyone he asked gave inadequate answers, and asking friends/relatives was out of the question since the Detective Chief insisted his personal-relations' files be burned shortly after his resignation for unknown reasoning. Whatever information Vash was able to gather, he had stored in the bottom drawer of his desk. There, it served as a reminder of failure, of his failure.

But, if he could investigate England on his own, it could broaden his experience and possibly lead to him finding the reason for his role-model's sudden resignation. On the other hand, there was no telling what could happen if he tried to inspect the thief without professional help. There was always the possibility that England had allies, especially with his recent bouts of popularity. Those allies could easily target Vash without him even being aware of it, eliminating both a Department Chief and an independent detective in one move.

It was a risky gamble no matter how he looked at it. The more he thought about the consequences, the more his conscience screamed 'no'. He thought of Lilli, how heartbroken she would be if her beloved big brother was killed off because he got a little too close for comfort towards the truth. He thought of the old Detective Chief, how regretful he would be if someone who tried following his
example ended up getting murdered. He thought of America, how...concerning he would become if there wasn't someone aside from 'O' to keep his sanity in check.

Vash wasn't a fool, he had seen how America had changed over the past few weeks; sure, he laughed and smiled easily, but there was a lingering darkness present in his normally-cheerful aura, though it was difficult to pinpoint. The negativity from the press and media had taken its toll on the way he's viewed crime, viewed England in particular. For some reason, the superhero had always harbored a dislike for thieves in particular, ever since he became a hero in high school. The fact that his public image had been degraded because of his hated brand of criminal had definitely taken damage on his psyche.

All those people and repercussions aside...he felt unsatisfied. It was departments like the Detective Bureau that made him kind of understand England's blatant dislike for the NYPD (though like hell he would ever admit it); people blindly following what their superiors order without any regard for the future. Criminals like England could easily be caught if they all decided to work, whether the mayor deemed it alright or not. All the police were doing at this point was playing a game of cat-and-mouse with England, chasing him down to a certain location only for him to slip out of their hands. Even though it had only happened twice, Vash had a feeling that this cycle would only continue if investigations weren't held and the plant wasn't cut off by its roots.

Another sigh escaped from his lips as the officer stood up from his desk chair and stretched, wincing in pleasure at the unfamiliar sensation as he had been working for several hours without moving. He glanced over towards the framed pictures lining the walls of his office, faces of important members of the NYPD forever captured within paper and glass. He had long-since memorized their names and appearances, even though a good portion of them were either retired or dead, as the previous owner of his office had nailed them into the wall.

His green eyes grew half-lidded once more at the sight of an all-too familiar name and face which belonged to his role-model, whom he had respected back when he was a fledgling in the police force. On the name plague resided a quote the former Chief had a habit of saying before he mysteriously resigned, one which Vash tried applying as often as possible:

NYPD Detective Bureau Chief William Kirkland

"Precaution is always a virtue to abide by."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Sorry for the extremely long delay in updating, to say that I've been busy is a great understatement; when I originally wrote these chapters, I was a sophomore in high school--now I'm a sophomore in university who just entered summer vacation, so I'll be able to update AO3's 'Excelsior' until it has completely caught up with Fanfiction.net's 'Excelsior'. With that in mind, thank you all so much for the love you've given this fanfiction as I never expected it to reach so many milestones in so short a time span. Please don't hesitate to leave a review or PM if you want, as my heart leaps with joy whenever someone comments on my work or wishes to speak with me.

Until the next update? Stay awesome.
Kiku got on his knees and spread out the map on the table, taking great care to smooth out the paper surface and weigh the corners down with books to prevent the map from rolling in on itself. The map took up almost the entire kitchen table, what with the many floors, rooms, and corridors in which it pertained to. It amazed the Japanese at how vast the interior and exterior layouts were.

Considering how his close friend, Heracles, worked as a curator at the Metropolitan Museum, Kiku knew that place like the back of his hand, therefore eliminating the need for maps. However, with the latest heist occurring tomorrow night in a different location, he knew that he had to memorize the layout from top to bottom. He had visited the Museum of the City of New York only once before, on the day that feverish Arthur was confined to his bed with Alfred as his caretaker. While he was there, he excelled at playing the part of the intrigued foreign tourist as he took numerous pictures on his camera and left no rock unturned, constantly exploring and asking innocent questions to the museum staff.

Little did the museum staff realize that his camera was full of pictures pertaining to valuable artifacts under minimal protection, locations of various security cameras, and quick escape routes through windows and air vents. That his exploration resulted in him finding secret passageways that not even employees were aware of, as the building was built in the late twenties/early thirties. And that his questions, seemingly insignificant questions like when the museum was renovated or when new exhibition wings were added, were all factors in a bigger equation than anyone could have expected from the polite Asian.

He couldn't stop the small, satisfied smirk that rested itself onto his features before he forced on his default poker face. He loved the adrenaline rush that came from going out into the field, however little he ventured out from the safety of the dorm during criminal escapades.

Whatever semblance of confidence vanished from the brunette as he glanced back at the laptop
sitting across from him, which was opened up to a blank white screen with an infamous black letter: O.

Kiku felt his insides burn with anger at the sight, though he didn't allow it to register against his facial features. Whoever they were, they had managed to hack through the computer. However, they sent that picture and nothing more. No audio, no video, only the picture that became associated with (what was assumed to be) America's sidekick.

And that made him feel sick with rage. They were mocking him. Whoever was responsible was showing that they could effortlessly hack into his system. ‘You can't hide from me, nor can you get rid of me. One way or another, I'll find you’. The fact that they had only left the picture instead of something meaningful like an audio or video clip only increased their audacity.

He had an inkling of who was responsible, but he dared not speak their name aloud out of fear they might somehow appear from thin air.

He took a deep breath and shook his head in order to dissuade those thoughts, his brow furrowed as he gave the map an once-over. His photographic memory was quite the useful tool nowadays, that was for sure. A few more looks at the various pictures he had taken, combined with the information he had been able to collect in his notebook, and he'd be ready to go.

Now all that was left was to prepare Arthur for the upcoming job.

The Asian's brown eyes narrowed in confusion when he recalled the events of the previous night, absentmindedly glancing over the map but not registering what it showed.

*Kiku had known Arthur Kirkland since an enthusiastic American who he befriended enveloped a bushy-browed Briton into a bone-crushing hug and managed to say ‘THIS IS MY BESSSST FRIEND IN THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD~!’ over the profanity-laced shouting of said bushy-browed Briton who was suffocating in his embrace.*

*In the seven years he had known Arthur Kirkland, he had seen him through all kinds of situations; he had seen him become president of the student council throughout high school, constantly mulling over paperwork until he fell asleep in the clubroom, where he would wake up with a bomber jacket draped over his shoulders. He had seen him fall completely and utterly in love with Alfred F. Jones, his blue sighs turning crimson with every endearing action or sentence from the person of his affections. He had seen him holed up in his bedroom, broken from the deaths of his parents, only to emerge like a phoenix from the ashes with the birth of 'England'. He had seen him laugh, smile, and cry, in those seven years.*

*But he had never seen him afraid.*

*‘Precaution is always a virtue to abide by', was a quote that Arthur had a habit of saying (although Kiku had no idea where it derived from). The Brit tried his best to apply it in every situation which would require it, particularly when he masqueraded as 'England'. As Arthur was a man who specialized in predicting people's mindsets, he knew the importance of facial expressions/body language and fought to keep his at a minimal, to prevent others from predicting him.*

*So for Arthur to have been shaking while playing chess with Russia, he must have been truly afraid.*

*Kiku couldn't refrain himself from shaking; after all, this kind of situation was dangerous and out of his element. If something went wrong, everything up until now would have been for nothing and the consequences could be deadly. The possible future aside, it was startling to see someone like Arthur*
losing at chess. As far as Kiku knew, Arthur had never lost a chess match before. But the inability for
Arthur to win the game was most likely linked to how Russia set up a folding screen to hide his
expressions/body language, therefore disabling the Englishman who thrived on those details to make
his moves. Arthur was fighting a losing battle, and he knew it.

And it unnerved Kiku to no end.

But what was even more unnerving was Arthur's response to when Russia asked what he would like
to gain from their business agreement, if that was even in the agenda. The concept that Russia was a
mole for the NYPD sent to distract Arthur while the police moved in to secure the premise could not
be overlooked, no matter how unlikely it seemed.

The blond rolled his eyes a good amount at the question, obviously angry at himself for buying so
easily into Russia's whims without considering the outcomes, his hands still shaking yet positioned
on his knees. His gaze flickered towards his black king, surrounded on all sides by Russia's white
knights, only for his eyes to close behind his mask.

He slowly drew in a deep breath, and, when he opened his eyes again, Kiku felt shivers caress his
spine. He looked...like a broken bone that had healed itself incorrectly, all mangled and mashed up
in all the wrong places.

"What do I hope to gain through this agreement of ours?" He repeated, his eyes half-lidded as a
lazy, arrogant smirk played against his features. Whatever anxiety had been previously visible in the
Briton's expression was gone, seemingly taking whatever sanity Arthur possessed along as well.
Sitting beside Kiku was no longer Arthur; it was a separate entity, a separate evil.

The brunette's theory about this new...thing sitting beside him was confirmed the moment that it
tipped over the black king of its own free will, resulting in a gasp of shock from Russia.

"Revenge."

It was England.

Thinking of last night caused goose bumps to form on the Japanese's skin. He swallowed thickly,
browsing through the pictures on his camera in a futile attempt to escape his memories. Another thing
he had never seen from Arthur was...whatever the hell that was. He couldn't even describe it; it was
like someone had flipped a switch in the Englishman's brain, turning him off and letting something
else take control over his body. He had heard of people possessing acting caliber that it enabled them
to effortlessly portray a character, but he didn't imagine such a feat could be attained. Perhaps the
blond was better at role-playing than he thought? Though it wasn't unheard of for people to go
through that kind of thing and not be aware of it...

_It was a wise decision for him to use revenge as a substitute for what he wants to achieve_, Kiku
thought as he began marking specific areas on the map, particularly places where blind-spots, escape
routes, and secret passageways could be found. The fluid movement of his black ink pen on paper
surfaces never failed to ease his nerves, whether drawing doujinshi or marking up maps like this. A
short, simple answer which wouldn't require a lengthy explanation that could come back to haunt
him, and something which Russia-san could probably relate to. After all, what
person hasn't desired revenge at some point in their life?

Russia could apparently relate well, as he praised England's goal with no intent of flattering him and
went over the details of their business agreement, still remaining behind the folding screen to uphold
the same precautions. If he revealed his physical appearance, he risked a chance at England
interpreting his mindset, which would bring him at a disadvantage. With the obscurity of last night,
Kiku could agree with Russia, resulting in him trying even more to maintain a good poker face in the Brit's presence. The Asian didn't want that weird switch to somehow go off in Arthur's mind and turn the Englishman into a different person again, and, if that did happen, Kiku didn't want that thing to anticipate his mindset. The idea sent him into unpleasant shivers again.

The business agreement was remarkably simple: Russia, it seemed, had an affinity for rare artifacts, so he procured a list of items he desired, all of which were stationed at various locations in New York. The most valuable ones were positioned in museums, so Arthur figured it best to pursue those early in their thieving careers while the mayor still hadn't yet deemed England a threat to the city. That way, security with the more priceless artifacts wouldn't be as high now in comparison to later. After attaining hold of those items, Russia would buy them off their hands and spare them the long process of auctioning the artifacts off one by one, skirting around the police to send the artifacts, waiting even longer to receive the money, etcetera. With Russia, they had a guaranteed customer who would take the items off their hands and quickly give them the money without unnecessary trials or complication of any kind. It was an ideal agreement between equals, something Kiku didn't anticipate happening considering how Russia acted during the chess match. It was clear he used Arthur's naivety to his advantage by luring him into a game he figured Arthur figured he'd win. He set the bait with sugar-coated words, only to surprise the Brit by ruthlessly asserting his dominance. The cleverest bit on the Russian's end was that, to any other passerby, it would look like a friendly game of chess to get to know each other, when in actuality it was a test of pride.

But then England took over and made a daring move; he accepted his defeat yet showed his determination by knocking over his king by his own hand, symbolizing that he respected Russia but wouldn't tolerate him taking the reins in an operation that was supposed to be shared.

Though it was horrifying to think, that sudden change in Arthur's personality might have saved their lives.

A soft sigh escaped from Kiku's mouth, as he blinked and glanced back down at the map, surprised at how he had unconsciously filled in all the necessary details on the map. He inspected the paper a few times in case there were a few errors, rolling up the paper and wrapping it up with a rubber band when there were no mistakes. From what he remembered, Arthur and Alfred had left to go to Matthew and Gilbert's wedding ceremony practice, and left him behind as he had to tweak the last few tidbits relating to tomorrow night's heist.

His face drained when he remembered how Arthur told him to contact him as soon as he finished the preparations, so that, in case he finished early, they could start the heist earlier than initially planned. He had completed the last of his preparations, as he had created more smoke bombs (just in case something happened and Arthur had to make a quick escape) and had another chip Arthur could install in the system so that he could keep an eye on the cameras from their dorm like he had during the first two Metropolitan Heists, so there was technically nothing from stopping him from contacting the Briton and commencing their operation a day earlier.

He fought the urge to grin when he remembered that tonight was the dress rehearsal, and that Matthew had informed him of some…'special' circumstances relating to the number of people in attendance.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

Arthur couldn't believe he was doing this.

Actually, scratch that—he didn't want to believe he was doing this! The whole idea was absurd, completely bonkers, embarrassing as hell—he could go on, he really could. But, honestly, he didn't want to dwell on what he was doing at the moment out of fear he would bolt out the exit.
He internally facepalmed the longer he stood outside the doors, biting his lip to give some feeling to his numbed senses. He would consider shifting the items in his arms, but he decided against it since it could fall apart, and it would take ages to piece back together. Damn Elizabeta and her precarious flower arrangements that were as fragile as a newborn child.

As the music started and he waited for his cue, he bade goodbye to whatever semblance of dignity he possessed and decided to reminisce on how he came to be in this... 'special' circumstance relating to the number of people in attendance.

Arthur gazed at the impressiveness that was St. Patrick's Cathedral, taking in the sights of the tall stone pillars and high stained-glass windows with wide eyes and a slightly-dropped jaw. The church was simply breathtaking, with its intricate patterns engraved into the walls and its swooping ceilings that made him feel small whenever he tilted his head up.

"It's beautiful here," he murmured, forcing himself to look from the interior of the church towards Matthew, who seemed incapable of not smiling. "How did you manage to reserve a wedding here?"

Matthew gave an impish wink. "It's a secret wedding," he confided, quirking a confused look from the Brit. "Since this church is adamant against homosexual weddings. Gilbert's brother's boyfriend, Feliciano, has a grandfather who happens to be a Archbishop and is willing to marry Gilbert and I discreetly."

Arthur nodded and looked back at the ceiling, now realizing why the wedding would be held so late in the evening. "Though wait," he began, his brow furrowing in puzzlement. "You said Gilbert's brother's boyfriend has a grandfather who is a Archbishop, right?"

Matthew hummed in agreement with his hands in the pockets of his black tuxedo, his blue cornflower tucked neatly into his lapel. "Yeah, why do you ask?"

The Briton tapped his chin as he contemplated the idea himself. "Isn't it a bit odd that the man's a Archbishop but he has grandchildren?"

The Canadian laughed. "Let's just say that he wasn't a good priest when he was younger," he managed to say, smothering his giggles with the back of his hand. "He had a hard time staying away from the ladies."

"More like the ladies had a hard time staying away from me~" A deep, cheerful voice said, surprising the two blonds. Arthur and Matthew turned around and caught sight of the Italian Archbishop, a wide grin residing against his well-aged features. He walked forward and ruffled both of the boys' hair, laughing heartily. "Besides, love should never be restricted, whether through titles or genders. And the Lord forgives all sins, so is loving really a crime?"

Arthur and Matthew shook their heads when the Archbishop removed his hands from their hair, unable to stop themselves from smiling at the kind man. While it wasn't nearly as uncommon to find a member of the church in support of homosexuality as it used to be, St. Patrick's Cathedral hadn't had the best relationship with the LGBT community as of late.

"Thank you so much for agreeing to this, Archbishop Vargas," the bespectacled Canadian spoke, unflinching at the fatherly pat on the back the Italian gave him as he was too used to the pats he would receive from his inhumanly-strong American brother. "It means a lot to Gilbert and I that you're risking so much to conduct the service."

"It's not a problem, my boy," Archbishop Vargas addressed, walking forward towards the altar and opening up his Bible to the correct page. "You can call me Romulus if you'd like. And I'm not risking
or doing anything noble—I'm only fulfilling my duties as a servant of God by not ostracizing people for who they are or who they choose to love."

The three males promptly jumped when Matthew's phone went off, the song 'Astronaut' by Simple Plan reverberating off the spacious walls. He quickly answered, apologizing all the while to the (now startled) men, talking for about a minute into his phone before closing it with a disappointed face.

"What happened?" The Englishman wondered out loud as the Canadian put his phone back into his pocket, his own hands in the pockets of his jeans (he wasn't dressed in formal attire since he hadn't yet been directed towards the changing areas).

"One of the guests missed their flight from Seychelles to New York," Matthew groaned, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose as they threatened to slip off his face. "They won't be able to make it in time for the wedding, meaning we're down one person in the ceremony."

Arthur shrugged, thinking through his schedule. He had the heist planned for tomorrow since Kiku hadn't contacted him in some way, the wedding was in a few weeks so he could plan his criminal activities around then, and he had no real role to play in the wedding. "How about I take their place instead?"

The bespectacled blond glanced at him, bemused. "Huh?"

"I don't have anything going on," he lied easily, checking his phone. No text messages or calls from Kiku. "And I don't mind helping out if it means this event will go along smoothly. So how about I take their place instead?"

For unbeknownst reasoning, Matthew turned bright red. "U-u-um," he started, his violet eyes flickering away to the curiosity of the Brit. "I-I don't think that's a good ide-"

"Sure," Romulus interrupted, an all-knowing grin etched onto his cheekbones. "You can take their place. I'm alright with it."

Matthew stammered some more, unheard by the satisfied Briton as he nodded in agreement. "R-R-Romulus, I-I really don't think that's a good idea-"

"What's not a good idea?"

The Canadian lost whatever color was present in his face at the sound of that voice. "N-n-nothing, Elizabeta," he expressed with feverishly-waving hands, provoking another hearty laugh from the Italian and another confused look from the Englishman. "S-seriously, it's absolutely nothing!"

A sly smirk grew on the brunette woman's face, her frying pan(?) on her hip as she tilted her head in thought. "Huh, I could have sworn I heard something about that flight from Seychelles being delayed...? I couldn't have heard wrong. What's going on, Romulus?"

The Archbishop waltzed over and whispered something in her ear, making the woman's green eyes widen and practically sparkle. "Really? And he wants to volunteer as tribute? Oh, YES~!"

Arthur was beginning to develop a bad feeling about this, but admitting defeat was never one of his strong points. "What's this all about? I'd still like to help."

Elizabeta smiled in a way that set him on edge. It could only be described as 'fangirlish'. "I'll inform you about it when practice starts," she chirped, grabbing the blond by the arm and tugging him towards the changing area. "We're running late as it is. Now, let's pretty you up~"
Those words have never sounded more sinister.

And that was how Arthur Kirkland ended up in a white dress with a red rose bouquet in his arms, standing outside the door to the mass hall waiting for his cue. It also didn't help that he was waiting for his damn partner to arrive, as he was a bridesmaid who needed a groomsman to escort him down the hall. Hell, it also didn't help that he was a man cross-dressing as a woman waiting for another man to escort him down the hall!

The whole situation reeked of embarrassment and self-pity, and frankly? Arthur wanted nothing more than to curl up into a dark little corner and die. Now that he thought about it, it kind of worked that he could die in a church, since he had to take the costs for a funeral into account…

He shook his head to try dissuading those thoughts, too swallowed up in shame and too lightheaded from the corset strangling the life out of him to even think straight. That Hungarian woman obviously had too much fun playing dress-up with him; he could have sworn she was cackling when she cross-stitched the constricting fabric around his waist.

*Though it does make me look thinner,* he toyed around mentally for a little bit, glancing at his reflection in the mirror. The dress was actually really pretty; it reached to his ankles, had black ribbon wrapped in a frontal bow around his waist, and was made of white fabric that clung to his figure and fanned out in the back like the feathers of a bird. It was surprisingly modest too, though it provided no concealment for his shoulders and slim arms, and it accentuated his…lack of cleavage. However, Elizabeta stuck some hair extensions so it made him look like he had waist-long pigtails. And added some eyeliner and lipstick. And blush. She said that he was like a blank canvas due to how pale he was, so she had to add a lot of blush. So he could pass as a girl, albeit a very flat-chested one. *I'd say I look quite fetching.*

He blinked once. Then twice. Then once more for good measure. And promptly facepalmed, uncaring whether or not his makeup smeared. He was starting to lose it. Perhaps it would be better to hike up the skirt and run out the exit before his groomsman arrived-

"A-Arthur?"

He promptly froze. And turned around. Very, very slowly.

Standing across from him in a tux with windblown hair, crooked classes, and a furious blush rising against his cheeks, was Alfred F. Jones.

*Oh God, no.*

Arthur scratched the back of his head, taking care to avoid messing up the pigtails since he knew Elizabeta would send him to an early grave if she found out, though he was still considering the possibility of death over playing the dress-in-drag bridesmaid. "Er, hello Alfred," he managed to say, blaming the constricting pressure of the corset for the sudden heating of his cheeks. "Fancy seeing you here."

Alfred seemed at a loss of words, Arthur not blaming him in the slightest. He was probably scarring the poor boy for life, though it pained him to think it. After a moment, the bespectacled blond blinked several times as if to register what was going on, his face blooming in fifty shades of red. "F-fancy seeing you here too," he coughed out, avoiding Arthur's line-of-sight with his hands fiddling aimlessly behind his back. "T-though this is kind of my bro's wedding rehearsal, so I'm here as a groomsman."

"Oh, Lord," the Brit moaned, his face in his hands. He refrained from saying or thinking profanity
whenever in church, but, at the moment, his mind was a chaotic bombardment of swears that would
make Davy Jones faint. "This can't be happening, this cannot be happening-!"

"What can't be happeni-ooooh," Alfred acknowledged, his eyes growing wide behind his glasses.
"You mean-?"

"Yes."

"And we-?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure-?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Alfred mumbled, looking at the floor with his hands in his pockets. It was torturous enough to
breathe, much less resume talking. A pregnant silence enveloped the two, broken by an outward sigh
from the American who extended his arm out towards the Englishman. "Okay, come on."

Arthur glanced at the blond's arm as if he had leprosy, his emerald eyes darting from the arm to
Alfred's face back and forth. "With…what?"

"Well, we've gotta go in there sometime." Alfred mentioned, still averting the Brit's gaze. "We
shouldn't keep the others waiting, especially during rehearsal. 'Practice mistakes makes perfect
mistakes', right?"

Arthur looked back at the arm, feeling conflicted. He wasn't one for physical
interaction, especially when it came to Alfred. With others, it was because he was unused to being
touched by people he didn't consider close, but with Alfred…he was scared that if he took his arm,
he wouldn't let go of it. That he'd be so drawn into the American's grasp that he would cling to his
affections like a cat.

He hated how weak-willed and desperate he was when it came to Alfred, but he couldn't help
himself; he had spent so much of his life in the blond's presence that he associated his touch with
comfort, with warmth, with home. Something so achingly familiar, yet something he felt was
permanently out of his reach. He couldn't remember the squeeze of his father's hugs or the gentle
pressure of his mother's kiss against his forehead; he could only remember whatever affection Alfred
had to offer (which, these days was limited to the occasional hair-ruffling, thanks to the busyness one
associates with growing up). In his life that was constantly turning on its axis, Alfred served as the
one consistency.

Arthur bit his lip, his eyes half-lidded as he tenderly slipped his arm into Alfred's, leaning into his
side a miniscule amount. For a moment, he felt like everything was back as it used to be. He wasn't
England, his parents weren't dead, he had no secrets to hide from Alfred-

"Arthur…? Why are you crying?"

The Briton jolted out of his thoughts as if he was electrocuted, looking up to meet the American's
bespectacled gaze. Arthur touched the upper-half of his own face gingerly, his eyes widening when
seeing the saltwater on his fingertips.

"A-and it hurts, i-it h-hurts so badly I-I feel like I'll explode! L-like my heart's impaled by an icicle,
and it's so cold but makes me feel warm at the same time! Like whatever walls I've put up are crumbling! I don't know what to do, and it scares me!"

"I'm alright," he murmured, wiping the tears away with the back of his hand in an (very futile) attempt to preserve a shred of masculinity. He didn't even realize how he had leaned closer into the American's embrace. "I promise I'm alright."

Alfred still looked unconvinced, but he nodded with a faint trace of a blush. "I trust you."

Arthur smiled a bit at him to bring some form of reassurance, but he was cut off by his phone vibrating in his pocket with a text message. Surprised, he reached into the concealed pocket of his dress and removed his iphone, careful to keep the message out of Alfred's sight.

"We'll do it tonight."

His words caught in his throat, making him stiffen at Alfred's side even though they were so close to entering through the mass hall doors and beginning the ceremony. He swallowed thickly, shoving the phone back into his pocket, and reluctantly removed his arm (and his hand—when did they start holding hands?) from the other male.

"I'm sorry," Arthur breathed, stepping back from Alfred. "I'm really, really sorry, but I need to go."

What seemed to be a quick glimpse of fear crossed the American's features, but it was gone as soon as it came. "Are you sure you're alright?"

The Englishman nodded, cradling his hands to his chest. "Yes," he restated in a firmer tone of voice, glancing away to avoid feeling guilt. "Please just tell Matthew I'm sorry I couldn't stay longer, though I'm fine with remaining his bridesmaid if it'll make his wedding easier."

Alfred nodded, confusion still evident in his sapphire eyes. "Though...where are you going?"

Arthur turned to look at him, and didn't even try hiding the sadness in his expression. He smiled. "Just trust me, okay?"

He pushed open the door and ran outside into the New York evening, the wind muffling the American's shouts for him to come back.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I never thought I'd actually see fanart for this chapter, but here it is: https://www.deviantart.com/miyaginoasakura/art/Chapter-20-522405535

BIG shoutout (and hugs) to Miyagino 'Mikura' Asakura who also drew fantastic cover art for this fanfiction here: https://www.deviantart.com/miyaginoasakura/art/Excelsior-52229623

Thank you all for your kind comments--it warms my heart to know that people are still reading this story and enjoying it despite it being four years since having originally posted it on Fanfiction.net. I hope you all enjoyed this chapter and I'll be uploading the
next installment soon.
Until then? Stay awesome.
Perfecting Mistakes

Chapter Summary

In which Arthur learns the hard way not to run in high heels.

Chapter Notes

Regular font indicates the present.

*Italic font indicates flashbacking or dreaming; whether it's a flashback or a dream will be clarified.*

*Bold italic font indicates thought.*

*Bold regular font indicates writing/typing.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One should **never** try to run in high-heels.

It doesn’t matter who you are, what you’re doing, how much experience you’ve had with heels, what matters is that you simply **avoid running in high-heels at all costs.** Walking was fine, speed-walking was kind of pushing it though not to the point of being in any real danger, but running? It was like an unwritten death sentence.

Arthur Kirkland found this out the hard way.

While his exit from St. Patrick’s Cathedral had been fairly dramatic, the process of actually getting from the outside doors to the street was as messy as his abrupt leave had been impressive. That was to say, very.

He bit his lip to prevent from cursing out loud as he picked himself up from the ground (for the **twentieth time in five minutes**), internally cringing when tasting the blood in his mouth. Frankly, it was a miracle that the dress had stayed in one piece, as he had toppled and skittered all over the sidewalk while attempting to flag a taxi. He hiked up his skirt a little bit more to keep the fabric from getting ripped as he waded his way through the crowds of civilians, ignoring the strange looks he received from the passerby as he continued to stumble on his precarious shoes.

*Whoever invented high-heels deserves to run through a minefield in these bloody atrocities!* Arthur thought with a satisfied grimace when he successfully waved down a taxi without falling flat on his face, stepping inside the vehicle and turning pale when he realized he could have **easily taken off the shoes and ran without the unnecessary trauma one associates with fashion.**

One of his hands reached inside the concealed pocket of his dress, removed his wallet, and procured the necessary amount of money that would get him from Point A (St. Patrick’s Cathedral) to Point B (Central Park East Meadow). His other hand was busy re-acquainting itself with his forehead out of
exasperation.

"East Meadow at Central Park, please."

He removed the shoes and gingerly rubbed at his feet when the taxi moved forward, psychologically berating himself for being so stupid. Honestly, why didn't he think of taking off the torture mechanisms earlier? It would have saved him time (as Kiku had sent the text message a little less than ten minutes ago, and it would take about twenty-three minutes to get from St. Patrick's Cathedral to East Meadow via Fifth Avenue if there wasn't any traffic) and saved him the embarrassment of collapsing every five seconds on the sidewalk.

The Englishman exhaled a soft sigh and cast a quick glance out the back window, surprise overcoming his features when seeing a familiar bespectacled blond making his way through the throngs of pedestrians. It seemed that Alfred was talking through his phone, a chaotic bombardment of emotion present in his being, from the uncharacteristically-serious look on his face to the gloved hand threatening to break his phone in half from how tightly he was clenching it.

After a moment, Arthur's surprise morphed into a brief look of sadness before he forced his England persona on, replacing the sadness with indifference. Was the American trying to look for him? Is that why he was looking so determined? Though Alfred did say how he trusted him, so he was unable to tell.

The thought of what happened mere minutes ago chipped at his heart a miniscule amount, but he didn't allow it to register on his physical appearance.

It pained Arthur to see how much Alfred trusted him. How Alfred rarely questioned his actions or choices, how Alfred had so much blind faith in him. He was so innocent in comparison to Arthur; so naïve and oblivious to the harshness of the world. He had experienced hardships, but he still had enough belief to be positive a majority of the time, unlike Arthur. The American was a stronger person than the Brit could ever hope to be, having enough courage to take his misfortunes with a smile.

And it pained Arthur even further to see himself take advantage of Alfred's trust. He was a sinful person; it was astonishing how someone like Alfred could tolerate him for a decent portion of his life. He was prideful, manipulative, stubborn, cynical, and a fool. A complete fool for falling in love with someone by the likes of Alfred, as he was scared of corrupting the bespectacled blond. He was already long-gone; he didn't want to condemn Alfred to the same fate out of his own selfishness.

"I'm sorry, I'm really, really sorry, but I need to go."

I needed to go so that I could create more lies to tell you, he thought as he laid his forehead against the window, the cool glass refreshing against his heated skin. I needed to go so that I could plunge further into my sin.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

No, no I wasn't alright, the Englishman admitted internally, watching as the American's form grew smaller the further away he was from the church. I'm not alright.

"Yes, please just tell Matthew I'm sorry I couldn't stay longer, though I'm fine with remaining his bridesmaid if it'll make his wedding easier."

I'll be seeing you soon, if such is the case, Arthur remarked within his mind, casting a glance towards (what he assumed to be) the direction of Bow Bridge, his gaze deepening and his gloved
hands turning to fists. He removed his phone and texted Kiku to ask about their rendezvous point, as they hadn't been given much time to discuss where he would be going after he reached the East Meadows of Central Park. I wonder what will happen then.

"Though...where are you going?"

'I'm going to have more secrets to hide from you' was what he remembered thinking, a quiet laugh escaping his pale lips when realizing how accurate that brief thought had been. He didn't intend to think it; his mind conjured it up before he even had time to react, but, by God, was it honest. Sad, but honest.

"Just trust me, okay?"

Trust is a funny thing, he dwelled mentally, paying the driver and stepping out of the cab when it stopped at the specified location, the cold wind sending goose bumps up his skin and his hair extensions fluttering in the breeze. As soon as the vehicle was gone, he trudged barefoot through the grass towards the Meadows with his skirt held up in one hand and his high-heels in the other hand. We learn more about the world with every passing day, and learn more about the cruelties the world has to offer with every passing day. As we grow up, we're told to be cautious around people at all times, told that not everyone is as they appear to be. We're constantly reminded of how a person changes in the presence of others, and yet we can't help but put our faith and trust in certain individuals, regardless of the façades they wear. Hell, most likely because of the façades they wear.

He stopped, and looked up at the sky. At the purple clouds fading into nothingness, at the stars barely visible with the neon lights and smog that was New York, his eyes half-lidded.

I only feel bad that he decided to put his trust in me.

The Brit removed his phone when he felt it vibrate with a text message in his pocket, the brightness of the screen contrasting harshly against the darkness of the grassy area, yet fitting quite nicely with the vibrant luminescence of Times Square off in the distance.

No need to text me, Arthur-san. I'm already here.

He looked up and saw Kiku's silhouette not too far from where he was, as he resumed his trudging through the grass to meet up with his Asian partner so that they could commence the heist.

"So, how did you find this secret entrance to begin with?" Arthur asked the brunette when he caught up with him, his cheeks turning pink when remembering he was wearing a dress. It was different for some passerby to see him and automatically assume he was a girl, but it was much more awkward for someone who actually knew him to see him and know his true gender. Thankfully, as the sun had just set, the park was practically deserted. "This location is six minutes away from the museum on foot, right?"

"Hai, Arthur-san." Kiku acknowledged, pulling out his camera and browsing through the pictures he had taken. He showed some of the pictures to the blond, ones which featured dark corridors and abandoned rooms. "However, I managed to uncover some secret entrances into the museum after 'getting lost' a few times and 'accidentally' ending up in closed-off exhibition wings. I dug around for information and uncovered the fact that the museum was originally part of the Gracie Mansion, which was built in 1799 to house the Mayor of New York after a different mansion commissioned by George Washington was destroyed by the British in the Revolutionary War. I grew curious with that fact, as it wasn't uncommon back then to have secret passageways leading in and out of places
for the purposes of transporting goods. So I explored inside the closed off rooms and found an
entrance, one that was built around the time the Gracie Mansion was built, but hasn't been used since
the Prohibition Era to smuggle alcohol."

Arthur nodded when hearing the sound background information, cascading his gaze all over the
dark room. It was a bit strange to think that somewhere in the vast tracks of land, there resided a tunnel of
sorts that could help them enter the museum undetected. Even so, he couldn't help but shrug. "So, where is it?"

Kiku pointed at the rocks beneath their feet.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

Contrary to popular belief, one of Alfred F. Jones's biggest pet peeves was running late.

Yeah. Seriously.

He hated it; knowing he had ONE job (which was to arrive at a certain place at a certain time), but
knowing he failed to accomplish said job either because A.) Something happened which was out of
his control, or B.) He was incompetent as hell when it came to meeting deadlines.

It was usually the latter. Much to his chagrin.

He had tried to solve this problem many times; if the job happened early in the morning, he set an
alarm for it (though he was such a deep sleeper he either slept through the obnoxious sounds, or he
would roll over and almost break his alarm clock from how hard he hit it). If it happened late in the
night, he would set a reminder on his phone (though he used his phone so much that by the time the
reminder was supposed to go off, it wouldn't because his phone was dead). If the job happened in
the middle of the day and he didn't want to risk either almost breaking his alarm clock or his phone
dying, he would take a bunch of post-it notes and stick them in random places to remind himself at
random intervals during the day. Of course, this had a tendency to backfire as often as the other
methods did, since post-it notes bought in bulk could get really expensive and his cat, Americat,
loved swiping them off whatever surfaces he stuck them on and eating them.

While he admired how his adorable feline had as much of an iron stomach as its master, he didn't
admire how late he often was to certain events as a result of his cat's antics.

Like how he was currently running late to his older brother's wedding rehearsal.

Alfred's mind was a chaotic bombardment of swears that would make Davy Jones faint, as he
struggled to properly tie the black tie hanging around his neck like a limp noodle in the taxi cab he
was inhabiting. Unlike Arthur, Alfred's fingers weren't thin enough to slip between pieces of fabric to
create knots. And since the Brit was insistent on him wearing formal attire correctly, Arthur always
went out of his way to tie his ties for him, so the American was completely out of his element and it
was driving him insane.

By the time he arrived at the church, he realized that he had a red clip-on bowtie in his pocket just in
case something like this happened. With that, he removed his wallet, paid the driver, stepped out of
the cab, and promptly facepalmed at his own stupidity. If he could be thwarted by a tie, it was no
wonder he had been thwarted by England in the past.

He attached the red bowtie onto his white dress shirt, forcing himself to stop thinking along those
lines as he didn't want himself to become negative when today was supposed to be a day in
preparation for his brother's happiness.
While the cold evening wind tousled his blond locks and set his glasses crooked, it was exceptionally beautiful outside. The sun was almost kissing the horizon, scattering shades of scarlet and sherbet all across New York, the sight never failing to steal his breath away. The colors reminded him of comfort, of warmth, of home. Of all the good times and bad times, of past memories he could no longer experience yet could look back on with a bittersweet smile.

He could remember being four years old, looking up at the vibrant hues that were just barely out of his reach while his father pushed him on a park swing.

He could remember being ten years old, the rays of decaying sunlight warming his back as he ate ice cream outside Baskin-Robbins with his mother.

He could remember spending the weeks following his fifteenth birthday locked up in his room of his own free will, tints of crimson peeking through his closed blinds as he ignored Matthew’s pleas for him to come out, too busy crying to even hear him.

He could remember being twenty and driving home with Kiku after seeing 'The Grand Budapest Hotel' in theatres, the late spring air chilly with their windows rolled down, the heater on to warm their feet, and the red sun burning into their backs as they ventured east while the sun set in the west.

And he could remember what felt like an eternity ago, yet in actuality was only several days ago, being on the Bow Bridge with Arthur, tones of rose making the Briton's already-blushing cheeks bloom brighter, making his dark green eyes shimmer, making Alfred tempted to-

The ringing of the Cathedral’s church bells forced Alfred out of his nostalgia as he quickly pulled out his phone and checked at the time, cringing at how late he was. Matthew and Arthur would undoubtedly give him earfuls about his tardiness, so he decided to head inside before the inevitable speeches could become longer.

Okay, 'sorry I'm late; I was pre-occupied with some personal business'. That sounds like a good explanation as opposed to 'sorry I'm late; my right-hand man in crime-fighting just informed me that there's a good possibility England will strike soon, which is bad since I'm, well, America', Alfred mentioned internally, checking his phone reserved for his superhero duties in case Oya messaged him in the past minute. I don't think they'd believe me even if I wanted to tell them.

It was true; while he was in the midst of getting ready for the rehearsal, Oya called him and informed him that, after hacking into England's sidekick's database (which confirmed once and for all that England legitimately had a sidekick, which, until then, was a highly-plausible theory), he had developed suspicions that England would commence another heist, although he had yet to determine where the thief would strike. 'O' also said how he wouldn't be surprised if England took up the heist earlier than initially scheduled, as he admitted to leaving his trademark image to bait the thief and his helper into making a move quicker.

He said he'd call me as soon as he pinpointed the most plausible I.P address location, as England's set up a wide variety of fake I.P addresses in different locations, the American dwelled, putting his phone back in his pocket and opening the door. He stepped inside and made his way to where the mass hall was located, his footsteps echoing throughout the wide corridors, the candlelight casting long shadows against the halls. I just hope he finds out soon-

He paused, in both thought and stride, when he saw a young woman waiting outside the mass hall.

Her dress was long and white, clinging to her slim figure and billowing out in the back in elegant ruffles, and, while it didn't hide her slender shoulders and arms, it provided modest concealment of
her legs (which was rather rare these days, what with short skirts and all). While he couldn't get a
good view of her from the front, he could see her from the side and found her to be quite beautiful,
with her waist-long pigtails that shone like spun gold and her dark green eyes that glimmered like
emeralds, though her dress kind of annunciated her lack of cleavage and her eyebrows were kind of
thick-


"A-Arthur?"

His suspicions were confirmed when the bridesmaid(?) turned around very, very slowly, revealing
Arthur Kirkland, as in, his best friend he had known since childhood who was as prideful and
stubborn as a lion, dressed in drag as a girl.

Albeit, a very, very cute girl.

He felt all the blood in his body rush to his face, leaving him feeling weightless and tingly from the
neck-down. He couldn't help it—the Brit was cute, beautiful even—he was unable to tear his eyes
away! It was so weird, though... as mentioned before, the Englishman had been his best friend since
childhood. They played together (Alfred beating Arthur at games like freeze-tag, Arthur beating
Alfred at games like chess), studied together (Alfred helping Arthur out in subjects like Calculus or
Chemistry, Arthur helping Alfred out in subjects like English or European History), they had grown
up together and walked through so many aspects of life side-by-side, whether it was him sticking
with Arthur as he studied for days on end to be accepted into New York University, or Arthur
sticking with him when his parents died!

So why had that warm, foreign sensation returned again? It was the same weird, fluttery feeling he
had experienced when Arthur kissed him as America during the Metropolitan press conference, at
Bow Bridge on the night of the second Metropolitan Heist, when Arthur was asleep with a fever. He
didn't understand what any of it was, though it felt strong. So very strong he felt he had to bite his
tongue to prevent himself from saying anything stupid, felt he had to dig his fingernails into the
palms of his hands to prevent him from reaching out and doing something stupid, felt he had to plant
his feet firmly in the ground to prevent him from moving forward and doing something stupid—!

"-Fancy seeing you here."

Alfred blinked, only now realizing how the male in front of him was talking. He somehow burned
brighter in the facial region, wondering how much of a Mediterranean tomato he must have
resembled based on the immense heating of his cheeks. Just act natural, don't show fear; he can
smell fear.

"F-fancy seeing you here too,"

Dammit.

"T-though this is kind of my bro's wedding rehearsal, so I'm here as a groomsman." He managed to
say semi-coherently, wincing at how badly the blond groaned when hearing his statement. Was
it that obvious how badly he was out of it, today?

"Oh, Lord," the Brit moaned, his face in his hands. "This can't be happening, this cannot be
happening-!"

"What can't be happeni-ooooh," Alfred acknowledged, his eyes growing wide behind his glasses.
Well, thank God. He thought it had something to do with him, but it apparently had to do with
the... 'special' circumstances at hand. He made a mental note to ask Matt about it, later. "You mean-?"

"Yes."

"And we-?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure-?"

"Yes."

"Oh." Alfred mumbled, looking at the floor with his hands in his pockets. It was torturous enough to breathe, much less resume talking. If there was one thing he hated more than being late, it was awkward silences. So, he let out a quiet sigh and extended his arm, still as vibrant in the face as the setting sun he was looking at, beforehand. "Okay, come on."

Arthur glanced at the blond's arm as if he had leprosy, his emerald eyes darting from the arm to Alfred's face back and forth. "With... what?"

"Well, we've gotta go in there sometime." Alfred mentioned, still averting the Brit's gaze. "We shouldn't keep the others waiting, especially during rehearsal. 'Practice mistakes makes perfect mistakes', right?"

Arthur appeared conflicted, still staring at his arm. Alfred didn't understand Arthur, sometimes. He went through so much effort to maintain the illusion that nothing was wrong, and yet he got flustered over little things like this. Perhaps he was unused to showing weakness? While he had experienced hardships, he kept it all bottled up on the inside to keep other people from possibly worrying about it, keep people from getting closer and somehow getting hurt by being involved with him, it seemed.

Yet he was a walking contradiction; while he took so much into keeping people away, Alfred couldn't help but feel like the Englishman genuinely cherished his loved ones, to the point of doing crazy things for the sake of those he cared for, even if he ended up taking the fall for it. That the ends would justify his means. That he would let his deepest dreams wither up and die if it meant making someone he loved happy. He wouldn't be surprised if Arthur went off and did something like that, though the thought alone was enough to break his heart, as both New York's superhero who wanted to save people from their darkness and as Arthur's friend who wanted the best for him.

Only when he felt someone's arm slip into his own, did the American jolt out of his mind. He glanced down, surprised at how close the Briton had come. Strange, taking the possible weakness-reluctance factor into account. Though, wait-

"Arthur...? Why are you crying?" Alfred asked, his words catching in his throat when seeing the blond look up at him with wide eyes dripping with tears. The Brit tentatively touched his own face, appearing horrified when realizing the water on his fingertips. Perhaps it was the weakness-reluctance factor after all.

"I-I'm alright," he murmured, wiping the tears away with the back of his hand, leaning closer into the American's embrace. "I promise I'm alright."

Please stop saying that.

He wanted to believe in him.
Please.

He wanted to. So, so badly. Because maybe if he did...Arthur might start to believe in himself, even if it was just a small amount. He might start to believe the idea that maybe someone wanted to scale those walls and be involved in him. So he said those three words that he felt could impact anyone, regardless of their backgrounds or mindsets.

"I trust you."

Arthur smiled a bit at him, as if he was so happy to hear those words, and the world seemed to dull in comparison. But, after a moment, his phone went off in his pocket, forcing him to draw his attention away from the American and look at a text message. Alfred was unable to catch what it was the message read, but, whatever it was, it made the male beside him go pale.

"I-I'm sorry, I-I'm really, really sorry, but I need to go."

He felt fear bite his senses, paralyzing him to the spot for a mere instant. But he willed it away as quickly as it had come.

"A-are you sure you're alright?"

The Englishman nodded, cradling his hands to his chest. "Yes, please just tell Matthew I'm sorry I couldn't stay longer, though I'm fine with remaining his bridesmaid if it'll make his wedding easier."

Alfred nodded, unable to stop himself from wondering what was going on. Was it another hardship he felt the need to hide for the sake of not worrying anyone? Or was it worse? He felt nauseous when considering the possibilities...what could be so bad?

"Though...where are you going?"

Arthur turned to look at him, and didn't even try hiding the sadness in his expression. He smiled. "Just trust me, okay?"

Oh, God.

With that, he turned around, pushed open the door leading outside, and ran into the New York evening.

"NO! WAIT, ARTHUR!" Alfred shouted, trying/failing to muster up enough strength to go after him, only managing a few steps forward before his legs buckled beneath his weight and sent him on his knees, a confused look on his face.

What the hell was going on with him? What the hell was going on with Arthur? Why was he being hurt so much by this and why couldn't he chase after him, dammit? By what invisible force was he...restrained? He felt like his fingers were just barely scraping the surface of whatever was happening, so close yet so far away. It pained him. It drove him mad with that strange sensation from before, growing and growing until he felt like his chest would explode.

'I know it hurts you, leaves a scar on your heart, and makes you think it was your fault they left-'

'Though I wouldn't concern myself with those matters if I didn't feel like I had to.'

'I'm very glad that I can still make you smile.'

It was then that he received a phone call.
And that's how Alfred F. Jones ended up running late yet again, only this time, he was running late in regards to stopping a criminal.

"Alfred, I've successfully tracked down where England is planning to strike," Oya began as soon as the American answered, making the hero's eyes grow wide behind his glasses. He waded his way through the crowds of civilians, glancing around as he could have sworn he saw someone flopping around in a white dress. It probably wasn't Arthur, though; while Arthur had a difficult time with high-heels (as any man would most likely has a difficult time with high-heels), he had enough common sense to take the shoes off before trying to go places. Trying to run with high-heels was like an unwritten death sentence, everyone knew that. "I hacked through England's system since it's active at the moment, and narrowed his I.P addresses down to one likely suspect based on the area where he's working on his computer from."

"Where is he? I'll try catching up with him as soon as possible," Alfred notified, barely refraining himself from crushing his phone. Though he hated the negative influence England had on both the NYPD and himself (as both America and Alfred), he was kind of thankful for him finally making his move. At least he had something to distract himself with, someone who could remind him of what he as fighting for in the end. "I'm over by St. Patrick's Cathedral, but I can either run or take a cab."

"You might want to stick with running," 'O' informed, making the bespectacled blond groan inwardly. He was going to hate himself tomorrow morning when he woke up with legs as heavy as lead. "You just missed the last set of taxis that could just barely miss the evening traffic. But don't worry; while I was hacking England's system, I came across some very interesting information his sidekick uncovered. Something about secret passageways."

Alfred grinned, already feeling the adrenaline kick in. "Lay it on me."

"Tell me Alfred, how familiar are you with the Museum of the City of New York?"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Another chapter for this fanfiction; thank you so much for your kind comments and constructive criticisms, it means so much that people are still reading/enjoying this work. With luck, it won't be long until I update with the next installment.

Until then? Stay awesome.
Project Run-Away

Chapter Summary

In which America encounters a new adversary and England harnesses a corset for sinister purposes.

Chapter Notes

Regular font indicates the present.

*Italic font indicates flashbacking or dreaming; whether it's a flashback or a dream will be clarified.*

**Bold italic font indicates thought.**

**Bold regular font indicates writing/typing.**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Museum of the City of New York was originally part of the Gracie Mansion built in 1799 to house the Mayor of New York, after the British destroyed the original mansion in the Revolutionary War. The property was eventually purchased by Henry Collins Brown in 1923, only to undergo a series of architectural refurbishments and expansions over the decades, the most recent addition being a new exhibition wing added on the east side of the museum. As a form of precaution undertaken by Ennead Architects LLP (formerly known as Polshek Partnership), the security cameras in that general renovation area were removed to prevent wiring from affecting the infrastructure of the building's walls and ceilings.

However, if there had been security cameras installed in that general renovation area, the security guards would have heard a set of floorboards talking on the first floor in the east-side exhibition wing.

"Oh, bloody hell, I think there's something solid blocking the entryway!"

"I wouldn't be surprised, England-san. After all, the last time this entrance was used was during the Prohibition Era, so it's likely that this passage was sealed up to prevent it from being discovered by police officers."

"Alright, so what's the fastest way to get out of here?"

"Are you sure when you say you want the fast way?"

"Yes, I can't stand being in here any longer-!"

And the security guards would have seen a gloved fist break through a set of floorboards on the first floor in the east-side exhibition wing, causing smoke, dust, and rubble to arise through the
abandoned area. They would have also seen two figures emerge from the former-floorboards, one of
the figures flexing their uninjured right arm, the other figure hugging the ground for dear life and
gulping in air.

"R-remind me," Arthur panted, glancing up at Kiku from where he lay on the ground, his mask
unable to conceal his shock and surprise. "R-remind me to NEVER get on your bad side, 'Japan'."

Kiku nodded, his expression hidden behind his Kitsune mask. "Hai, England-san. Though it's
extremely unlikely that I'll have to resort to such force around you."

The Brit rolled his eyes, standing up from the ground and dusting his steampunk attire off of debris
and cobwebs. "I'm just glad we're finally out of that wretched place," he admitted, unable to help
himself from shuddering. "Small, enclosed spaces and darkness don't sit very well with me, to say
the least."

"I thought something seemed off about you while we were traveling through the tunnels," the
Japanese acknowledged, removing a camera from the bag slung over his shoulder. He scrolled
through the pictures, soon coming across the set of images he had collected while posing as a tourist.
"I assumed you were nervous since we're in a new location."

"That was part of the reason," the blond divulged, biting his lip. "But our primary focus is the heist,
so let's not distract ourselves any longer. From what I recall, we'll be taking a visit to the third floor?"

"Hai, England-san," the brunette agreed, removing a map from the bag slung over his shoulder. He
knelt down and spread the map onto the ground, revealing the interior layout of the museum with
various rooms, floors, and corridors outlined in black ink. The Japanese male pointed to a specific
section on the map located on the third floor. "Our targets are located in the Gilded Age exhibit."

"Artifacts generously put on display thanks to Tiffany & Co." Arthur noted with a small smirk,
wishing that simply wearing a smirk could automatically ease his anxieties. "Artifacts like brooches
and necklaces made of silvers and sapphires."

"Precisely," Kiku affirmed, pulling out a plastic bag containing a computer chip. "This will be similar
to the two Metropolitan Heists in that you'll insert this chip into the system so that I can access the
cameras from my laptop and act as your eyes. However…"

If the Englishman hadn't been wearing a mask, the Asian would have seen his thick eyebrows rise in
confusion against his forehead. "What is it?"

"I wish you had told me about your claustrophobia earlier, England-san." 'Japan' addressed,
provoking another groan from the thief. "Otherwise I wouldn't have devised a plan that revolved
around you sneaking through air vents."

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na ~

When Oya had told him that a secret entrance to the Museum of the City of New York was located
underneath a bunch of rocks, Alfred couldn't hide his skepticism.

"Are you sure that this is a route into the museum? Like, pinky-swear this is a route? N-no, I
wouldn't go as far as to say elephant-swear, but still, it's a bunch of rocks!" He expressed into his
phone, inspecting the mound of stones from varying angles in case he missed something of extreme
importance. "If what England demonstrated during the first and second Metropolitan Heists (what
with him jumping out of windows and using smoke bombs), he has a thing for theatrics. It would
make more sense for him to use a more dramatic way of entering."
“That’s true, but keep in mind that England is smart,” ‘O’ reminded, his voice distorted by electronic manipulation software in the instance the call was being recorded. "He won’t hesitate to use something—or someone—to his advantage if it means it'll help him win. You and I have both been on the receiving end of that in the past.”

"Yeah," Alfred mumbled, his gaze hardening behind his glasses. "I'm well-aware of that. Anyway, are you sure that England's sidekick didn't simply send a proxy I.P address to throw us off their scent since they know you hacked their computer?"

"It's a strong possibility," Oya admitted, as the American continued to thoroughly investigate the rocks. "But it's the only real lead we have. And I'm positive that England's helper will stick with their plan, albeit commencing it a little early thanks to our enzyme-equivalent of a message."

"You keep saying that England's helper is probably hiding information from England himself, why is that again?" The bespectacled blond questioned, puzzlement evident in his expression when he found a piece of lacy white fabric beneath a large rock. It looked like a piece of fabric one would expect from a nice dress, though he had no idea why something like that would be present in a place like East Meadow. Curiosity overwhelmed his senses, leading him to look closer at the fabric and the rock. "You've told me that in some cases it's better for the leader to be oblivious of things that'll happen, but if this heist results in England being caught, wouldn't it also put the helper at risk?"

"You make a valid point, Alfred," 'O' commented, as the American stuck his fingers beneath the rock and pulled upwards with his superhuman-strength, yelping when the rock moved to reveal a set of concrete stairs descending into (what appeared to be) a dark tunnel. "I'm assuming you found the entrance?"

"Y-yeah," Alfred gulped, standing up and looking into the passage with wide blue eyes. The ceiling looked low and the walls looked compact, his inner claustrophobic screaming for him to run for the hills and never look back. Combined with how dark and damp it looked from where he was standing…it looked like it hadn't been used in decades! "I'll turn up the brightness on my phone so I can see better, though I'll probably lose reception while I'm down there."

"I wish you good-luck, Alfred," Oya notified, sending shivers down the blond's spine as he walked down the stairs. "Oh, and in regards to your question?"

Alfred looked up at the sky. At the purple clouds fading into nothingness, at the stars barely visible with the neon lights and smog that was New York, as he began shifting the rock over to seal the passage behind him. "Uh-huh?"

"I honestly don't know."

And then his cellphone connection cut off, leaving him in darkness.

Now, he wished that he believed Oya sooner so that way their cellphone call could have ended quicker and preserved more of his battery power, as his was just about to run out.

"Crap, crap, crap," he mumbled, internally panicking as he started to run through the tunnel. The place was creepy enough with the faint light of his cellphone, he didn't want to imagine being trapped in the passageway in the pitch-blackness. Not only was it the kind of situation horror movies were made of, but it also brought back certain memories that Alfred had no desire in re-living anytime soon. "I've got to get the hell out of here-!"

It was then that he saw a literal light at the end of the tunnel.
…Followed by a BIG hole in the wall that looked pretty recent.

His flame of confusion had re-lit itself, burning much brighter than before at the sight of the hole. It was like someone had taken a small cannon and decided to fire it dead-center into the wall/floor(?) of rock and wood, as rubble and splinters littered the floor of the museum, dust lingering in the air.

Alfred was relieved he had enough hindsight to wear his superhero attire beneath his regular attire, as it would have been painful to change into his outfit and inevitably step on all of the debris in the process.

His eyes glanced around the room from behind his mask, scoping out the area for potential cameras. It was obvious that England had used the entrance since the aforementioned hole looked new, not to mention that if the employees found the hole, they would immediately take care of covering it up since they were doing renovations in the area anyway. The only question was who had created the hole in the wall?

Is it possible that England's helper is here? England himself doesn't have enough upper-body strength to do it, and the mark doesn't look clean enough to be made by something like a pick-axe, the American thought, releasing a breath he didn't know he was holding when there were no cameras in sight. 'O' theorized that England would use this entrance as the architects would disable the security cameras, but the idea of England (or England's helper) setting up cameras set him on edge. Is he trying to re-create what Oya and I did during the second Metropolitan Heist, with putting out a new person to catch the enemy off-guard?

Alfred's question was answered when he felt a sudden rush of wind pass by his face, followed by the sensation of a warm liquid trickling down his left cheek. His gaze briefly flicked up towards the throwing star embedded into the wall facing him, and he grinned.

Arthur bit his lip as he maneuvered his way through the air vent, mentally berating himself for being so stupid. What had he done in a past life to be condemned? It wasn't bad enough he had to dress-in-drag and wade through a claustrophobic space—oh no, he had to do it all TWICE!

A soft sigh escaped his lips as he allowed his England persona to take over, easing his frayed nerves and replacing it with both arrogance and confidence.

He glanced down from his position in the air vent, keeping his eyes trained on the night guards. It turned out that his plan of attack here wouldn't be the same as the first Metropolitan Heists, as the security guards weren't concentrated solely in the security room. Granted, a majority of the guards were concentrated in the security room, but there were still some wandering around. Since the Museum of the City of New York (or MCNY, considering he was growing tired of the formal title) was undergoing renovation and had its security cameras disabled in those defenseless areas, there were guards sent to patrol those renovation areas to make them not-so-defenseless, and make England's job all the more difficult.

So, it was time for plan B. Or, as he liked to call it, 'Project Run-Away'. Why 'Project Run-Away'? Because the Gilded Age exhibit of the museum had a bunch of dresses with wide, frilly skirts perfect for hiding under.

He waited in the air vent for guard number one out of three to turn his head at a ninety-degree angle, and stealthily jumped from the opening in the vent onto the ground. Within the appropriate five-second interval, he crouched down, rolled towards the nearest frilly dress he could find, and hid beneath the skirt, mentally damning whatever traces of masculinity still remained in him. After that,
when guard number one turned his head at a ninety-degree angle for the second time, he was
knocked unconscious by a walking stick the Brit had found.

*This is a pretty good weapon to have,* England noted with a nod of approval, admiring how the
ebony wood was flexible beneath his fingers but sturdy enough to cause physical pain. He
particularly liked how the gold glimmered in the dim lighting of the exhibit. *I think I'll keep it.
Perhaps my 'magical cane of pain'?*

He rolled his eyes. *I'm so good at naming things.*

The thief glanced at the unconscious security guard, unable to stop himself from wondering how he
was going to keep him quiet. His rope (which he planned to use on the guards in the security room)
was still up in the air vent, and he couldn't exactly use his can of Nitrous Oxide to send the man
unconscious for a longer period of time since the chemical wouldn't be as potent to use in a wide
space like the exhibition hall in comparison to a small security room.

*Well, this is proving to be quite the problem,* England thought, his gloved hand on his chin in a
pondering motion. *I can't exactly have this man come conscious and ruin my plans, now can I?
But what can I use to substitute for rope?*

His gaze briefly flicked towards the dress he had crawled out of, and he grinned.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na

"I see you've decided to show up," the masked figure remarked, their facial expressions unreadable
given they were concealed behind the mask of a fox. "Though, to be honest, I'm a bit disappointed in
you, America."

Alfred laughed. "Not quite the dramatic entrance you were expecting, huh?" He gestured towards
the hole in the trap door residing by his own feet, his smile not reaching his eyes. "I think England
beat me in terms of theatrics. Or was that you who did this?"

The Kitsune nodded and flexed his gloved fist. "That was me."

The American whistled lowly. "Damn, that's impressive. Whatever stuff you're doing—mellow jazz,
bongo drums, huge bag of weed—I want some. So, what's your name anyway?"

The male clad in black and white bowed with their hand over their heart. "I go by the name 'Japan'."

'Japan', huh? The bespectacled blond thought with a light eyebrow rising beneath his star-dotted
mask, his arms crossing over his chest. *Is this the guy who might know Oya and I's plan but isn't
telling England about it?*

"What's with everyone and these country names, am I right?" Alfred shrugged, not taking his eyes
off the enemy/possible ally(?) for a second. "First myself, then England, now you. Anyone else I
should be aware of? And speaking of England, are you his sidekick by any chance?"

He was cutting it close, and he knew it was a risky move to be so blunt around the same guy
supposedly responsible for screwing up that poor mess of wood and stone beside his feet, but he
sought no need in sugar-coating his questions, especially when the answer could result in an possible
alliance. Not to mention that…something about this 'Japan' character seriously reminded him of
someone. He couldn't place who, as the mask was distracting, but the way they acted and spoke…
no, it was impossible. He dismissed that idea as inconceivable.
'Japan' glanced at his pocket watch, flipping it closed and slipping it back into his pocket after a moment. "'Sidekick' is such a derogatory term. I prefer the phrase 'helper' or 'aid'. Regardless; yes, I am his 'sidekick'."

The American drew out a long sigh, if only to occupy the silence with something. "That's a bummer to hear," he stated plainly, stretching his arms. "I was hoping that you and I could be friends. You seem like the kind of guy who'd like anime, not trying to be stereotypical or anything, and I have a friend who's really into that kind of stuff. But-

He reached into his left fabric boot and pulled out a standard Glock 19, keeping it trained on the (presumably) Japanese male. "I guess that's life."

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

England stood back, admiring his handiwork. When he was being shoved into a dress earlier in the evening, he had learned a few helpful tips when it came to corsets thanks to Elizabeta. Though he didn't think that he would ever apply those skills, they were surprisingly simple yet efficient, rendering guard number one unable to move as their abdomen, lower arms, and hands were shoved into a tightly-laced corset. He then ripped off some of the remaining fabric off the corset, using half of it to tie the man's ankles so they couldn't walk, and using the other half to muffle the guard's speech when they came to.

He glanced at the card he swiped from the unconscious guard, the feeling of victory spiking his senses like a drug as he stared at his prize. With the card, he could easily disable the security system surrounding the first out of three artifacts, which was a priceless necklace-brooch made of platinum, diamond, and sapphires. With a proudful smirk, he climbed up the air vent and retrieved his thieving bag.

He felt his pocket watch vibrate in his tailcoat, making him freeze in his actions. Arthur removed the watch from his pocket, registered what must have happened, and turned pale as the realization hit him like cold water.

"As you're completing this mission, keep in mind that just because the security cameras for the east wing are disabled on both the outside and inside, does not mean that the artifacts are defenseless," Kiku explained as he rolled up the map and put his camera back into his bag. He readjusted his Kitsune mask most likely out of paranoia that it would somehow fall off in the duration of the crime. "They'll likely have guards patrolling the most valuable artifacts, the ones we're prioritizing the most on this mission since Russia-san wants them the most. The objective of the mission is not to steal all of the artifacts in the Gilded Age exhibit, but to take the three artifacts that Russia-san has specified we steal. To steal those three things, you can climb through the windows and end up on the third floor, where the Age exhibit is located. From there, you enter the ventilation system in the ceiling and enter where the three items are stored, knocking out the guards and tying them up if there are any nearby. In an ideal situation where we have enough time to steal those three artifacts and more, you can go back into the ventilation system, sneak into the security room, use your usual container of Nitrous Oxide to knock them out, install my chip into the system so I can keep an eye on things, and go around stealing items as you see fit. However, that's the best-case scenario; only do that if we have enough time. Until then, stick with the original plan."

Arthur nodded in agreement. "What will you do, just out of curiosity?"

"I'll be waiting here," the Japanese informed, opening his laptop. "In case we have enough time and you need me to watch over the cameras, and in case America-san arrives. I'll communicate with you through your pocket-watch if I encounter America-san."
What should I do? Arthur thought, still poised to jump from the air vent onto the ground. He cascaded his gaze towards the card held in his hand, and back at the pocket watch in his other hand. I need to steal those items for Russia, but Kiku's relatively new in the field and he's fighting against America!

He felt guilt eat at his senses, fear fraying his brain when thinking of what could easily be happening to his roommate, his friend. It was common knowledge that America gave criminals a second chance, but it was also common knowledge that America held a heavy dislike for thieves, particularly England! How would he react in finding England’s right-hand man? Would he try to talk him out of it? Form an alliance? Take him as a hostage? Or-

Arthur swallowed, forcing himself to stop thinking of such things. America was a naïve, blubbering idiot who was foolish enough to side with the NYPD, but he was human! If he killed someone or took them as a hostage, that was more proof of the police's corruption!

The logical thing is for me to steal the three artifacts at least, he decided, silently jumping down and running towards the case. He swiped the card and disabled the security system, opening up his thieving bag and retrieving pieces of fabric to wrap the artifact in. He stuck his hand inside the glass container and tentatively took the jewelry, covering it in the fabrics and placing it inside his bag when he was content with his work. Without a second glance to the unconscious guard, he climbed back up the air vent and started crawling towards artifact number two. I won’t waste any time in trying to steal any more. As soon as I'm done, I'll rush down and help Kiku!

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

Alfred winced at the sudden cut that appeared on his right cheek, grabbing his right arm in order to steady his aim. He always carried a gun around with him in his fabric boot in case the worst-scenario occurred and his strength wasn't enough, but he tried refraining from using it as much as possible since he knew how dangerous they were. They took the personal relationship that came with killing and made it impersonal, made it easier to kill people without thinking. It was that kind of power that Alfred felt that no human should possess and use constantly, which is why he tried limiting his usage of it as often as he could. But in the case of this 'Japan' character? He wasn't going to take any chances; the guy was a menace.

He was too quick to be considered remotely human. His shuriken (his throwing stars, he had come to learn with a grimace) were delivered at precise intervals and at specific pressures that were designed to not hurt him initially, but accumulate in pain over time. Shortly after Alfred removed his gun, 'Japan' cooperated with him, going as far as letting him tie up his hands and feet! But he turned his back for one minute, suddenly his gun was kicked out of his hands and halfway across the room, and 'Japan' had undone his ropes thanks to his shuriken lying in the ground. Alfred was starting to strongly consider the possibility that England hired a mercenary of some sort—that would have been the only explanation for the guy's fighting skills.

"Spent already?" That voice called out, making 'America' growl. "I'm rather disappointed in you again, America. I expected more out of the NYPD's show dog, but I guess that's life. Here," he said, tossing the American's gun on the ground and pushing it towards him with his foot. "I'll even give your weapon back if you want, though I thought you prided yourself on your physical strength."

"What do you want from me?" Alfred questioned, leaning down and picking his gun up. He half-expected Japan to suddenly appear with another shuriken at his throat, so he was surprised when he remained where he was when he last saw him. "Seriously, what is it you want?"

"Who hacked into my computer?"
Alfred paused, checking his gun to see if he still had ammo. Again, he was surprised to see the present shots of ammunition, but he looked up and shrugged. "Don't know."

He couldn't hide his gasp when a katana was at his throat. His eyes drank in the sight of the weapon against his will, as he wondered from where he had seen it before-

"Do you know now?"

He strengthened his resolve and shook his head, hoping the Asian couldn't see through his bluff. Of course it was 'O' who had hacked his computer, though if Japan didn't know that, he had the upper-hand. All he had to do was keep up the illusion just a little while longer, something he had become the expert in at this point.

Apparently, he succeeded, as the weapon slowly lowered.

"I see," Japan murmured, their dark brown eyes appearing darker behind their fox-mask. "You really don't know, do you?"

Alfred shook his head. "Nope."

A long sigh escaped the Kitsune. "One last time, I am disappointed in you, America," he spoke softly, sliding his katana back into its sheath. "But this time…I expected it. I only hope it's not as bad as I fear."

A light eyebrow rose beneath the hero's mask. "What do you mean by that?"

The criminal waved him off with a wave of his hand. "A story for another day, hopefully a story I will never have to tell," he disclosed, glancing around at his fallen shuriken. "And on that day-"

Two gunshots rang throughout the room.

Somewhere, off in the museum, Arthur Kirkland heard the gunshots and paid it no heed. The sooner he got to his partner-in-crime, the better.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Another chapter completed, another cliffhanger for you all to enjoy. Thank you so much for your kind comments and for following me along on this strange adventure, I'll make sure to update soon with the next installment. Until then? Stay awesome.
As Arthur Kirkland maneuvered his way through the air vents with his rope, Nitrous Oxide, and heist bag in tow, he could have sworn he heard what sounded like two gunshots from somewhere far-off in the museum.

He shook his head, assuming it was his nerves (or lack thereof) fabricating noises in order to create a false sense of panic. He wouldn't put it past himself to do something childish like that, as such unhealthy habits were common whenever he was forced into a claustrophobic situation (both figurative and literal) akin to the one he was currently involved in.

The Brit glanced through a small opening in the air vent, his eyes catching sight of the next artifact resting in a glass case. He admired how the necklace's gold, diamonds, turquoise, pearls, and enamel glimmered in the dim lighting, yet his expression hardened when realizing how the guards were better-protecting this artifact. In the previous exhibition hall, the security for the necklace-brooch wasn't well thought-out, as two out of the three guards were busy patrolling the area outside the hall that they didn't realize the third guard (who was the only one really guarding the necklace-brooch itself) was knocked out and stuffed in a corset while the artifact was stolen. This exhibition hall dedicated to the necklace would require him to be much more careful in his antics, as the three guards surrounded the glass case with their guns aimed towards the walls and doors.

Arthur bit his lip, thinking of Kiku. He had no idea how his partner-in-crime was holding in his fight against America, and that thought scared him; yet another situation he was unable to control, another thing he couldn't predict as the scenario had never happened before. Against his will, horrendous images began playing through his mind, ranging from Kiku being choked against a wall by America's hand, to the Asian being punched in the face until his head resembled a bloody pulp. The thief swallowed, grimacing as it felt like there was something trapped in the back of his throat, something he couldn't dislodge.

He absentmindedly touched his wrists, wincing out of habit. At the touch of his smooth skin, he
could feel the beginnings of adrenaline surging through his system, giving him the same fight-or-flight response he felt when he was trapped in the tunnels beneath the museum.

*The only thing that seemed louder than Arthur's footsteps was the sound of his heart thundering in his ears.*

*He took a few deep breaths to steady himself, walking forward to get rid of the fuzzy feeling developing in his legs, his grip on his flashlight tightening by a miniscule amount. Arthur swallowed in a vain attempt to swallow his nervousness, feeling a bizarre sense of depersonalization overcome his senses when he looked down and was unable to see his own feet due to the darkness of the passage tunnel.*

**This…this isn't good,** he dwelled internally, glancing around feverishly. Though he would never admit it out loud, he had a…case of claustrophobia. The idea of small, enclosed spaces dunked ice on his nerves and sent his system into the same fight-or-flight reaction he experienced when masquerading as 'England', which he had tried to conceal as often as he could, and had, until now, been successful in his personal quest. The fact that it was so dark he could barely see ten feet in front of him only increased his personal desire to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible. **This isn't good at all, this really, REALLY isn't good at all!**

"H-how much l-longer until we reach the m-museum, Kiku?" Arthur managed to say, oblivious to how badly he stuttered. He cascaded the beam of his flashlight onto the wall so that he could see the Asian following behind him, unnerved at the sight of his partner's Kitsune mask peering out in the dim lighting. As soon as Kiku had pried open a set of rocks at Central Park's East Meadow and revealed a secret tunnel, they entered the passage and re-sealed the entrance behind them. Thankfully, Kiku brought along a bag containing their criminal attire, allowing the two of them to change in the pitch-blackness without any complications.

"Just a little longer." Kiku replied, glancing at the time on his phone with his laptop bag slung over his shoulder. "We're making rather good time, as a matter of fact."

**How long is a little longer? A minute? Two minutes? An hour?** He knew it would take an estimated six minutes on foot, but his uneasiness was building with every second that seemed as long as a year in the confined space. Before long, he found himself struggling to swallow, somehow increasing the adrenaline in his veins.

**This tunnel is located several feet beneath the ground, and buried beneath pounds of grass, dirt, and cement.** Arthur thought in a failed attempt to distract himself. He assumed that if he tried to keep his mind off the constricting circumstances at hand, he would have an easier time calming down. Unfortunately, him reciting certain facts about the impending doom of the passage tunnel only seemed to increase his internal panicking. Everything around him seemed stifling, like he was dragging weights on his ankles and arms. **Something terrible could easily happen, and no one would ever know. I could die down here and no one would ever know-!**

His eyes widened behind his mask as he faltered in his walk, his limbs feeling like static, his grip on the flashlight shaky. He touched his wrists, wincing out of habit.

It felt strenuous to breathe, as if the oxygen had been suddenly drained out of the area. Kiku had sealed the exit shut, right? Was it possible that they had a limited amount of air and they just ran out?! He wanted to claw at his hair, scream at the top of his lungs, ANYTHING that could get him out of this claustrophobic situation! He had to get out of there—no, he NEEDED to get out of there!

It's been said that fate, while a wicked mistress, has her bouts of kindness when people need it the
most. For him, that bout of kindness came in the form of several cement stairs, which lead to a door positioned on the ceiling.

Arthur let lose a genuine smile as he dashed up the stairs and grabbed the brass doorknob in his hands, twisting it as he was so eager to escape and breathe in the fresh air. However, fate was a bipolar mistress, as it turned out that the door had been sealed.

"Oh, bloody hell, I think there's something solid blocking the entryway!" He exclaimed, banging at the door with what (little) upper-body strength he possessed. For once, he wished he was someone by the likes of Alfred (hell, even America), only for the purpose of breaking through the material separating him from his possible-coffin.

"I wouldn't be surprised, England-san." Kiku mentioned as he made his way up the stairs, eyeing the trapdoor as if assessing its thickness. "After all, the last time this entrance was used was during the Prohibition Era, so it's likely that this passage was sealed up to prevent it from being discovered by police officers."

Arthur groaned, wishing he had brought a pick-axe or something. "Alright, so what's the fastest way to get out of here?"

Kiku looked at him with an amused look. "Are you sure when you say you want the fast way?"

The blond nodded quickly. "Yes, I can't stand being in here any longer!"

And then, contrary to whoever may have (somehow) seen, Arthur Kirkland did not proceed to gape like a fish when Kiku Honda punched through the solid wall and floorboards as if his fist was a knife stabbing through a piece of paper.

Just thinking of that made him shiver uncontrollably, but he shook his head a second time. He had to stop freaking himself out; this situation was different in that he could control it! The quicker he was done with this, the quicker he could reach Kiku and help him against America, right?

**With that in mind, it's unlikely that I'll have enough time to steal more than what Russia wants,** Arthur thought, grabbing his can of Nitrous Oxide and mentally calculating how long it would take to knock out the guards with the amount in the glass container. The current exhibition hall was bigger than the security room, meaning it wouldn't be as potent here as it would there, therefore it would take longer for the guards to get knocked out. However, his resolve tightened when a startling image of Kiku lying in a puddle of his own blood flashed across his conscious. So, I have no choice but to improvise. **It's the only way I can complete the mission and help him at once!**

He took a deep breath to steady himself, exhaling shakily. The Englishman stalked across the interior of the air vent, keeping his movements quick and soundless as to not give away his position. Arthur threw on a smirk, as if a smirk could help relax him more, and slipped his gloved fingers beneath a barred metal sheet, revealing he was above the artifact and the guards in turn. He bit his lip, summoning whatever semblance of upper-body strength he possessed, and managed to remove the sheet from the surrounding metal of the vent, releasing a breath he had no idea he was holding. The thief removed a large piece of white fabric from his pocket (a little bit of his bridesmaid dress from earlier had unfortunately ripped on the East Meadow rocks when the passageway sealed up; he had enough hindsight to take some of the fabric and keep them in his pocket just in case he needed it), tied it to cover his nose and mouth, and dropped the can of Nitrous Oxide so that it landed beside the necklace's case.

The container landed on the ground with a sharp crash, breaking the glass and sending the colorless
gas into the air. One of the guards knelt down to inspect the container and fell unconscious on their
stomach after getting a particularly heavy whiff of the chemical, causing the other two guards to fire
their guns at the ceiling.

Arthur dove forward in the air vent to escape the barrage of bullets, pulling his knees to his chest and
keeping his neck protected by his arms. He covered his ears with the palms of his hands to try
muffling the sound of the gunfire, but it was so deafening—it was so dark he couldn't see his own
feet, so small a space he couldn't move without his head harshly colliding with metal, and the chorus
of bullets was so loud it resonated throughout the enclosed area and made his head spin—that it
thundered worse than his racing pulse in his eardrums.

And yet, just as soon as it had started, it ended with two sickening 'THUMP's and the sound of guns
colliding with the floor.

Slowly—partly out of paranoia that the shooting would resume, partly out of being momentarily
paralyzed by fear—Arthur unwound himself from his safety position and edged towards the opening
in the air vent. His green eyes peaked just barely over the side, growing wide behind his mask when
seeing the three unconscious men on the ground. He felt his fear wash away instantaneously, leaving
him slightly nauseous and somehow shakier than before.

England grabbed his heist bag and jumped down onto the ground, swiping a security system card
and unlocking the glass case with the white fabric still covering his nose and mouth. When the
necklace was secure inside his bag alongside its predecessor, he made haste to climb back up into the
air vent as it wouldn't be long before the guards came to, again.

Arthur couldn't mask the shudder that caressed his spine when he caught sight of the
many, many bullet holes tattooed in the metal of the vent, though.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

"Spent already? I'm rather disappointed in you again, America. I expected more out of the NYPD's
show dog, but I guess that's life. Here," the voice said, tossing America's gun on the ground and
pushing it towards him with his foot. "I'll even give your weapon back if you want, though I thought
you prided yourself on your physical strength-"

"What do you want from me?" America questioned, grabbing his right arm in order to stem the small
amounts of red seeping through his white superhero attire, a grimace distorting his normally-
optimistic features. "Seriously, what is it you want?"

"Who hacked into my computer?" They interrogated, whatever traces of mockery vanishing from
their tone, replaced by unadulterated seriousness.

Silence grew in the room like moss on the bark of a tree, before America replied with a "Don't
know."

America's answer wasn't good enough, it seemed, as a gasp escaped the hero a moment later, with a
weapon (what kind of sword was it? He was better at recognizing gun types than sword types) held
at a close proximity and a disturbingly-calm "Do you know now?" retorting back.

The silence had returned, hanging in the balance as if one misplaced breath would permanently
shatter it.

"I see," they murmured, lowering their sword. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Nope."
A long sigh escaped the unknown figure clad in a tuxedo and a foreign-looking mask. "One last time, I am disappointed in you, America," they spoke softly, sliding their weapon back into its sheath. "But this time…I expected it. I only hope it's not as bad as I fear."

He swallowed. It seemed it was the best time. It was now, or never, as the masked person was distracted by the previous conversation. His hand rested against the side of his Glock 19, the cool polymer seeping through his gloves and easing his nerves, his index finger faintly twitching against the trigger.

"What do you mean by that?" America wondered out loud.

"A story for another day, hopefully a story I will never have to tell," the stranger disclosed, glancing around the throwing stars lying on the ground. "And on that day-"

With the enemy's guard lowered, it was the ideal time to strike. So, the blond extended their right arm before the dangerous masked man had time to even finish their sentence, and shot twice, wincing slightly at the dull 'THUMP' that emitted as the figure clad in the tuxedo fell onto their stomach, blood seeping through their formal attire.

America grew pale behind his white-and-blue mask, his gun falling out of his hand with a hollow 'clack' that echoed throughout the room. His eyes flickered from the man lying on the ground in a small puddle of crimson, to the blond who still had their gun aimed at the bleeding man on the ground.

For a moment, the hero looked like he was going to be sick. But he shook his head and picked up his gun, running his thumb over the barrel. "When did you get here, Vash?"

The Department Chief lowered his arm and put his gun back in its holster attached to his waist, getting on his knees so that he could inspect the masked man lying on the ground. "Long enough to see this guy in action," he admitted, picking up the criminal's right hand and foot, smirking a bit at the bullets firmly lodged through the fabric and skin. "He shot his throwing stars with his right hand, and always started running on his right foot, so I shot those two areas to render him unable to properly fight and move around for a while."

"Will he live?" The masked hero asked quietly, making the officer roll his eyes.

"I said for a while, didn't I? He'll need to get the bullets removed with some tweezers, but he'll live. Luckily for him, the bullets are still intact, so it shouldn't be that big of an issue." Vash replied, making America exhale a sigh of relief.

"Oh, thank God," the tall blond addressed in barely a whisper, resulting in another eye-roll from the officer still inspecting the injured (but still semi-conscious) brunette. "I thought…I thought I actually shot him. A-and the weight of what I thought I did just hit me like a train and-"

The American shut himself up, growing pale again from behind his mask. After a moment, a wavy smile graced his features, quirking a confused look from the Department Chief. "I-I'm just… really glad that I didn't, you know?"

"Kind of," Vash divulged, removing a pair of handcuffs and affixing them to the criminal's wrists. "Though…you realize that, at some point in your life, you'll have to use that gun?"

The hero swallowed, his hands clenching to fists at his sides. He glanced from the Glock 19 in his hand, to the masked brunette with handcuffs restricting their movement. "I-I know," America acknowledged, resulting in another confused look from Vash. "I-I just…I just know what these
things are c-capable of, so I don't want to use it unless I have no other choice."

The officer's green eyes grew half-lidded with understanding. "I see," he mumbled, kicking the brunette's sword away from where it lay on the floor so that the masked criminal couldn't reach it. "That's rather wise of you, America. A stretch for you, I'm sure."

Even with his visible uneasiness, America managed a small, genuine smile at the teasing remark. "You and me both," the American affirmed, deciding to humor his higher-up just this once. However, another glance at the handcuffed criminal still residing on the floor caused his blue eyes to darken and whatever lightheartedness to flee his expression. "Be careful around this guy, 'kay? His name is Japan and he's called that for a reason, if his fighting is anything to go off of."

"I noticed," Vash agreed, helping the injured male stand up and sit down on a set of crates. The Department Chief removed some linen fabric and a pair of tweezers from a bag slung over his shoulder, as he stripped the (presumably) Japanese of his right-hand glove so he could remove the bullet. "Like I said before, I arrived soon enough to see this 'Japan' in action. You might not be alive if it wasn't for 'O' contacting me."

The masked blond blinked. "'O' talked to you?"

Vash nodded, ignoring how the Asian's hands seemed noticeably shakier since the mention of America's sidekick. "He told me where you were going, and gave me directions of a different secret passageway to use, to prevent the security guards watching the cameras from freaking out and making England retreat pre-maturely."

The hero grinned. "Leave it to him to help me out, one way or another. So, it's likely that England's still in the premise? Japan's confessed to being England's sidekick-er, 'helper', and it's unlikely that he would leave without him, so-"

"Yes," Vash cut in, sending a fast look of apology towards the American for interrupting him. "Though there's a good chance that Japan is being used as bait to keep us pre-occupied while England commits the crime. You go off and catch England, I'll stay here and have a little chat with this 'Japan'. We'll meet up at the secret entrance I used to get here, since I left it open and available for accessing on the second floor."

It was America's turn to nod, as he made his way to the door leading out of the first-floor East exhibition wing. "Right, I'll make sure to rendezvous with you there."

"Oh, and America?"

The masked blond stopped and turned, his hand on the doorknob. "Yeah?"

Vash glanced away, unable to look him in the eye. "Stay strong in your beliefs, okay? Don't use that gun too quickly."

America touched his own wrists absentmindedly, wincing out of (what appeared to be) habit. "Right. Don't worry, I will."

With that, the superhero turned on his heel, opened the door, and closed it behind him to catch a thief. Silence engulfed the room left abandoned by him, only broken by the metallic movement of tweezers and the occasional hitch of breath that emitted from the person they were being administered on.

"Y-you're making a b-big mistake," 'Japan' gasped, breaking the silence and quirking an unamused glare from the officer. "Y-you can still turn back."
"I made this decision long ago; I chose this route of my own free will, no one else to blame but
myself," Vash snapped, hating how his tweezers kept losing its grip of the bullet embedded into
the criminal's hand. "So if you're trying to make me second-guess my life choices, you're talking to the
wrong person."

"L-let me re-phrase myself," the Japanese groaned, disliking how the Swiss's negative attitude was
taking a toll on his hand. "Y-you're making a big mistake in t-trusting 'O'."

The Department Chief stopped in his antics for less than a second, but it didn't escape the masked
brunette's eyes. Vash would have been lying if he said he wasn't curious. "How so? America would
trust him with his life, I bet."

"T-then his faith is poorly placed," 'Japan' wheezed, as Vash removed his tweezers by a fraction, his
eyebrows high on his forehead out of suspicion and intrigue. "England was right in that sense."

The blond smirked lightly. "Implying that England is wrong in other ways? You don't seem very
loyal to me."

"Your assumptions will be your d-downfall," the handcuffed man hissed in pain. "From that point, it
will be a steady descent into chaos and unnecessary suffering."

Vash frowned a miniscule amount, resting his hand upon his cheek as he stared at 'Japan'. "You
remind me of someone I met, once." He confided, oblivious to how even shakier the Asian's hand
became in his grip. "You two have a lot in common; one of them being you'll be imprisoned, soon."

The police officer grew inquisitive to know what expressions the Japanese was making behind that
strange animal-mask of his. Was he biting his lip to hide how scared he was? Or was he snarling in
anger? He assumed it must have been the latter, given how the brunette's hands clenched into fists,
regardless of the bullet still embedded in one of them.

"If not for your sake, then for America's sake," Japan spat through gritted teeth, his brown eyes
hollow from what the Swiss could see beneath the fox. "Do not trust 'O'. If, for some reason, you do
not take my advice into at least a little consideration, then may God have mercy on your soul."

And Vash would have been lying if he said that statement didn't send shivers down his spine.

He opened his mouth to ask, ask why the Asian would say such a thing, ask who he was referring to,
ask how he came to know and think along those lines in regards to America's sidekick, but he was
interrupted by a loud 'BOOM' that shook the ground from about two floors above.

He was then interrupted by a quick kick by a tailored black shoe, one that hit him in the jaw and
caused him to see the same stars that dotted America's mask. Vash was sent spiraling to the floor,
cringing in the sharp pain in his left cheek in particular—good God, he was going to have the worst
cold sore of his life, soon—and glaring with every fiber of his being at the masked man, who
handcuffed his hands behind his back.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Department Chief Vash Zwingli," Japan taunted, the blond able to
hear the smirk in his tone (the bastard). Vash growled when seeing the criminal pick up one of the
throwing stars still lying on the ground (he mentally berated himself for not getting rid of those things
when he had the chance), insert the flat side of one of its blades between locking mechanism and the
teeth of the handcuffs, and unlink the cuffs within a few short seconds. "But I'm afraid I must be
going. Oh, and officer? Don't use that gun too quickly."

He was gone before Vash could even yell at him. The bastard.
Author's Note: Every time I end with a cliffhanger, take a shot of WATER--I don't want any of you guys ending up in the hospital within the first five minutes. Anyway, hope you all enjoyed this chapter and appreciate all your kind comments, I'll be uploading the next installment soon so you probably won't have to wait long.
Until then? Stay awesome.
The Folly of Janus

Chapter Summary

In which Arthur can't hide his feelings and America makes an important decision.

Chapter Notes

Regular font indicates the present.

Italic font indicates flashbacking or dreaming; whether it's a flashback or a dream will be clarified.

Bold italic font indicates thought.

Bold regular font indicates writing/typing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Arthur Kirkland was screwed. There was no point in denying it.

The gunshots from the second exhibition hall were loud enough to draw the attention of both the guards from the first exhibition hall and the guards patrolling the second floor, meaning that about twenty men (excluding the three he knocked out with Nitrous Oxide and the one he tied up with women's lingerie) were wandering throughout the third floor with guns ready to fire.

Arthur swallowed when he peeked through another small opening in the vent, watching the uniformed men patrol the halls with their weapons fully loaded. He had enough hindsight to remain in the air vents as it was an excellent hiding place and provided him with viewing access of his enemies without them being aware of it. As long as he remained quiet, he could remain as vigilant as a hawk surveying its prey and move accordingly. It was also good that the guards in the security room hadn't left their position (considering there were no cameras in the east wing to alert them of his presence), as he was not in the mood to go up against more people.

However, that didn't deter how screwed over in this plan he was.

It wasn't a matter of the plan being bad—quite frankly, it was a good plan and had gone along smoothly until now—it was simply a matter of him being outnumbered. Regardless of the security room guards not being involved, the ratio between the wandering guards and himself was about 20:1. If the previous guards hadn't shot at the vents and alerted the others of a possible intruder, he would have most likely been able to steal the last artifact (and potentially steal more artifacts) without any problems.

There was also another factor in this equation he had to consider. Another annoying, patriotic, commercialized factor: America.

Arthur groaned inwardly as he assessed the situation; as far as he knew, Kiku was still fighting
against America and was keeping him pre-occupied while he stole the artifacts for Russia. Yet, that meant there was another enemy in the building, another person he had to avoid coming into contact with at all costs if he wanted to succeed in his mission (since the twat could easy take him down in a physical fight and the only weapons Arthur had to wield were his brain and his tongue, excluding his new Magical Cane of Pain). In the worst-case scenario where Kiku was rendered unable to help him, that was a 21:1 ratio between the people out to get him and himself. All in all, he was fighting a losing battle.

But that was what Arthur Kirkland believed. England, on the other hand, believed the phrase 'If I'm going down, I'm taking you all with me' was very applicable to this situation.

**In spite of how the odds are against me at the moment, I have no intention of surrendering,** England thought as he stalked through the darkness of the air vents with silent motions, keeping his senses heightened and his adrenaline on stand-by until further notice. His green eyes grew half-lidded as excitement removed the edge of his nerves, a wide smirk present amongst his facial features the longer he thought about what he planned on doing. *I won't stop until all the tasks at hand have been cleared.*

He slipped his gloved fingers beneath another barred metal sheet in the vent and pulled it up with minimal amounts of noise. If his memory regarding Kiku's map of the museum was correct, this was the room closest to the room containing the final artifact Russia desired (a necklace made of gold, natural pearls, demantoid garnet, and enamel), meaning that getting rid of these guards was essential in preventing people from stopping him in his mission. He wouldn't want to spend so much time fighting one group of guards only for them to have backup so soon, now would he?

Another glance downwards showed he was looking into a room with about five guards and two doors. The doors were most likely open in case some other guards needed assistance with catching the target, but that didn't alter the fact that there were doors, one of which he was distinctly close to. He could use that to his advantage if he played his cards right.

The thief nodded with that thought, and jumped from the air vent onto the ground.

He landed on the floor soundlessly and simply closed the door, a small 'click' of the lock being the only sound to escape the article of wood separating him and the guards from the rest of the museum. A small 'click' was enough to make one guard turn their head towards his direction, but he jumped back up and climbed into the vent before anyone could spot him.

Phase one was completed, now it was time for phase two.

With that in mind, he reached inside his heist bag and removed a pair of goggles. He knew it would look stupid wearing both goggles and a mask at the same time, but if it came down to him wearing just the goggles, just the mask, or the goggles and the mask, he had to pick wearing the goggles and mask, as he didn't want to risk someone seeing his face and possibly being blinded from what he was about to do.

The Briton placed the barred metal sheet to cover the vent again, and moved in the confined space until he was positioned above the second door on the opposing end of the room. He kept a firm grip on his Cane of Pain as he jumped down and repeated the process of closing/locking the door. Only this time was different; this time, he procured a small glass ball full of black smoke and threw it onto the ground, effectively catching the guards blind (pun intended). With his goggles on to prevent his vision from going awry, England moved through the room and knocked the guards out one-by-one with his walking cane, opening a window to let the smoke out when he had finished.
A satisfied grimace etched itself onto his expression at the sight of the unconscious men. Really, it was astonishing (and kind of sad) how easily they had succumbed to an improvised plan, of all things! It was one thing to succumb to a plan that had taken a while to create, but improvisation was their downfall? He could barely contain his laughter.

*If the NYPD is as quick to fall for such tricks, I'm surprised they've lasted as long as they have,* England noted with another smirk as he finished tying up the last guard with a corset and stuffed a ball of fabric in their mouth. Surely, by the end of the night, his skills with women's lingerie would rival that of Elizabeta! *All the more incentive to bring them down and begin anew; to prevent crimes like these from happening with little resistance.*

His brow furrowed beneath his mask when remembering that, unable to help the slight feeling of disappointment spreading in his system.

Masquerading as England was dangerous; it had been ever since his public debut at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with the Ganymede artifacts. His profile was plastered all over the internet, his alias had become better associated with a criminal as opposed to a country, and he was becoming more and more known as a world-renowned thief with every passing day. 'England' was the enemy of the NYPD and of New York's golden-boy, America, making it unknown what lengths both parties would go in order to ensure his imprisonment. With every crime he committed, he only deepened their hatred and his own pool of sins. By all means, he shouldn't have felt disappointed when remembering his magnum opus of future achievements.

And yet he couldn't stop himself from feeling his heart twist uncomfortably at the concept of letting his caricature go.

*You like it,* the little voice in the back of his head murmured, making Arthur turn pale. He shook his head quickly and climbed back up into the air vent in case the guards came into consciousness prematurely. *You enjoy the thrill of living a double-life.*

There was a grain of truth in that; his life had certainly become more interesting since he had first donned his England attire. However, 'interesting' wasn't always associated with good things. He was constantly on-edge with someone possibly discovering his secret, he had to think one step ahead of people by the likes of America or 'O', and he had to tell a lot more lies to people like Alfred to keep them from getting somehow hurt by him. There was a thin line between Arthur Kirkland and England; one that had a habit of occasionally blurring together, much to his chagrin.

'England' had become a part of him, and he with 'England'.

The thief didn't realize he had stopped until he found himself peering through (yet another) barred metal sheet, giving a good glimpse at the set of five guards patrolling the same room as artifact #3. The necklace was right there, lying in its glass container with a card-scanner serving as its only protection. He was so close, yet he was still so far from being done. Now, the ratio was about 15:1, which was better than before. The one trick with the locked doors was a spur-of-the-moment plan, one which he didn't want to repeat out of fear he would use up all his smoke bombs. He had two left now, which he wanted to use only if absolutely necessary.

"But what can I do?" Arthur murmured beneath his breath, glaring at the guards as he tried thinking of a foolproof way to remove them from the equation, a way which wouldn't require the extensive use of smoke bombs he wanted to keep in case (God forbid) he were to encounter America or 'O' again. "I can't think of anything that could work-"

And then England got an idea. An idea so remarkably-simple he was appalled at his own idiocy.
Alfred had a mental list of things he didn't like.

Everyone has something like that in their minds (or at least he liked to assume everyone had something like that in their minds, to make him feel less weird); how else would people know what they wanted to avoid/never experience again? Like everyone (again, he assumed), the #1 item on that hate list tended to fluctuate, depending on the situation one was currently involved in. For example, when he was running late to Matthew's wedding rehearsal, 'being late' was his #1 most hated thing. Whenever he encountered England, 'England' was #1 on his hate list.

Right now that #1 spot was occupied by 'stairs'.

_Dammit_, Alfred thought semi-coherently as he ran up the flight, his hands clenched into fists at his sides from how hard he was pushing himself to continue onward, repressing the strong urge to just lay down on that comfortable-looking pile of marble-stair. His mind had fogged up like a shower mirror, making it difficult for him to coordinate his limbs properly. This had resulted in him tripping over his feet and barely avoiding a sprained wrist or broken nose thanks to the aforementioned marble stairs. _Why…are…there…so…many…STAIRS?!_

_Why couldn't England have struck in a section on the second floor? Or better yet, the first floor? Or even better, why couldn't England have not struck at all? Then I could have stayed back at St. Patrick's Cathedral with Arthur dressed as a girl and walked down the aisle and yeah, I'm going to stop that sentence right there. Yeah._ Alfred mentally acknowledged, blaming the vibrant blush on his cheeks on the strenuous activity he was partaking in. His brain was already muddled from physical exertion (from both the stairs and running to the museum from the cathedral; he should have just stuck with a cab) — he didn't want to muddle himself even further with the confusing (yet surprisingly pleasant) imagery of Arthur playing the dress-in-drag bridesmaid. How did he even get to thinking of that? Ah, yes: RUNNING.

_My legs are bound to fall off any time now_, the American dwelled with a semblance of clarity, his hands on his knees as he gasped for breath when he finally reached the third floor. He had carried his gun in his hand since it would have made his trip up more awkward, but since he would (hopefully) not deal with stairs any longer, he stuck it back in his right fabric boot after removing the ammo. He highly imagined that, if someone pushed him down the flight of stairs, he would have never moved again (from both his utter exhaustion and from the fact the trip down would kill him). _I wouldn't be surprised at this point._

It was then that he realized there was an elevator to his right.

Though before he could even facepalm, a shrill alarm pierced the default silence of the museum, making Alfred almost jump a few feet in the air and cover his ears with the palms of his hands.

#1 on the hate-list: obnoxious noises in big, spacious areas. He would be in a wheelchair and deaf by the time this night was over.

_It sounds like it's coming from a specific room_, Alfred noted within his mind, as he (reluctantly) resumed his run, only now through the hallways of the east wing's third floor. From the far end of the hall, he saw a bunch of security guards dashing towards the room which was probably the source of the alarm. He counted fifteen guards entering the room, their guns brandished in an attempt to look intimidating (but, to Alfred, who had seen Vash Zwingli in action, they looked like inexperienced newbies), confusion and anger prevalent against their facial features as they holed themselves up in that room. _Seems off to me. England wouldn't deliberately give off his location if he was_
His eyes grew wide behind his mask as he somehow quickened his pace. He passed by the room and closed the door, reluctantly sticking a large piece of heavy furniture in front of the door to prevent the guards from escaping. As Vash said, it was best to keep the security guards out of this as much as possible, to prevent England from freaking out and retreating earlier than anticipated. That was the reason he had failed with 'O' during the second Metropolitan Heist; he sent someone new to England and made him run before they could properly arrest him.

He won't feel as compelled to run away if it's just the two of us, the superhero determined as he cascaded his gaze into various rooms, trying to catch a glimpse of the British thief so that he could make his next move accordingly. If England had somehow went and set that one alarm off to bait the security guards into rushing over there, that meant he was unarmed, right? Though he needed to take the fact that the criminal was outnumbered into account, so…there was no telling whether he would be armed with a weapon or not.

In the past, England had never had a weapon to defend/attack with (except for his brain, though he didn't want to open up that keg of worms since he beat England in physical fighting, but wasn't as strong in the psychological stuff), yet 'Japan' had never showed up either. Tonight could easily turn into a night of firsts for all different kinds of things. He'll still be feeling the exhilaration of his plan to lure the guards away, and think he can do the same with me. Pride always comes before the fall, after all.

Pride was a strange thing; it wasn't a necessary thing to have, yet people clung to it if someone/something threatened to take it away. It acts as a form of security blanket to those who have experienced hardships—the worse a person experienced in their past, the more pride they have as it was the only thing that kept them from succumbing to their darkness—and molds even the most brittle pieces of coal into practically-indestructible diamonds.

When Alfred had that epiphany, he couldn't help but wonder what kind of hardships England must have experienced to have so much pride. He was so stubborn and conceited all the time, and, as he had become a villain, the hero was curious to find out what had pushed him so far over the edge he resorted to crime. His curiosity had even extended to the point of him wondering who lurked behind the masquerade mask, for reasoning beyond wanting to see the true face of 'England' behind bars!

Maybe if I found out what happened to him, I could use that knowledge to prevent others from going down the same path? Alfred questioned internally, gritting his teeth in frustration when he couldn't find the Englishman anywhere. Where was he hiding and how had he managed to sneak past both himself and the guards so quickly? Though there's no guarantee that knowing the truth would help. Two people could go through essentially the same traumatic experience and end up entirely different. Besides, I'd only end up sad and angry that another person was too far gone for me to save.

For unbeknownst reasoning, he thought of Arthur. When remembering what happened at the cathedral, with the Brit trying to make himself seem like he was fine when he really wasn't, his heart clenched painfully and his teeth ground deeper in his mouth. What sort of things had he seen and experienced to make him that way?

"Well?" A British voice interrupted his train of thought, as Alfred blinked and requested him to repeat himself. "I asked if you would have any reason to fight if you were somehow caught up in all this chaos."

To that, Alfred snickered. "I'd never let myself get involved in that kind of mess," he lied, wondering
if the sickening sensation in his stomach was caused by guilt or another feeling. "Situations like those will definitely ruin your health, staying cooped up in your house or not. You?"

"Same," Arthur agreed, his green eyes half-lidded behind his glasses. "Though I wouldn't concern myself with those matters if I didn't feel like I had to."

The hero stopped running so he could catch his breath, his chest heaving and his hands on his knees as he struggled to regulate control over his heart and lungs. He stood upright after a minute, the alarm not blaring as loudly as it was earlier considering he had covered a far distance between himself and the room with the security guards. His attention, however, was caught when he heard a soft noise up above his head.

His eyes widened behind his mask when he realized the sound was moving.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

That went along much easier than I thought it would, England thought as he crawled through the air vent towards the room with artifact #3, keeping his weight proportioned equally and trying to minimalize the amount of noise that emitted whenever his lower legs slid against the metal flooring. He could have sworn he heard (what sounded like) someone running, but he brushed it off as another security guard trying to get to the room where he had set the alarm. Frankly, the thief was appalled at how easily the men could succumb to such simple tricks; all he had done was go through the vents into a room that was a good distance away from where artifact #3 was located, set off an alarm by breaking into an artifact without using the security card he had swiped earlier in the evening, and climb into the vent again towards where artifact #3 resided while they were distracted with the broken-into display. An effortless ploy that would give him enough time to steal the last item and get to Kiku, one he didn't anticipate working out so well in his favor. I almost feel bad for their employers for hiring such incompetent workers.

Yet another smirk played against his features, his amusement barely contained what with the darkening of his eyes and the hand covering his mouth to stop himself from snickering. Almost.

Whatever semblance of pleasure vanished from his expression when he peered between a small opening in the metal ground of the vent and saw the last treasure, glowing faintly in the dim lighting of the exhibition hall, seriousness replacing the aforementioned feeling. All that was left was to take the necklace; the sooner he did that, the sooner he could return to the first floor and help Kiku. It had been a while since he had received any form of communication from his pocket watch, meaning that something had happened that prevented the Japanese from making contact, whether it was being injured, imprisoned, or-

Arthur shook his head a second time in a (futile) attempt to dissuade those negative thoughts. He couldn't afford to lose focus now, not when he was so close to finally completing the mission and getting the hell away from the third floor.

Oblivious to how badly his gloved hands were shaking, he went through the motions of slipping his fingers beneath (yet another) barred metal sheet and lifting it up, his arms burning with the familiar sensation due to his lack of arm-muscle. Sooner or later, he wanted to ask Alfred some tips about building upper-arm strength since the American was good with things like that, and it would undoubtedly help him whenever he masqueraded as England if more air vents were in his future.

The Briton released a breath he had no idea he was holding when he jumped through the newly-opened space and landed on the floor, taking a moment to assess his surroundings. Still no sign of any guards, the cameras were all disabled so there was no threat of anyone seeing him, the coast
appeared to be clear by all means. With that in mind, he removed the card he took from an earlier security guard and swiped it into artifact #3's protection system, a timid 'beep' signaling that it was safe to remove.

Although he knew it was troublesome for him to fret so much, Arthur was unable to stop himself from glancing over his shoulder as he went through the process of removing the artifact, wrapping it up in fabrics, blah, blah, blah. Call it paranoia or fear, but a heavy feeling had settled in his stomach with every moment he spent cooped up in the infernal wing of the museum, one which built with each passing second like grains of sand in an hourglass.

*Probably just my imagination,* Arthur thought, depositing the artifact into his bag as he tried to force his nerves from manufacturing noises in an attempt to wig himself out. First the almost-panic attack in the secret passage, then twice in the air vent. He REALLY needed to stop if he wanted his mind to remain in one piece. *It would have at least taken a good portion of time for the guards to track me to this specific location after thoroughly searching the room where the alarm went off. Therefore, it's unlikely that there's anyone in this area-*

"England!"

*Well, should have seen that one coming.*

With a deep breath, he resumed his façade as England to calm his nerves and steady his shaking hands, as he carefully slung his heist bag over his shoulder and turned around on his heel. "Keep it down would you? We're in a museum," he reminded with heavy sarcasm, provoking a bemused look from the ruffled-up superhero. "A place that's supposed to be quiet, something you must struggle with immensely."

Annoyance and miniscule amounts of anger made itself known on the hero's expression. Geez, the man's mind was as readable as ever. "You're one to talk since you set off that alarm. You're not very subtle for someone who's supposed to be a thief, now are you?"

"I'd mention how you're not very subtle for someone who's supposed to be a superhero, but I covered that the last time we met face-to-face." England shrugged, inwardly laughing at the hero visibly bristling like a cat in remembrance to the first Metropolitan Heist. "By the way, did you happen to like my message I sent to you and your merry band of misfits?"

The American's eyes darkened behind his white mask with blue stars, sending unpleasant shivers down the Brit's spine. "I've been meaning to repay you for that. For all you've done, as of late."

England smirked. "I've done a lot as of late, I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific. However, I must say your reaction to that message is the ultimate jewel in my collection."

The thief noted the brief look of fear that crossed the hero's expression with intrigue. Something about his previous sentence must have struck a chord, for unbeknownst reasoning. Perhaps he could work that to his extent? He could use America's emotions to his advantage, like he had done during the second Metropolitan Heist.

Nevertheless, he was surprised when it was America's turn to smirk. "Did you have a nice first meeting with 'O'?"

Arthur's persona dropped for a split-second as fear gripped his senses. So he wanted to play that game, huh? Luckily, England had the upper-hand. "Did you have a nice first meeting with Japan?"

Again, call it paranoia or fear, but something about the American seemed…different. Like there was
a lingering darkness in his normally-cheerful aura, difficult to discover its origin. A slight twist in an otherwise-predictable (for the most part) variable. "You've gotten ahold of quite the fighter," America said nonchalantly, reaching into his white fabric boot and pulling out a gun. "Unfortunately, I was better."

Arthur's fingernails dug into his black gloves, almost breaking through the skin and fabric. He forced his voice to remain steady as to not give his nemesis satisfaction. "What did you do to him?"

It was almost like the Englishman was looking at a person who was the opposite of America, who rolled his shoulders and flexed his fingers for dramatic emphasis. "The better question would be what I haven't done to him," he acknowledged, resulting in a seed of panic growing in Arthur's system. "Would you prefer to know that, instead?"

The panic turned to rage, causing England to curl his hands into fists and punch America in the jaw, pain shooting up his arm but a satisfied grimace etching onto his expression at the effective blow. It knocked the hero a few feet away and onto his back, giving the thief enough time to jump towards the air vent.

He grasped onto the interior of the vent with every fiber of upper-arm strength he possessed, wincing profusely at the agonizing pain ebbing his fingers and preventing him from getting a good grip. The Briton managed to seize a smoke bomb and his Magical Cane of Pain before his legs (which were still dangling out of the vent thanks to his out-of-commission right hand) were grabbed by the American and yanked on, sending him crashing onto the ground.

Arthur felt bizarrely fuzzy from the rough impact, barely registering what was going on until a hulking figure clad in white and product labels pinned his wrists above his head with one hand, the other hand beside his head and grabbing at his mask.

Adrenaline coated his system and sent him into fight-or-flight mode when feeling America's gloved fingers slip beneath his mask, as he ripped one of his wrists from the superhero's grasp, grabbed ahold of a smoke bomb that was remarkably-intact, and smashed it onto the ground to engulf the exhibition hall in darkness with a loud 'BOOM'.

He shoved the American off of him when the taller blond's guard was lowered, stumbling blindly towards his heist bag and walking cane. When he grabbed both items, he readjusted his mask with trembling fingers and ran out the door back into the main hallway, ignoring America's shouts for him to stop.

The alarm he set off earlier was still ringing, blaring loudly in his ears alongside his raging heartbeat as he ran, pushing his legs until they burned, gasping for air until his lungs ached with each heave that seemed an instant longer, and his blood heating until he feared his veins and heart would burst.

If my memory regarding Kiku's map is correct, Arthur managed to think semi-coherently, not wanting to risk looking behind him since it would undoubtedly slow him down. There should be a staircase around here. I'll take that to the first floor and save him!

"England!" America yelled, probing the thief to run even faster. His suspicions regarding the staircase were confirmed at the sight of elegant marble stairs leading to the second floor. "I won't let you get away with this!"

What have I told him about shouting in museums? The bloke's still as thickheaded as ever, I see, England thought with a mental eye-roll amongst the chaos of him dashing down the stairs (a difficult feat to maintain in his knee-high green boots, but he managed, albeit less gracefully than he
would have liked) and America clobbering a few stairs behind him. *Though it's better for him to be thickheaded than whatever the hell he was earlier-*

"England-san!"

Arthur faltered in his pace for half a second on the last step at the sound of the familiar voice, the American behind him using that to his advantage by grabbing his wrist and pulling him close. The Brit looked ahead and saw Kiku, wondering why the Asian's right hand was covered in blood and why he was standing there when he had a katana and a shuriken instead of attacking.

A dull 'click' registered in his ear, followed by the feeling of cold metal being pressed against his temple, was what made the criminal realize that the superhero had a gun near his head.

His breath caught in his throat at the realization, his eyes tearing up behind his mask without his consent. His knees grew wobbly beneath his weight as he bit his lip to prevent from crying out. He didn't hear America tell Kiku to not make any sudden moves; he only heard his pulse reverberating through his brain. The chill of the weapon so close to his skull—the power to kill him so close to his skull—made him want to break into tears. His wrist trembled in the grip of his enemy, terror sinking its teeth into his mind.

*He wanted to move, but he couldn't. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't. He wanted to think, but he couldn't. There was only the stench of iron in the air.*

"P-please don't." He managed to say, hating the stutter in his voice. He couldn't muster enough courage to look at America, out of fear the hero's trigger finger would slip and he'd be dead. "Please."

Maybe it was from the shock of seeing the proud supervillain who kept a poker face as often as possible to prevent others from predicting him, in such a pathetic state. Maybe it was from the pity of seeing the prideful supervillain who kept a poker face as often as possible to prevent others from predicting him, in such a pathetic state. Maybe it was from the heroic morals the superhero boasted himself having. Maybe it was from the acknowledgement that, in keeping a gun trained on the thief's head, would make him no better than the criminals he imprisoned.

Whatever the reason, not even Arthur was able to determine what precisely went through America's mind that made his hold on him relinquish, allowing the Brit to slip free.

Arthur nearly tripped over his own feet as he backed away from the masked blond, still staring at his enemy with wide, wide eyes. He was at a complete loss of words to say.

America averted his gaze, and slowly removed the ammo from the gun. "I can't do it." He murmured, his voice so low Arthur strained his ears to hear him. "No matter what, I won't do it. I won't become like you."

The Englishman twitched when he felt a hand on his shoulder, a glance behind him registering Kiku. They had to leave soon, in the instance someone contacted the NYPD and suddenly swarmed the place, and in case America changed his mind.

The British thief nodded to his partner and tightened his hold on his heist bag still slung over his shoulder. His Magical Cane of Pain rested limply in his other hand, as he was still trying to register what had just happened a few moments prior.

In hindsight, he should have never said it. He never should have, as he knew it would only bite him in the arse later on. England knew that, Arthur Kirkland knew that.
But Arthur Kirkland wasn't heartless, contrary to popular belief.

"I owe you one." He said, turning his back to the hero with his partner in tow. "Thank you."

His words echoed alongside the sound of footsteps in the Museum of the City of New York, fading into nothingness with the closing of a secret passageway on the second floor.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: *slaps roof of fanfic* this bad boy can fit so much fuckin angst in it. Hope you enjoyed this chapter and appreciate all the wonderful/funny comments this silly story has been receiving, it makes me glad that people are still liking/following this story so it won't be long until I update the next installment. Until then? Stay awesome.
At this point in the evening, Alfred was so used to the burn in his legs that he was barely affected by it, anymore. He pushed his lead-like limbs forward in a slow, quiet walk and tried not to think of how sore he would be the next morning, his blue eyes darting around from behind his mask in a (presumably) vain effort to find his nemesis.

No matter how you look at it, it’s unusual to suddenly hear sounds from the ceiling, the American thought, quickening his pace a miniscule amount to keep up with the nearly-silent scuffling noises above his head. Now that he was further away from the room where the security guards were, he could clearly hear what sounded like fabric lightly shuffling against metal, bringing the superhero to suspect that there was something—or someone—in the air vents high-up in the ceiling. And I wouldn’t put it past England to use methods as risky as air vents to get around unnoticed. He won’t hesitate to use whatever he can to his advantage.

In all forms of media, whether through movies or television, it wasn’t unheard of for fictional characters to travel through air vents in order to sneak about incognito, as ventilation systems were usually soundproof, away from security cameras, and could access wide assortments of rooms. However, none of that deterred how dangerous it was to travel through vents; not only was it illegal (a fact that England most likely disregarded as everything he did was illegal), it was also hazardous in that the spaces were usually cramped and hot. Regardless of how convenient it would be to have admission inside and outside of the museum, Alfred was reluctant to personally use air vents as means of exploration, considering he was slim yet muscular (making it difficult for him to fit), and claustrophobic (therefore he had serious qualms towards being shoved into constricting places). To use such methods likely knowing the downsides, one must have been either naïve, desperate, or crazy.
Knowing England, it was probably the latter.

Alfred's frown vanished as he stopped his pace. He could hear the sounds venturing into a room on his right with a set of open double-doors, meaning that the criminal was planning to steal an artifact from that location. The American resumed his walk with steady, hushed footsteps in the instance his enemy was aware of his presence (if he wasn't already), pressing his back against one of the double-doors and peeking out from the side to get a brief glimpse into the room.

His eyes caught a swift flicker of movement in the ceiling tiles, confirming his suspicions when he saw a section of barred metal amongst the tiles lift up and seemingly vanish into the darkness. After a moment, a slim form shrouded in a black tailcoat dropped from the opening and landed on the ground with the prowess of a tiger, resulting in the hero releasing a shaky breath he had no idea he was holding.

There he is.

It really had been far too long since he had encountered England face-to-face. All of his nonsense relating to the press and the NYPD had begun on June 1st with the first Metropolitan Heist, meaning that it had been about eighteen days since they had genuinely seen one another. Up until then, it had been like throwing a grenade at a far-off target; you heard, saw, and received the minor backlash of the explosion since you weren't entirely away from it, yet you weren't affected as badly as the target in question. Up until then, he and England had undoubtedly made moves and decisions that impacted the other from afar, but it wasn't nearly as affective as being up-close and personal.

Alfred kept his gaze trained on the criminal, who went through the motions of swiping a security card into the case holding the artifact (a necklace made of gold, natural pearls, demantoid garnet, and enamel), and removing it. He felt his nervous system start to coat itself in adrenaline when he saw the muscles in the thief's neck twitch, signaling he was going to look over his shoulder, as Alfred stopped spying into the room and placed himself back against the door. He could feel a small smile work itself onto his angular features—he was unable to help it, he loved the thrill of catching villains in the act—and counted down the seconds until he could remove himself from the wall and head inside the room.

Five.

His senses had heightened to the point where they could be considered animalistic.

Four.

His ears could pick up the practically-soundless rustle of fabric as England wrapped the jewelry and stored it inside his bag. Far away, he could still hear the alarm ringing.

Three.

His fingers twitched beneath his white gloves in case he had to either punch someone or protect himself, itching to do something. His hands felt a tad constricted, almost shaky due to lack of action.

Two.

His eyes fluttered closed behind his mask as he took deep breaths, visualizing what was going on in the room. England had his back turned to him, already mentally congratulating himself on a job well-done, distracting himself thanks to his tendency to dwell in his own mind. Perfect.

One.
Alfred opened his eyes and replaced his present grin with a look of seriousness, as to evoke a no-nonsense aura around himself. He didn't want to have England thinking he was all fun and games, now did he? Cynicism and overall Britishness aside, England was still a criminal that America had to take down. He wasn't like Arthur, someone he could let loose and mess around with—no, England was a separate entity, a separate evil, from Arthur.

"England!"

The thief slung his heist bag over his shoulder and spun on his heel, looking just as Alfred last remembered him; devious, egotistical, and calculating. As if he was playing a game of chess that he knew he had already won, arrogance as thick as his sarcasm when he said "Keep it down would you? We're in a museum, a place that's supposed to be quiet, something you must struggle with immensely".

To be honest, something about that look reminded him of Arthur. Just a little bit, most likely because of the aforementioned chess simile.

Alfred allowed his poker face to drop, to give the Brit a false sense of security. Lure him into a situation he's pre-determined, and throw him off his guard when he least expects it. That was the tactic that cost America his win during the second Metropolitan Heist, one he wanted to use to his advantage, now.

"You're one to talk since you set off that alarm. You're not very subtle for someone who's supposed to be a thief, now are you?" He mentioned, deciding to humor the criminal since England would be rendered strategically-injured without Japan, who was in Vash's custody.

"I'd mention how you're not very subtle for someone who's supposed to be a superhero, but I covered that the last time we met face-to-face." England shrugged, resulting in the American letting his poker face down more by appearing angered with his statement. He had never been as good as Arthur or Kiku with concealing his emotions, but now he was using that to his advantage by lowering England's guard. Perfect. "By the way, did you happen to like my message I sent to you and your merry band of misfits?"

Now time to throw him off a little bit.

At least, that was what Alfred reasoned within himself. He didn't want to admit that England's reminder of the NYPD message had touched a nerve (since he had been played out to look like a fool and had fallen for it); he wanted to think he had a little more control over the situation by allowing his anger to become a bit more visible.

His eyes darkened behind his mask, though he was unable to tell whether or not he intended it to happen. "I've been meaning to repay you for that. For all you've done, as of late."

England smirked. "I've done a lot as of late, I'm afraid you'll have to be more specific. However, I must say your reaction to that message is the ultimate jewel in my collection."

Once that sentence was spoken, Alfred couldn't justify the pure fear that spiked his senses and bared its fangs at him. Just...it seemed so familiar. That phrase was so achingly familiar, burned into his brain until it made him want to claw his skull and scream. Waves of panic washed over him as he looked at England and imagined a patchwork of skin beneath his mask, green eyes reflecting Arthur's eyes jabbed messily into a psychopath's skull!"He died screaming for you to rescue him."
"He died believing you would find him in time and save him like the 'hero' you claim to be."

"And I must say...his eyes are the ultimate jewels in my collection."

Alfred knew it was only a nightmare. He knew it was a figment of his imagination, manufactured due to the stress of having dealt with the backlash from the second Metropolitan Heist and having stolen a kiss from Arthur in his sleep. Yet he was unable to stop remembering the unadulterated terror that spread like poison in the bloodstream when he first woke up, the sweat that dotted his brow, the roar of his pulse in his ears, the shakiness of his hands as he had peered into the blackness of his room and saw those dull green eyes and Frankenstein face.

The sickening nostalgia nearly sent him on his knees, but he swallowed all signs of his panic and forced on his steely persona of America. America, the hero of New York, who had to take down the bad guys to make the world a better place for his Arthur. Alfred smirked, as if something like a smirk could somehow make him feel better. "Did you have a nice first meeting with 'O'?"

England's cockiness seemingly-dropped for a split-second, allowing fear to become visible in his expression. That showing of fear surprised the American, as the thief always tried to keep his emotions under control to prevent people from predicting him. It was obscure to see a shred of humanity in him, as it was easy to forget England was also human.

Nevertheless, that fear vanished after a split-second, the arrogance returning as if it had never left. Of course, Alfred had seen it. And he could use that fear if he played his cards right. "Did you have a nice first meeting with Japan?"

He's obviously insecure at the moment, letting his feelings be revealed for a short time and all, 'America' noted internally, considering his options. If England wasn't keeping his emotions as close in check, that meant something in his plan had gone wrong. By asking if I had a good first meeting with Japan, was the thief trying to find out what happened to his partner? It's a gamble, but I can definitely manipulate his temporary weaknesses.

A part of him felt bad at even considering that idea. By exploiting one's kryptonite, wouldn't that make him no better than England? He used people's flaws against them, tripping them over and laughing at them for their shortcomings. He profited off their misfortunes, and had the gall to insult the NYPD for doing the same thing. By all means, America shouldn't have thought twice about giving England a taste of his own medicine.

But Alfred F. Jones felt the guilt rot his heart from the inside-out.

"You've gotten ahold of quite the fighter," America said nonchalantly, reaching into his white fabric boot and pulling out a gun. "Unfortunately, I was better."

He could see England's fingernails dig into his black gloves, almost breaking through the skin and fabric. It felt weird, seeing a strange reversal-of-roles, as America was using England's tactics while England was psychologically-exposed. The thief had to force his voice to remain steady. "What did you do to him?"

America rolled his shoulders and flexed his fingers, still uncomfortable with the heavy weight of the gun in his hand. It was so scary to think that the power to kill the masked man before him was just a finger-pull away on the trigger. Though the Englishman would probably never understand it, Alfred decided to quote what the England from his horrible nightmare had said.

"The better question would be what I haven't done to him," Alfred acknowledged, shoving his guilt away when he saw England's eyes widen. Those eyes that resembled his beloved Brit's, ones that
were hollow and dead in his nightmare from two days ago. "Would you prefer to know that, instead?"

It seemed like that statement was the straw that broke the camel's back, as England shot his fist forward and collided it with Alfred's jaw, sending him on his back a few feet away. Pain exploded across the left side of his face, the American grimacing when he tasted the iron of blood. He swirled his tongue around his mouth to check for any injuries, a mental sigh of relief escaping him when there were no teeth broken/dislodged. England had good aim, but his upper-arm abilities were severely lacking in terms of causing physical damage.

Without another minute to waste, the hero shakily stood up (he was definitely going to be sore, tomorrow) and dashed towards the air vent where England's legs were dangling from. He grabbed ahold of the criminal's ankles and pulled, sending the masked man crashing down onto the floor thanks to America's superhuman strength.

Unable to think of England without seeing the horrendous image of Arthur's patchwork face in his mind, Alfred managed to get the blond onto his back. He straddled the villain by the waist and pinned his thin wrists above his head using one hand, and pre-occupied his other hand with slipping his fingers beneath the black masquerade mask and tugging upwards to reveal England's true identity.

He was able to get a brief glimpse of a nearly-faded scar on England's right cheek, one which he couldn't remember from where he had seen it, before England ripped one of his hands from Alfred's grip, grabbed something, and smashed (what was probably) a smoke bomb, based on the vast amounts of darkness that caged the area with a thunderous 'BOOM'.

Alfred felt a hand press against his chest and shove him off, resulting in him losing his balance and falling onto his back a second time. He bit his lip to prevent himself from cursing when he felt some shards of glass penetrate his shoulder blades—he must have landed on some broken glass from the bomb—and grabbed his gun from where it resided a few feet away on the floor. When he registered the sound of footsteps quickly fading away, he got back up on his feet with a barely-concealed groan and started running again.

He tuned out the sounds of the alarms ringing, focusing his attention on loading the ammo while he ran. If he ended up having to threaten England, he would do it right; if he didn't load his gun and England realized that, he could call him out on his bluff and run away without any problems, making everything pointless. While the concept of actually...shooting someone made him weak-kneed and nauseous, he couldn't afford to slip up. If he caught England, whatever war that was beginning to brew would be finished, New York would become safer when criminals realized the NYPD meant business by taking down criminals, and Arthur would be safer as a result.

Because, in the end, he was doing it all for Arthur. He had to take down England for Arthur's sake; if he didn't, who else would?

"England!" He yelled, probing the thief to run even faster. He turned pale at the sight of the marble staircase, wishing the thief would have at least taken an elevator or something, to prevent them from awkwardly clobbering down the stairs. Though it was easier to go down the stairs than up, right? "I won't let you get away with this!"

He was so close to reaching him-! If England would only slow down his pace just a little bit, he could grab ahold of his arm and capture him on the last few steps leading onto the second floor! After that, he could run downstairs, grab Vash and Japan, and use either of the secret passageways (whether the one on the first floor, or the one on the second floor) to get to the NYPD's headquarters!
But how? Alfred wondered, having the most difficult time getting down the stairs between trying to catch England and trying to not fall flat on his face (whose brilliant idea was it to make marble stairs?!), therefore limiting the amount of brain activity he could devote to concocting a plan. I can't think of anything that would make him falter.

"England-san!"

Well, that'll work.

Internally thanking every deity he could think of (plus a few he had made up on the spot), Alfred reached forward and grabbed ahold of England's wrist, cringing slightly as he did so out of habit (he couldn't explain why England seemed to do the same thing, however) and pulling him close. Before the thief could even blink, America held his gun to the side of England's temple, forcing the masked blond (and his partner, Japan—how he managed to escape Vash, Alfred had no idea) to stop in place.

He could feel the criminal stiffen up beside him, but he refused to acknowledge the guilt piling up in his ribcage. There was no doubt in his mind that, if England had a gun, he wouldn't hesitate to use it on him. But as England didn't have one, he had the upper-hand. He had to use it while he still had the chance by finally cutting the weed by its roots.

"No sudden moves, Japan." America warned, tugging the Brit closer. While he saw the Asian's katana lower from its initial threatening-to-strike pose, he couldn't help but notice how much the villain beside him seemed to be...frightened?

He dared to cast a quick glance towards the Briton, and nearly dropped his gun in the process.

His green eyes were wide behind his mask, tears threatening to trickle down his dark lashes, and he was shaking like a leaf in America's firm grip. It was so startling to see him showing so much emotion! America had no idea whether England was playing the pathos card or if it was all legitimate, all he could feel was the utter regret that hit his heart like an anvil and decomposed (what semblance of) his rational mindset. He was scaring him. As in he—the hero, New York's golden boy, the NYPD's trump card—was scaring England!

Of course, the concept of actually scaring a criminal wasn't alien to him; he had to intimidate villains into submitting and surrendering, after all. But the Englishman was always so stubborn and prideful, he never let his true feelings surface as easily, before! To show weakness was to render him open for being attacked, his kryptonite capable of being used against him! So for him to have been trembling and on the brink of tears (especially in the face of his enemy), he must have been truly afraid.

His suspicions were confirmed when he heard the Briton say something he would have never imagined hearing in his life:

"P-please don't. Please."

I shouldn't feel bad about this, America reasoned within his mind, forcing himself to look away. He didn't want his resolve to keep deteriorating, especially if it meant that England would win again! The American's confidence had taken collateral damage in the past few weeks, weeks of being bombarded by the press, public, and police, all for the mistakes that England had resulted in him making! Why am I feeling bad about this?!

Arthur wouldn't want this, the little voice in the back of his head spoke, making the hero freeze. His
eyes dilated as the fact drenched his nerves in ice-cold water. **Your parents wouldn’t want this, either. How would they all react to you doing this, holding this man hostage?**

America tried to reinstate his beliefs relating to England. That, regardless of his possible identity/background, he was a criminal who posed a threat to the NYPD and to Arthur, making it a necessity that he was imprisoned ASAP. Alfred, on the other hand, was torn. He wanted to make England pay for what he had done, receive the swift hand of justice in the form of a prison cell, and put an end to the raging conflict storming up both New York and himself. But was this really the way to do it? With a gun to England's head, the Brit as defenseless as Alfred’s parents were when they were killed?!

England was a thief, a thief who had the potential to turn people upon each other with a smoke bomb or a set of pictures leaked online from a security camera. A thief who had to be stopped.

But he was just as human as America was, as Alfred was, as Arthur was. He was simply better at concealing it, though flesh and bone could not be concealed by smirks and schemes alone. Whether England hadn't realized that or not, both America and Alfred had no idea.

Which is why Alfred lowered his gun, much to the Englishman's (poorly-concealed) surprise.

England slipped his wrist away, taking a few steps back with wide, wide eyes. Eyes that reminded him of his best friend, though the American hated to acknowledge that fact.

Unable to look at him and not think of Arthur, Alfred turned his head and cascaded his gaze elsewhere as he removed the ammo from his gun. He loathed how weak he felt, removing the metal from the Glock 19 without having used it at all. Vash would be disappointed in him for releasing a criminal intentionally and not even using his gun when he clearly had the chance.

"I can't do it." He murmured, his voice low out of anger towards himself for being so weak, and anger towards England for making him so weak. "No matter what, I won't do it. I won't become like you."

I won't become heartless like you. Heartless like your brand of criminal, the same brand of criminal that changed my life: a thief.

He didn't want to look up and see England's face. He didn't want to see the villain smirk that condescending smirk at the sight of the 'hero for justice' being reduced to a mere infant. He didn't want to see him cross his arms over his chest, shaking his head in a 'tsk'ing way. He didn't want to see him point and laugh, as the NYPD's trump card was so cowardly he couldn't even pull the trigger of a gun.

But he abandoned all hopes of not looking at England when, again, he heard the Briton say something he would have never imagined hearing in his life:

"I owe you one. Thank you."

After that, England turned his back and left with his helper in tow, engulfing Alfred in silence when the two criminals left through the secret entrance Vash had used on the second floor.

The events proceeding that were a blur: he vaguely remembered rushing down the stairs to the first floor and finding Vash handcuffed and trying to pick his way out with a shuriken (nearly slicing his fingers off in the process, as he was better with handling guns than knives). He could reminisce releasing Vash and lying to him, saying that England had gotten away by the time he had made it to the third floor. He could only recall going through the second floor secret passage, trudging through
tunnels akin to that of the first floor's passage, and changing out of his superhero attire into his tuxedo from the earlier wedding rehearsal.

At some point, he ventured down some form of metal slide that led out to the museum's gardens, so that was a strange experience overall. When he stood back up, he could see black dots start to cloud his vision, so he decided to stick with a cab as opposed to running. The remainder of the trip passed by in a particularly-colorful blur, as he was taxied through Times Square and ended up at his university dorm complex in what seemed like a split-second. From there, he entered the complex and made his way up the stairs, relying heavily on the railing as his body was exhausted and aching profusely. His jaw was pulsing with pain (leading him to suspect that perhaps England did somehow dislodge a tooth), his shoulders still had chunks of glass embedded into his flesh, and lifting his legs were like trying to lift multiple sets of 100-pound weights.

If he had to pick the reason for him making it to his dorm room without losing consciousness, it would have had to be Arthur.

Arthur had left Matthew's wedding rehearsal, leaving obscurity in his wake. Alfred had been so preoccupied with England that he hadn't given any consideration towards where Arthur had suddenly vanished to. All he had said was that he needed to go. Other than that, he left no indication. Alfred didn't have enough physical or mental strength to think of the possibilities, and doubted he was physically/mentally strong enough to handle thinking of the worst-case scenarios.

The American wandered up to his dorm for the sole purpose of depositing his super hero attire. He would need to make repairs to the outfit as it had been ripped and covered in blood, but that was something he would do at a later time. For now, whatever semblance of his coherent mind was focused on going downstairs and making sure Arthur was safe. If he wasn't, Alfred wouldn't hesitate to venture out on the streets again, regardless of his own aforementioned physical/mental exhaustion.

The last thing he remembered was knocking on the door three solid times. He had used up his energy into those knocks, that, by the time Arthur opened the door, Alfred had already crumbled onto the floor and his world turned to black.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

It had truly been a long night.

For the first (and probably only) time ever, Arthur was reluctant to leave America's side while masquerading as 'England'. Throughout his entire life, Arthur had prided himself on being able to read people like he read books; effortlessly, and recalling every last detail. But…he hadn't anticipated America actually letting England—as in, the same enemy who stressed him out and made him out to be a fool—free when he had him right where he wanted him. He had a gun to his head, for crying out loud!

So why did he let him go when he had the chance to end everything, whether with England ending up in a prison cell or six feet underground?

His honor-before-reason mindset will likely be taken advantage of, Arthur thought as he dried himself off from the shower, changing into comfortable jeans and an oversized Joker T-shirt when he finished. They had taken the second passage that 'Japan' overheard Department Chief Vash Zwingli (from where had he heard that name before?) talk about to America, and used that confined space to change back into their normal attire, even though Arthur's 'normal' attire still consisted of a bridesmaid dress. After that, they had taken a taxi and ventured back to their university dorm complex, where they resided at the moment. If not by me, then someone else.
The Brit wiped off the fog that gathered on his bathroom mirror, tentatively eyeing the scar on his left cheek from the second Metropolitan Heist. It had mostly healed, but it was still visible if someone got up-close and personal in his face, like America had earlier in the evening. He contemplated whether he should apply miniscule amounts of concealer to cover it up, but decided against it as it was unlikely anyone in his personal life would try invading his bubble.

"I can’t do it. No matter what, I won’t do it. I won’t become like you."

Arthur stopped erasing the shower-fog, those words bouncing around in his skull as his hand turned to a fist on the mirror, his eyes half-lidded when recalling that. What did America mean, becoming like him? He knew that the hero held a grudge towards thieves in particular—that was one of the major reasons why he had become a thief to begin with! To catch America’s attention so he could get the hero under the public’s spotlight even more than before, and reduce his public image. But still, for what reason did he say that sentence with such…venomous hatred?

He tried not to dwell on the other reason he became a thief, as his fingernails were threatening to cut into his palm and he didn’t want to bandage more wounds. He had just finished removing the two bullets from Kiku’s right hand and foot (an unpleasant experience with much more blood than he wanted to see) and took a shower to cleanse himself, after all.

_Whatever the reason, I won’t have to dwell on for too long_, the Englishman thought as he unlocked the door and exited the restroom. He snuck a peek inside Kiku’s room and visibly relaxed at the sight of the Japanese sleeping. His bandages were fresh so he wouldn’t need to change them for a while, and the disinfectant seemed to be working fine. A shiver went down his spine at the thought of what might have happened had the Department Chief somehow missed his shots. With a shake of his head, Arthur closed the door and ventured into the living room, opening his laptop when he sat down on the couch.

_I’ll message Russia privately on Ailateh to inform him the three specified artifacts have been stolen and are in perfect condition. It’ll take a good portion of time to sneak those three items to him, along with the Ganymede and Etruscan artifacts. By the time he’s notified Kiku and I of our next assignment, both of us will be healed enough to commit another heist and America will have probably forgotten about my debt._

He outwardly cringed when reminiscing that. He knew it was going to come back and haunt him later on, as pride was as bipolar of a mistress as fate, especially when it came to saving one’s life. Just because America was a hero didn’t mean England had to live up to his I.O.Y, right?

_Again, it’ll hopefully be a while until I have to commit another heist_, Arthur decided, typing up a quick-yet-formal message to Russia pertaining to the aforementioned facts relating to the artifacts and closing his laptop when he finished. He stretched in his seat, cursing a tad when he felt shockwaves of pain shoot up his right arm from where he had punched America. The man was strong—ridiculously strong, reflecting even in the sturdiness of his jaw structure! _So, even if he does remember that and expects me to live up to it, I won’t have to deal with it just yet._

Even so, he couldn’t stop himself from jumping when he heard three solid knocks on the door.

"Who could that be?" He wondered out loud, slowly standing up from his seat and making his way to the front door. He peered through the eyehole, blushing when seeing Alfred on the other side. A content smile made its way onto his face as he opened the door, that smile vanishing when seeing the American drop onto the floor like a sack of flour.

"A-Alfred?!” Arthur stammered, getting onto his knees and taking the male’s face into his hands. He placed a thumb on his neck to check for a pulse, a relieved sigh escaping his pale lips when feeling a firm (albeit quick) heartbeat. His mind went in a frenzy as he tried recalling all the information he
learned from his mandatory health classes at NYU. Knowing it wasn't the wisest decision to make, yet it would be far easier tending to the bespectacled blond on a bed instead of outside in the hallway, Arthur wrapped his arms around Alfred's upper-torso and dragged him inside.

*Should I put him on the sofa? No, it's too uncomfortable, not to mention he could open up my laptop and uncover my Ailateh files. He's good enough with computers that he could hack my passwords if he wanted to*, Arthur dwelled, grinding his teeth together as he tugged Alfred down the hall as quietly as he could. *But he's not as good as Kiku when it comes to things like that.*

The Englishman reached his room and managed to lift the American onto his bed, thanking himself for having enough hindsight to hide both the stolen artifacts and his England attire as soon as he arrived at the dorm with Kiku. He removed all his pillows from his bed and set Alfred's head down on a level mattress, pressing another finger to his neck to check on his pulse, a ghost of a smile etching itself onto his face when realizing how much Alfred had stabilized in the past few minutes.

"Thank God you're alright," Arthur breathed, running a hand through Alfred's soft gold locks, trying/failing to ignore the scratches and droplets of crimson dotting his face. "Though what happened to you?"

He bit his lip as he stared at the unconscious male. It was obvious that he had passed out due to exhaustion, though from what? He saw Alfred talking to someone on his phone when he left St. Patrick's Cathedral earlier in the evening. After that, he had no idea what had happened to him that caused him to be so beaten up. He lightly skimmed his fingers across the American's neck again, jolting in surprise when the unconscious man let out a small moan of pain.

His brow knit together in confusion as he carefully rubbed near the base of Alfred's neck, wondering where he was hurting. His eyes grew wide as he peeled back the dress shirt the bespectacled blond was still wearing from the wedding rehearsal and saw large shards of glass sticking out from his skin. Arthur began to panic when he saw the glass, his face draining of color when he cautiously removed the American's shirt and saw scars, and lots of them. Small, insignificant scars that resembled birthmarks more than anything else, and gigantic, long scars that practically tattooed Alfred's chest and back. Some of them were old, practically lost against his natural tan, while some had just begun healing, standing out like a sore thumb against his otherwise-flawless skin. There was one scar in particular that made Arthur's eyes grow until he feared they'd pop out of his head; it was on Alfred's chest, and looked both the longest and the oldest by far. It stretched diagonally, from the blond's right shoulder to his lower left rib, about an inch away from encountering his heart. The sight of it was enough to make the Brit's vision blurry with saltwater.

"What happened to you?" Arthur repeated sadly, grabbing some linen, tweezers, and disinfectant to remove the glass. He took great care in turning the American onto his chest, to alleviate the pressure pushing the glass deeper into his skin and to give him better access to remove the harmful shards, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand to get rid of possible tears. "How have you gotten those scars?"

*I feel so terrible,* Arthur noted within his mind as he took the tweezers and began removing the glass with one hand, rubbing soothing circles into the small of Alfred's back to try lessening the pain with his other hand. *He's been getting hurt for a while and I haven't even noticed. He's just kept it all to himself for whatever reasoning.*

He ignored the sensation of tears spilling down his cheeks, too focused on getting rid of the glass and mopping up the blood. When he had finally finished, there was a decently-sized pile of shards on a paper towel tinted with pink, and a large amount of red holes in the American's back. Thankfully, the
injuries weren't deep, therefore he didn't require much disinfectant to apply to the cuts. However, as a matter of precaution, he took strenuous effort to wrap the linen safely over Alfred's wounds to prevent them from getting infected.

Arthur released a breath he had no idea he was holding when he ventured off to the restroom to wash his hands and returned to see Alfred resting devoid of blood staining his back. For a good portion of time, the bespectacled blond's features were scrunched up faintly, but now his expression had relaxed and his breathing had regulated. Based on the quiet snores that escaped Alfred, he had enough oxygen to fall into a deep slumber as opposed to his previous state of unconsciousness.

The Brit's eyes grew half-lidded at the sight of the American in a significantly-better state than he was earlier, a tired smile working its way onto his face. Arthur wanted to keep an eye on him to make sure his pulse was normal and his wounds weren't bleeding as bad later on, though he could feel his head start to spin with drowsiness and exhaustion (much to his chagrin).

Although he was extremely tempted to crawl into bed (which looked unusually fluffy and resembled a luxurious cloud as opposed to a heap of fabric stuffed with cotton) alongside Alfred, he knew it was better for the injured male to have the whole bed to himself so that he could rest properly. Not to mention it would be extremely awkward (though…nice) to wake up in Alfred's embrace the coming morning.

_How the tables have turned_, he thought with a victorious smirk as he pulled up a chair beside the bed and readjusted the blankets around Alfred's form to make him more comfortable. _After all those years of being restricted to my bed and you staying by my side until morning, it's now time for me to return the favor, twat._

His smirk was replaced with a small smile as he reached forward, tenderly brushed aside some of the American's blond bangs away, and, after some internal debating, pressed a soft, fleeting kiss to his forehead.

Arthur pulled back after a moment, already feeling regret eat his conscious even though the man of his affections was (not quite anymore, but still essentially) unconscious. Similar to the day where he had visited his parents' graves, he felt like his heart was rotting from the inside-out. So much of him yearned to give into his dreams and love Alfred, but that was the more emotional aspect of his brain. The logical aspect was chaining him to the ground, using fear and guilt to bait him into not making a move.

'You're so selfish,' it'd say, twisting the Englishman's morals into knots. 'You should be satisfied with simply being around him. Don't be greedy in wanting to be more than friends, especially when you have no guarantee he'd even swing your way.'

As deeply as it cut him, as frustrated and half-mad as it made him, he knew that aspect of his mind was right. What he and Alfred had in terms of relationships' was good. They had maintained a solid friendship over the years, overcoming obstacles one associates with growing up with ease and becoming stronger. Yet it had become frail, to the point where one wrong move could destroy it beyond repair. It was like a rose in that its scent was beautiful and its petals bore a deep shade of crimson, but its thorns could draw blood if one came too close to it.

If Arthur tried to change anything, change the happy relationship he and Alfred had because of his own fruitless hopes…he was scared it would all fall apart, and he would lose Alfred completely. He would lose the one person who had stayed with him throughout his life, throughout his shortcomings and misfortunes, completely.
He didn't realize he had reached out towards Alfred until he felt his arm touch the soft fabric of the mattress. Until he felt his hand delicately take hold of Alfred's hand. Until he felt Alfred's fingers lace between his own, in his sleep.

"Goodnight, Alfred." Arthur whispered, his eyelids closing against their will as his head rolled onto one of his own shoulders, uncaring for once of his poor posture in his chair beside the bed as he gave a comforting squeeze to his childhood friend's hand.

_I love you._

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Another chapter uploaded--thank you all so much for your kind words and constructive criticism, I always get so excited whenever I get a notification since it's like, 'oh my god, REAL people are reading this and REAL people are liking this stupid idea I got at 3 A.M' and it's so wonderful to hear what readers are thinking so that I can take their advice into consideration and grow as a writer. Anyway, that's it for this chapter and it won't be long until I publish the next installment. Until then? Stay awesome.
A Rousing Failure

Chapter Summary

In which Alfred comes to and Vash has an unproductive meeting.

Chapter Notes

Regular font indicates the present.

Italic font indicates flashbacking or dreaming; whether it’s a flashback or a dream will be clarified.

Bold italic font indicates thought.

Bold regular font indicates writing/typing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"-nk God you're alrigh-"

"-hat happened to you-"

"-hat happened to you-"

-ave you gotten those sc-"

"-night-"

Alfred stirred when he felt a distinct warmth in his hand vanish.

He moaned quietly, wishing it would return as it felt nice and oddly familiar, though his sleep-warped mind couldn't discern its origin. He felt something soft press against his forehead, leaving a pleasant tingling sensation, though it left as quickly as it had come. He could hear curtains being pushed aside, allowing the place he was in to become brighter, based on the light that infiltrated his eyelids.

All the obscurity aside, Alfred felt warm, bandaged, and safe.

Therefore, it was natural for him to immediately think he was dead.

The last thing he could remember was feeling…light. Like his body decided it was sick of gravity and all its limitations and decided to float upwards. It felt both relaxing and unnerving, almost dizzying, cutting the rope of restrictions and letting his brain fly like a balloon. Aside from the distinct sensation of weightlessness, he could vaguely recall hitting the floor and feeling the glass from England's smoke bomb embed itself even deeper into his skin, the pain that previously spread like liquid fire through his nervous system melding into darkness much like his surroundings.
Then there had been a brief period of time where it felt like he had been adrift on a sea of unconsciousness, constantly fluttering in and out of it. It was dream-like and rather surreal as his brain came up with nauseatingly-chaotic figments of imagination, like he had taken a particularly-heavy dose of LSD and decided to watch cartoons. At some points, he was so deeply out of it that he wouldn't have been surprised if he was dead, but at other points, he was so close to bridging the gap between his mind and reality that he could pick up pieces of conversation.

Speaking of conversation, Alfred could hear another one occurring if he strained his ears accordingly. He could definitely hear talking; he just needed to hone his concentration before he could try making some sense of it.

"-ssed out last night, outside the door-"

"-njured beyond anything I've ever seen-"

"-mpoved immensely overnight, though I need to restock on medicine-"

"-on't know who could have hurt him-"

"-think it might have been America-san?"

Now, everything about him felt heavy; his tongue felt like a useless slab of meat in his mouth, his arms and legs like huge chunks of lead hastily stapled onto a torso, and his brain like it was being smashed by a slice of lemon wrapped in a large gold brick. It hurt enough to even breathe so he took strenuous care in opening his eyes and made sure to blink several times so that that his fried retinas could adjust to the immense illumination. He took his time in looking around the room he was located in, eyeing the sunlight unabashedly filtering through the light green curtains with curiosity. The vast amounts of thick novels lining the shelves of the room and the collection of antique tea tins collecting dust on a desk all seemed familiar though Alfred's sluggish memory was struggling in naming the place, the deep, pulsating ache around his jaw and shoulder blades not helping in the slightest.

What about America?

He quickly sat up against the multiple pillows cushioning his head, neck, and shoulders only to immediately regret his decision when his joints announced their dissatisfaction with him through a series of sharp stabbing pains, all of which prompted Alfred to hiss loudly. Too loudly.

He inwardly panicked when he heard rapid footsteps coming in his direction as he tried to readjust the blankets around him to make it look like he had simply readjusted himself in his sleep. He closed his eyes and regulated his breathing, a difficult feat to manage as the door slowly creaked open and the footsteps paused. He imagined that they were observing his movements to see if he was unconscious, an inspection he must have passed as light, carefully-placed footsteps made their way towards him.

Alfred had no idea what he was expecting—maybe for his eyes to be suddenly poked through by rough hands, or his jaw to manhandled until it felt like he got sucker-punched again—so he was effectively thrown for a loop when long, thin fingers thread themselves into his golden locks and massaged his scalp, sending pleasurable shivers down his spine which soothed the screams of pain that formerly resonated throughout his body.

His mind somehow became even more sluggish as he found himself leaning into the touch with their fluid movements and gentle motions. It felt like the same hand that had removed itself from his grasp when he found himself stirring earlier.
Naturally, with this being one of the nicest sensations he had experienced in a while, it took him a minute to realize that the person making his skull feel like Jell-O was talking.

"-scared me half-to-death, you know; I honestly had no idea what I was going to do since I don't have much experience with tending to wounds, but from what I could tell, your injuries were fresh. You have have a lot of explaining to do in relation to that, and I expect some VERY good answers as punishment for making me worry so much."

A sigh further confirmed the American's suspicions, although the English accent was already pretty damning evidence. "As greatly as I wish this hadn't happened to you…I am happy that you came to me first, you foolish twat."

**Yep, it's Arthur.**

And as much as he wanted to delay the inevitable interrogation pertaining to his injuries and allow Arthur's hands to continue their acts of pure bliss on his scalp, he needed to see for himself if Arthur was okay and had managed to get home (mostly) unscathed; he made a mental note to inquire about the origin of the Brit's bandaged hand which, by now, had stopped its wonderful magic. Alfred groaned softly at the loss, his eyebrows rising when he realized how brightly the smaller blond was blushing.

"What?" The American wondered out loud, repressing the temptation to tilt his head to further illustrate his bemusement as it would undoubtedly hurt. Arthur's cheeks only increased their hue, provoking a smirk to cross Alfred's features that stung his jaw. "Did you plan to wake me up with a kiss?"

Alfred would have thought that the fact he was injured would have stopped Arthur from smacking his head with a rolled-up newspaper.

He was wrong since, according to Arthur, "YOU WERE PRIMARILY HURT AROUND YOUR TORSO AND JAW—THE TOP OF YOUR HEAD IS FREE-GAME, YOU WANKER!"

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

Members of the New York Police Department had quite frankly seen some strange, disturbing, and downright terrifying shit. They had seen numerous crimes ranging from petty purse-snatchers to the most revolting and psychologically-scarring cases, and had emerged with their sanity (for the most part) intact. To be a police officer, one had to have courage, physical/mental agility, and nerves of steel. The higher-ranking officer one was, the better they were at controlling those characteristics, otherwise how else would they have stayed at their jobs for so long?

Nevertheless, to be a member of the NYPD, one had to be a hardened civilian who was capable of maintaining their strengths and concealing their weaknesses. One must never show weakness in front of potential enemies or allies, after all.

Yet that didn't stop everyone who encountered Department Chief Vash Zwingli from nearly passing out or pissing their pants in fear. Especially taking the fact that he looked like he was about to commit a horrendous crime into account!

Vash ignored the poorly-concealed stares and barely-hushed whispers that emitted from his peers and subordinates as he stalked his way to his office, his footsteps quick and ominous-sounding as the soles of his shoes clacked harshly against the tiled floor. His hands were clenched so tightly into fists at his sides that his knuckles had turned white, his green eyes were narrowed until they resembled that of snake eyes, and his teeth were chewing against his lip until he feared he would break through
the skin. Not like it mattered, though—all he wanted was to get into his office, close and lock the
door, and slam his head against a wall repeatedly if only to escape the tremendous shame and anger
he was experiencing at the moment.

It seemed as though little-to-no time had passed before he had arrived at the door of his office, his
hand twisting the knob to the right until the circular metal almost made a 360-degree rotation before
he shoved it open and slammed it shut. He rested his back against the door, his chest heaving as he
inhaled and exhaled, his pulse slowing down with each intake and release of breath through his nose
and mouth. The blond glanced down at his hands, red marks of his fingernails temporarily tattooed
against his fair skin, evidence of his temper. A soft sigh escaped him as his arms fell limp against his
sides and he relinquished his weight off the door, walking towards his desk.

Vash sat down at his desk and leaned back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling. His head was
pulsing with the beginnings of a migraine, one that wouldn't stop pestering him unless he nipped it in
the bud with aspirin or something. A big cup of coffee sounded appealing, especially since he would
probably be spending the night in his office with his newly-acquired workload courtesy of New
York's quickly-rising star in the criminal world, England. Knowing the thief (and the situations he
had a nasty habit of creating thanks to his antics), Vash would have a considerable mound of work to
do after just one day since England's last endeavor at the Museum of the City of New York, or,
known to the public, the Triple MCNY Theft.

He glanced over at his iphone set to the website of The New York Times, his eyes scanning over the
highlight article that had brought the recent blunder to light. He had read it dozens of times already,
yet, for the sake of him properly dealing with the hydra before it grew too out-of-hand, he had to
absorb every piece of information, regardless of its importance or relevance.

**Triple Theft at MCNY**

**Toris Laurinaitis, New York Times Staff Reporter**

6/20/xx

Updated: 2 hours ago

New York City- At 9:19 P.M yesterday night, security guards at the Museum of the City of
New York were making their rounds around the premise before they heard an alarm go off in
the east wing on the third floor, in the Gilded Age exhibit. Sixteen out of the original twenty
guards on patrol between the second and third floor of the museum rushed to where the
alarm was sounded off, only to end up locked inside the room due to a large piece of heavy
furniture blocking the entryway.

Members of the New York Police Department were later contacted by an anonymous source,
leading them to the museum where they found three artifacts (a necklace-brooch and two
necklaces, placed on display with the aid of Tiffany & Co) missing and uncovered the security
guards who were unharmed. After thorough searching, they found the four missing guards
that hadn't ventured off towards the alarm.

Three of the guards were discovered beside a broken glass container that was supposedly
taken in for further analysis. As it was discovered that bullet holes were lodged into the air
vent of the ceiling, the three have been taken in for interrogation. The fourth guard was found
tied up in a corset with a ball of fabric in their mouth and has also been taken in for
interrogation.
None of the guards have released public statements relating to their unique circumstances yet, though the validity of their potential statements remain questionable as rumors continue to circulate and doubt begins to surface. The New York Police Department has yet to accept or deny whether or not the heist was conducted by 'England' or if it was a ruse concocted by America in an attempt to win the public's opinion back in the police's favor. With luck, the New York Police Department will give its citizens the explanations they deserve.

Vash set the phone aside, repressing the strong temptation to break it. IPhones were extremely expensive, and he didn't want to use the money to repair the phone if he could prevent it from getting broken in the first place. It was just so infuriating seeing even The New York Times becoming biased—they were supposed to tell the news like it was, not bowing to any particular side! It was obvious that those who were apart of The New York Times were either sympathetic towards the public for feeling left out in important affairs, or milking the reactions of their audiences for as much money as they could get by publishing blatant slander directed towards the police!

They're taking a page of out England's book by using people's emotions to their advantage, the Swiss thought with another outward sigh, standing up and making himself a cup of caffeinated, bitter goodness that was perfect for easing the rough edge of his headaches. And it was cheap too—bonus. He popped an aspirin into his mouth and swallowed it dry, taking a swig of his drink and relishing the warmth speeding down his throat. A grimace etched itself onto his expression at the concept of more people like England, though. That'd probably be America's worst nightmare. As if the world wasn't already opportunistic.

The idea was definitely junk food for his thoughts; he knew he shouldn't even contemplate it, but he was unable to help himself. Not when he would be forced to mull it all over for the next few hours.

If he had to pinpoint the source of his anger from earlier, it would have had to have been from the Mayor of New York (no surprise there). Again, the man was reluctant to deem England a big-enough problem to involve the detectives, saying that he was "a small spider in a large forest full of deadly creatures" and that he'd "fade out of the public's eye soon enough". The man failed to realize that, where it had taken most criminals decades to make their names so world-renowned, England had accomplished so in a few weeks and with three successful heists!

"You fail to realize that people these days have a very limited attention span," the mayor rebutted, his back to Vash as he stared out the window overlooking Manhattan, the crimson sun waving goodbye as it ventured past the horizon of the Atlantic. "They only obsess over what entertains them. The instant they deem it uninteresting, they let it wither up and die. The same applies with this 'England' character."

"But sir," Vash began, taking a step forward and placing his palm firmly on the politician's desk. "Regardless of whether or not he'll fade out in terms of popularity, the fact remains that he has power now. We should gather up the detectives and investigate before he blows things entirely out of proportion!"

"You're being too irrational in your decisions, Department Chief Zwingli," the leader of New York countered, resulting in a furious blush rising against the Swiss's pale features. "Wasn't it 'O' that said that if we move without thinking, we would only be playing into his hands?"

"Y-yes, but all the more reason we should ambush England," the blond affirmed, biting the inside of his cheek due to humiliation. He was relieved for once that his supervisor wasn't making direct eye-contact, as he felt his position in the debate was faltering. "He expects us to take the logical path and think things through. We would catch him by surprise if we acted in a seemingly-impulsive way, and use that opportunity to catch him! Wasn't it former Detective Kirkland that said precaution was
always a virtue to-

"I will not tolerate any more of this foolishness, Zwingli."

Vash stopped and blinked a few times, his eyes growing wide as he removed his hand from the desk. "Foolishness?"

"Yes; you're acting too brashly with your heart as opposed to your head. As a police officer, and frankly, as a leader of other police officers, this is not a trait to have. You need to keep your feelings under tight surveillance, and allow nothing to stand in your way from doing what is right and just in the eyes of the law."

"B-but," Vash stuttered, mentally berating himself for allowing his tongue to slip in the presence of his superior. "To pass law without emotion...you might as well just leave it to a machine!"

"You must allow nothing to stand in the way from doing what is right and just. If you must sacrifice your conscience for the sake of the greater good, then so be it."

Vash bit down on his tongue to prevent him from saying something he would end up regretting. His hands turned to fists at his sides as he turned on his heel, and left the office for the police's headquarters.

He stared at his hands again, the angry red marks from earlier now soft pink in his palms and matching the kind of pink that reminded him of Europe's evening sky, the kind of pink that grew on the flowers outside his mother's cottage on the outskirts of Geneva, the kind of pink Lilli liked to use when he would visit Switzerland and she would sew embarrassing, endearing, and surprisingly cost-effective outfits for him. He looked away from his hands and stared at the portrait of his role-model, his eyes tracing the gold cursive of the phrase permanently engraved beneath the picture:

"Precaution is always a virtue to abide by."

He cascaded his gaze elsewhere, taking another sip of his coffee to occupy his hands with something to do only to wince given how lukewarm the drink had become. A groan escaped him as he laid his head on his arms, willing away his migraine that was returning with a vengeance. It sickened him to think that somehow, somewhere, England was in New York and walking around a free man, spreading his poisons while no one in the NYPD had any idea where to look, hell, it seemed like the NYPD or the mayor even WANTED to look! It was as if everyone was content to keep up the crumbling façade that everything was under control; the world's axis was threatening to spin in a different direction and nobody gave a damn about who it could hurt as long as it wasn't them-

"Are you sure you want to go through with this, Vash? You will have to undergo a lot of prerequisite examinations and tests to even take the exam. That's not excluding what you'll have to do once you attend police academy," His mother reminded the eighteen-year old Vash as he readjusted his grip on his luggage, turning to his mother and nodding. "I'm certain this is what I want to do, mother," he addressed, glancing around at the Genève Aéroport to preserve it in his memory as best as he could. It would be a while before he could return to Europe, to Switzerland, as New York was always lively with criminal activity and his father would want him to remain in the United States to maintain his positioning in the NYPD (if he even got accepted). Although he wasn't the best with smiling, he managed a small one directed towards his mother to bring her some reassurance. "I won't disappoint you."

That seemed to break whatever semblance of control, as the woman engulfed her son into a slightly-awkward hug with tears streaming down her cheeks. "Oh, you could never disappoint me!"
Guilt tugged at his heartstrings as he tentatively patted his mother's back; it was no secret that she was particularly protective of him especially when considering that, until Lilli was adopted, he was all she had after the divorce from his father made her move back to her native home in Geneva. "I know, Mutti—I'll make sure to write often and I'll try to visit around Christmas if possible."

His mother pulled back after a little bit, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. "N-now go on," she hiccupped, trying/failing to send him off with a wave of her hand. "You'll miss your flight, and I know how much you hate wasting money."

Vash nodded once more and picked up his suitcase again. "Well," he began, trying to think of something nice (but not cliché, Hallmark nice) to say before departing. "I guess I'll...be going then?"

With that, the blond male turned around in the direction of his flight, only to stop when he felt a small pair of arms wrap around his waist.

He blinked a few times, before a small, genuine smile made its way onto his features and he looked down to the seven-year old with the long gold braids currently hugging him like he was the last life raft on the Titanic. "Lilli..."

Lilli looked up, tears threatening to spill from her large, green eyes. The sight alone was enough to make the Swiss nearly drop his suitcase and forget about leaving altogether, but that urge left when a happy smile etched itself onto her youthful features.

"I love you, big brother!"

That did it for him.

Vash slammed his fist on the desk and stood up, his eyes narrowed as he redirected his gaze back to the portrait of his role model, of former Detective Kirkland with his phrase that was permanently engraved into the wood of the portrait and into his brain.

He opened up the bottom drawer of his desk where he kept all of his files relating to the detective, fumbling around until his fingers grasped a worn-out manila folder. He smiled to himself, a real smile that actually hurt his cheeks given it felt like ages since he had last worn it.

He didn't have much information on the former detective—that much was obvious, as the man had suddenly resigned and requested his personal files to be burned at the risk of anyone from tracking him down. However, what information he had been able to salvage had been stored in that bottom drawer, hidden from the NYPD and most importantly, hidden from the mayor.

Seven years ago when he was still a fledgling in the NYPD, he had been somewhat of a prodigy towards Detective Kirkland; he had been taken on cases that none of the other rookies had clearance on, given classified information that some higher-ups didn't know. Even years later, he had used the tips and secrets that Kirkland gave him which helped him climb the ranking ladder and reach the title of Department Chief at the age of twenty-eight, a feat that was the first of its kind in NYPD history.

Thanks to Kirkland's help, the amount of valuable connections he had been able to forge when he was twenty-one and fresh in the precinct allowed him certain privileges...like being the one to burn Detective Kirkland's files when he resigned that same year.

Of course, he had to do his job; he had gotten so far in so short a time, he didn't want all the efforts from his role-model to be in vain all because he wanted to keep every personal file to himself. So he stole one document (which was more of a post-it note than an actual document) that could be overlooked and never missed. But, when taking the factors into consideration—England's growing
popularity, the mayor's reluctance, the NYPD's declining approval rating to send any real detectives out to stop him—Vash figured that now was about as good a time as any. If he could find the detective...he could enlist his aid and stop a war before it could truly begin.

He stared at the piece of paper, singed and brown from the flames it had nearly been thrown into, and wondered from where he could remember having spoken that name out loud:

**Arthur Kirkland.**

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Another completed segment for this long, winding road we've found ourselves on. I'll make sure to upload the next installment soon—we've made tremendous headway, for those of you not following the fanfiction.net version of this, about twelve more chapters to go until this is caught up. Thank you all so much for your hilarious, heartfelt comments, I always appreciate receiving feedback for my work as it's an opportunity to improve as a writer. Until then? Stay awesome.
If Arthur Kirkland didn't know any better, he would have thought that all was right in the world. The late morning wind tousled through his sandy-blond locks and scattered dark green leaves across the pavement of the sidewalk, the sky was impossibly blue and the sun was emitting warmth that made his skin tingle pleasantly, and Alfred was by his side as they walked together. The bespectacled blond in question had significantly improved in terms of his health and wore his default grin on his face as they waded their way through the crowds of the ever-bustling Times Square. At any other time of his life, Arthur Kirkland would have thought that the day couldn't be more perfect.

However, Arthur Kirkland did know better; and he knew that the entire situation at hand reeked of obscurity.

Arthur blinked once. Then twice, as if to register what it was Kiku had just said, a look of confusion dwelling against his facial features as he asked the Japanese to repeat himself.

"I think it would be a good idea to take Alfred-san out of the dorm." He informed, a small smile briefly present amongst his expression given the Briton sitting across from him at the kitchen table cocked his head to the side to further illustrate his bemusement. "He's been holed up in here for two days and I believe some fresh air would help him. You forget how much of an extrovert he is compared to you."

Arthur huffed, crossing his arms over his chest in a melodramatic manner. "He's so spoiled," the blond remarked sarcastically, quirking another small smile from the brunette. "Requiring things like 'sunshine' and 'fresh air' to properly function. Children these days have to make everything overly-complicated, don't they?"

Kiku laughed lightly, taking a sip of his tea. "I'm afraid they do." He replied, his gaze flickering over towards Arthur's room where Alfred currently resided. He looked back towards Arthur when seeing
how the door was closed, a more serious expression prominent on his face.

"Not to mention that we've been severely hindered since he took up residence here," the Japanese explained in a lower tone of voice, making the Englishman nod in agreement. "He overheard me speak about America-san yesterday morning, though he was probably too delirious to realize the implications. We need to tread lightly while he's here, to say the least. For all we know, he could have heard everything from yesterday and is only being quiet about it."

"When I say this, I mean this in the best way possible," Arthur started, resulting in a dark eyebrow rising against Kiku's forehead. "But you do realize you're talking about Alfred, right? He can't be quiet to save his life."

"How so, Arthur-san?"

"Remember when I ran for Student Council President during our senior year?"

"You mean when Alfred-san went on the school roof with a megaphone and shouted 'vote for Artie so you can party' until he nearly got expelled?"

"Yes."

"I understand." Kiku spoke, finishing his tea and setting the cup aside. "Regardless, I believe we should remain wary until he's fully recovered which, based on the status of his injuries, shouldn't be for much longer. While he's out of the apartment, I'll overlook articles relating to our recent endeavor from two days ago and undertake the necessary measures."

Arthur smiled a bit towards his partner-in-crime. "I figured that if I kept repeating that 'precaution is always a virtue to abide by' phrase, you would eventually come around." He teased, provoking the Asian's features to bloom a faint shade of pink.

"I-it's a logical statement," The Japanese coughed, avoiding the Brit's line-of-sight due to miniscule amounts of embarrassment. "Regardless, I believe we should remain wary until he's fully recovered which, based on the status of his injuries, shouldn't be for much longer. While he's out of the apartment, I'll overlook articles relating to our recent endeavor from two days ago and undertake the necessary measures."

Arthur forced himself to stop, his eyes growing half-lidded as he stared at his ring finger that visually represented the sad truth he had spoken aloud. The sad truth that there resided two tombstones in Woodlawn Cemetery that were dedicated to William and Alice Kirkland. Although it had been four months since their passing, meaning that it didn't hurt as badly as it did before…his heart still felt like a re-opened wound, bleeding out in heaps of the beautiful, achingly beautiful crimson that was his sorrows.

He closed his hand after a moment, his gaze hardening as he remembered the appearance of 'O' during the second Metropolitan Heist, nearly losing Kiku during the Triple Theft, and nearly being killed by America's hand. All of those situations made possible thanks to his own incompetence. "And myself, if I don't take every factor into account and proceed accordingly."

Which is why I can't allow myself to slip up anymore. I can't afford to make mistakes when I risk losing everything, whether loved ones, my sanity, or my life.
"So, you're saying that the passing of your mother and father, one of whom made that motto infamous towards the NYPD, is directly related to them not thinking everything through?" Kiku acknowledged, his brown eyes widening in surprise when hearing a hollow laugh emit from his partner-in-crime.

"Yes, they were fools," Arthur admitted, resting his hand on his cheek as he stared into space. "But they were the best kind; the ones with good intentions."

The brunette stared at the blond with an unknown expression, his dark eyes hooded and his brow furrowed as silence enveloped the two, only to be broken by a laugh from the Japanese. A sad laugh.

"You are something else, Arthur-san," Kiku managed to say between his fits. "You really are."

And so, Arthur had woken up Alfred (a difficult feat as the man could probably sleep through the sound of an oncoming train) and informed him that it was a beautiful morning to go frolicking outside and do whatever Americans did when they required their 'oh-so-important' dose of vitamin D.

"I imagine what I do when I go outside isn't all that different from what you would do if you actually went outside," Alfred had joked, earning himself another hit on the head from a rolled-up newspaper. "A crazy thing to imagine, by the way!"

So now there he was, wandering alongside Alfred who he assumed (but didn't have his hopes up too high) knew where he wanted to go throughout Times Square while Kiku took advantage of Alfred's absence by administering his duties as 'Japan' back at the dorm. Everything seemed to be fantastic, with the exception of how bizarrely-silent Alfred had been in the duration of their trip.

_He's been like this ever since we left the dorm_, the Brit thought with an outward sigh, presumably unheard by the male walking beside him as he was too busy staring into space with his hands in the pockets of his blue jeans. It relieved Arthur to see that Alfred hadn't passed out from exhaustion as they had been traveling on foot for about forty minutes, but it made him all the more concerned at how Alfred seemed less like himself and more like…someone actually capable of shutting up for longer than ten seconds. _It's starting to freak me out, to be honest._

Arthur cast a quick glance towards Alfred, noting the aforementioned smile and absentminded-look in his eyes with suspicion. While he knew that it had been about two days since he had collapsed in front of his and Kiku's door, it was still strange to see him out and about as if he had never fallen unconscious with glass shards in his shoulders to begin with. To make sure that Alfred didn't know he had tended his wounds, he only changed his bandages when he was asleep, though thankfully the American assumed that Kiku was responsible for bandaging him up as Kiku was known to fret over people's physical well-being. A part of him was relieved to see that the American had healed up without any problems, that he no longer winced or grumbled curses beneath his breath whenever he rolled his shoulders or stretched his arms, yet another part of him, the cynical, ever-cautious part, wondered whether Alfred had really gotten better or if he had just become better at hiding his physical pain.

His pace slowed down as he contemplated that train of thought. Alfred did have a wide collection of scars, so it was obvious to assume that he had been hurt a lot in the past (though the idea alone was enough to make his heart tighten until it felt like his breath would come out in a gasp) and grew accustomed to the pain as a result. However, what if he was remaining quiet for an entirely different reason, unrelated to the injuries he had acquired a few days ago? What kind of gears ran through his mind feverishly enough to render him mute?
Although Arthur hated to admit it (as he felt his skills at predicting people had diminished), now was one of the rare times he couldn't figure out what Alfred was thinking. It was a realization that made him stop walking entirely, a look of fear briefly crossing his features as he comprehended the fact that he couldn't have even a vague glimpse of what was running through Alfred's mind! And that thought terrified him, paralyzing him literally and figuratively.

While he knew that Alfred would never try to hurt him...he still felt as helpless as he felt during the chess match with Russia a few days ago, when the man set up a folding screen to disable him. That startling knowledge that he couldn't anticipate what would happen, even if his assumptions were completely wrong, and he could only watch and hope that fate smiled kindly upon him.

Which, in case it wasn't obvious, didn't happen often.

If not for his (granted, significantly-healed) impairments, then why is he so unusually quiet? The Brit wondered as he swallowed thickly and forced himself to resume his pace, keeping his eyes trained on the number 50 stitched onto the back of Alfred's dark brown hoodie as he drew closer. Is it because he's trying to think of a place for us to go visit? Is it because he's genuinely lost and trying to find a familiar location to re-establish his sense of direction? Or is it because he's-

"A-Arthur?"

That voice drew him out of his pathetic excuse for a coherent thought process, making him blink several times and his breath legitimately come out in a gasp. His head bobbed upwards so that he could look at the taller male, surprise dawning on his features when seeing the genuine surprise on the latter's face, followed by...blushing?

"Y-yes?" Arthur asked, internally brewing up a curse-storm at his slip of the tongue. That served as a sign he hadn't been paying much attention, which could be interpreted negatively if given the right ingredients.

Alfred lifted his hand up, making Arthur's face burn a deep shade of crimson as he realized he seemed to have taken hold of the bespectacled blond's hand when his mind had started to venture down a dark path. "Y-you suddenly grabbed my hand. Is there something wrong?"

The Englishman didn't think he had enough blood to blush even more, but apparently such a feat was attainable as his head felt like it was on fire. He carefully unwound his fingers from the American, cradling his hands to his chest in a (fruitless) effort to keep a semblance of dignity.

"There's nothing wrong," he lied, trying to think of a good reason that would excuse his behavior. He dared to maintain a steady gaze with the man to instill a false aura of confidence. "I just...realized that we never finished our tour of Central Park, now did we?"

It was Alfred's turn to blink a few times, before his grin returned with full-force. "You're right, I completely forgot about that! It's been ages since we've been there, hasn't it?"

Arthur nodded quickly, inwardly relieved that the attention had been directed from his fumble towards something else. "Y-yes. Considering I've lived in New York since I was five but have apparently 'never been to Central Park', I request that you act as my escort until that mistake is remedied."

Alfred laughed, the achingly-familiar sound easing the rough edge off Arthur's nerves. He opened his mouth to say something but was cut off when the American grabbed his hand and proceeded to drag him in the direction of the newly-decided location.

Good grief, he thought with an inward smile as he had to pick up his pace to keep up with the tall
blond. He's still as hopeless as ever, I see.

It really had been far too long since he and Alfred had last spent time together.

He had been pre-occupied with so many things as of late, what with his façade as 'England' to maintain and 'America' to deal with, not including the recent business deal with Russia and constantly skirting away from the NYPD, and definitely not including the recent development relating to Matthew's wedding. All of those things had weighed heavily on his mind, squeezing his psyche as a python would to its prey until it felt like he couldn't even breathe. It was easy to forget that it was times like now that motivated him to work as 'England'.

"S-slow down, you git! You'll nearly get us killed at the speed you're going!" Arthur exclaimed as they dashed through the entrance of Central Park, leaves scattering around their feet thanks to Alfred's fast pace, the sunlight somewhat obscured due to the darkening clouds, the smell of roses wafting throughout the air.

"Don't worry about it, Artie!" Alfred proclaimed, shooting another smile to the flustered male whose hand he was holding (in public no less), whatever traces of temporary-meekness gone and replaced with his usual bout of optimism that the Briton couldn't deny he had missed. "I'll always protect you!"

Alfred F. Jones had returned his attention back to finding a new site in Central Park to visit that he missed the sad smile that graced Arthur Kirkland's features. For the first time in a long while, all was right in the world.

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"Well," Alfred began, staring at the blackened sky from where he and Arthur stood beneath the large pin oak tree even as his glasses became studded with rainwater. "I did not see this coming."

The day had gone by faster than either of them could blink, as the late morning metamorphosed into afternoon and afternoon bloomed into twilight. They had visited countless places in that span of time, ranging from the Central Park Zoo to the Shakespeare Garden. Both of them hadn't realized the sky had darkened with rain clouds until they felt the first few drops brush their faces. As they had just finished exploring the Shakespearean Gardens, Alfred thought it would be easier to simply wait out the worst of the downfall by The Lake until they could return to the entrance and catch a taxi.

Arthur sighed, his breath appearing in small puffs of smoke in front of his face. Once more, he was appalled at how quickly the temperature could diminish considering it was almost the end of June and he could see his own air when he exhaled. "Nor did I," he divulged, rubbing his arms and mentally scolding himself for venturing out of his dorm in a red long sleeve without a jacket of some kind. "It was supposed to be sunny for the remainder of the day, but here it is pouring buckets like I'm back in England."

Alfred took his eyes away from the sky and removed his glasses, wiping them dry with the hem of his shirt beneath his hoodie. "What's it like over there? Places like...Britain?"

The Englishman raised an eyebrow at the American's previous statement as he placed his back against the trunk of the tree and rubbed at his arms. His brow furrowed as he tried accessing his earliest memories which primarily consisted of things like dark skies that stretched endlessly past the horizon, the smell of car exhaust and Earl Grey lingering amongst the cobblestone-streets, and the sound of ocean waves rippling against the wooden docks and crawling up the sandy beaches. His features softened as he reminisced those things, those little fragments that danced throughout his conscious in a rose-tinted kaleidoscope, so close that he felt he could extend his hand yet just far
enough away that his fingers barely grazed them.

"In a word? Distant." Arthur answered, provoking a look of bewilderment from Alfred. He shook his head lightly and redirected his gaze towards the lake tattooed with liquefied crystals. "It feels solitary, even though you're surrounded by others. It's a cold, untouchable place; not just in the weather or landscapes, but in its history and culture that's been forged over years of failed invasions and splendid isolation. It's a bit lonesome, in a way."

He smiled as he remembered the days when it would stop raining enough to let the sun show. The way that the fading, blood-red sun would dip seamlessly behind the ocean and leave scars of periwinkle and vermilion flourishing through the sky never failed to make his heart skip a bit and his nerves ease. "And yet that is what makes it so beautiful."

When he had heard the news, he could barely conceal his excitement. Finally, after ten, agonizingly-long years, he could return to England for the remainder of the summer and create new memories. He could return to his homeland, even if it was for a short while, and re-acquaint himself with the land that caught his words in his throat and made the age-old blood of his ancestors burn in his veins. Those dreams would soon wither up and die in early July, stabbed with the harsh blade of reality and staining his future crimson.

"Wow," Alfred murmured, his eyes half-lidded as he gazed at the Brit. "Sounds amazing over there."

Arthur nodded, mistaking the tears on his face for rainwater that slipped between the leaves of the pin oak tree. "It really is."

After that sentence was spoken, another silence enveloped the two. A relaxed silence that wrapped around them with a blanket, unbroken save for the gentle pitter-patter of the rain colliding with the leaves and the lake situated before them.

Contrary to popular belief, Arthur was actually the first between them to relent in the quiet atmosphere as he let out a small sneeze. His previously-pale features blossomed into a pastel shade of pink when hearing the American standing across from him let out a chuckle.

"Sounds like you're starting to catch a cold," Alfred remarked with an impish wink, walking over and unzipping his hoodie. Before the bushy-browed Briton could protest, he wrapped the jacket (a more modern take of World War Two bomber jackets, something the bespectacled blond thought was an awesome idea) around the shorter blond's shoulders and flashing him a quick grin. "We should probably get going before it gets any worse. Unless you want to start singing in the rain again?"

Arthur burned brighter in the facial region as he reluctantly slipped his arms inside and zipped the front up, trying/failing to ignore how…comforting the article of fabric was (though like hell he'd ever admit it, especially to the male in front of him). It was a little big on him considering he wasn't as tall or built as Alfred, it smelled faintly of washing detergent and AXE deodorant, and it still had some traces of warmth on it. He couldn't help but be overwhelmed by guilt, given the American had been severely injured a few days ago and he was worrying about him. "Sh-shut up," he retorted half-heartedly, putting up the hood to hide his face. "And my immune system isn't that weak. You, on the other hand, had been beaten up and hurt to the point of unconsciousness! How did you end up that way to begin with?"

Alfred paused, his hands still lingering on the hem of the hoodie, his eyes a bit darker behind his glasses. It must have been the Englishman's imagination, as it was gone as suddenly as it had come. "I almost got mugged," he explained with an air of nonchalance, Arthur's eyes widening in shock. "But I showed those guys a thing or two, don't worry about it."
"Don't worry about it'? Of course I'm worried about it!" Arthur confessed, Alfred being the one to have his eyes widen in shock. "You were unconscious when I found you; you had pieces of broken glass in your shoulders for God's sake!"

Alfred turned pale, his hands falling limp at his sides. "Y-you…you saw that?"

The Brit faltered, realizing his mistake. He didn't want Alfred to find out as it would undoubtedly make him uncomfortable knowing...someone like him treated his wounds, as deeply as it hurt him to even consider such things.

"I-I thought," the bespectacled blond began, panic visible in his body language from the clenching of his fists to the shaking of his head. "I thought Kiku bandaged me up, since he always freaks out over people when they're sick!"

Arthur reached out and tenderly touched Alfred's shoulder, regret eating his stomach when seeing the tall male jump slightly. "I'm sorry; I was the one who did it. I helped you inside and removed the glass and-"

He bit his lip, wishing Alfred's mindset was a bit more readable so that he could speak accordingly. "You've been hurt a lot in the past, haven't you?"

The shorter blond couldn't even muster enough courage to see the taller blond nod slowly.

Arthur took a deep breath to steady his drum-like pulse, his line-of-sight briefly flickering up to meet Alfred's. "...You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," he insisted, Alfred's eyes growing even further at the familiar statement. "Trust me when I say that."

The Briton could remember how the American said that same sentence to him four months ago when he was found crying in his room with the death of his parents. He remembered the immense relief and gratitude he felt towards Alfred for not forcing the truth out of him, for letting him simply cry without feeling the embarrassing need to explain, and had always felt indebted to him for that. At least one of his debts was now repaid.

Yet even that couldn't stop the gasp of surprise from escaping him when the tall blond hugged him, his head buried in his right shoulder and his arms wrapped around his upper back.

The Briton looked away from the setting sun towards the American standing beside him on Bow Bridge, unable to hide the puzzlement that crossed his features when seeing how the male's fists were clenched tightly and his face was contorted into an unusual frown. Unthinking of his actions, Arthur took Alfred's hand in his own and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

Why are you looking so sad?

His eyes widened in uncertainty when the bespectacled blond met his gaze immediately, making him swallow thickly. He...felt ashamed of himself for doing such a thing, as it probably made Alfred uncomfortable and most likely wanted him to let go. He felt stupid for undertaking such a gesture that was meant to be between lovers as opposed to close friends. Though he felt his heart clench, he was about to release his hand, freezing in place when the American brushed aside some of his blond bangs.

H-he's so close, Arthur thought, swallowing again. His heartbeat was thundering wildly in his wrist, making his face heat up immensely and sending his stomach twisting into knots. Why is he acting like this all of a sudden? I can't predict him at all!
He opened his mouth to speak, immediately forgetting what he was going to say when he felt Alfred's
hand cup his cheek, his touch surprisingly gentle against his skin as if he was scared of breaking
him. The foreign sensation was enough to make him lean into his palm by a miniscule amount, the
walls of his restraint threatening to crumble.

More than anything, his heart pulsed with yearning to give into his deepest dreams and tell Alfred
how he felt. But he hated the selfishness of it, the selfishness of his goal—to make Alfred F. Jones
love him. He had no guarantee that Alfred would ever feel the same, that his emotions would be
requited and shared. It was likely that the American was only acting this way because of his chaotic
mindset that not even the Englishman could predict. And that realization dug far deeper than any
knife or bullet could ever hope to reach.

"Alfred?" Arthur wondered out loud with hooded eyes, trying to think of the right thing to say.

Please don't do this.

The bespectacled blond only decreased their distance, their noses barely brushing against each
other. Arthur could see the small specks of silver amongst his pools of sapphire, he could count the
freckles that were rendered almost-invisible thanks to his sun-kissed skin, he could see his own
reflection in the male's glasses-

Stop before you end up regretting this.

"Arthur." Alfred murmured, sending shivers down his spine.

I love you, but you deserve to be happy so much more than I do. So much more.

He nearly cried from either happiness or despair when the American's phone went off, sending
Alfred running off for unknown reasoning and Arthur feeling completely disgusted with himself.

Arthur stood there for a moment, paralyzed in the male's embrace as his heart exploded with a rapid
whirlwind of emotion—things like happiness, affection, and hope, and yet things like fear, sadness,
and longing—all of which threatened to swallow him whole. Out of all of them, the dominant feeling
was guilt. He felt so much guilt for even relishing in his friend's misfortune! He felt spiteful of
himself for using Alfred's insecurity for his own benefit; for taking advantage of his temporary
weakness even through something as simple as a hug.

He wondered if he would die young from how often he felt like he was breaking inwardly, hating
himself for feeling this way for his best friend, someone who trusted him enough to do things like
this. He didn't want to ruin the relationship he and Alfred had spent years developing all because of
his own selfishness and blatant disregard for his friend's feelings.

"Thank you so much, Arthur," Alfred mumbled into his shoulder, his voice a tad hoarse and his arms
a bit shaky. "You're a good friend."

Words could not describe the sheer willpower it took Arthur to not wrap his arms around Alfred.

This time, however, he was fully aware that the water spilling down his cheeks were in fact tears as
opposed to drops of rain.

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: I find it pretty interesting to use Homestuck's classpect system to determine the hypothetical rankings and abilities of people (both fictional and real) if they existed in Homestuck's world since I'm a big geek about that kind of stuff; I'm a Sylph of Heart if you were wondering, and it's my personal headcanon that, according to this story, Arthur would be a Prince of Heart while Alfred would be a Knight of Hope, but hey, that's just my interpretation. Feel free to write what you think about the characters in the comments, I'd love to hear what you guys have to think and I have a lot more useless headcanons (from MBTIs to Enneagrams) I'd love to share. Anyway, thank you all for reading this update, I'll be back soon with the latest installment so you hopefully won't have to wait long.
Until then? Stay awesome.
Chapter Summary

In which Arthur and Alfred go to a hotel, and Kiku gets a worrisome phone call.

Chapter Notes

Regular font indicates the present.

Italic font indicates flashbacks or dreaming; whether it's a flashback or a dream will be clarified.

Bold italic font indicates thought.

Bold regular font indicates writing/typing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Arthur was sure that he would end up in bed with another cold by the time the day was over. He was certain of it.

The storm hadn't diminished, to say the least. If anything, it seemed to have increased in its intensity, as if to contradict Alfred's previous assumption that the weather would let up after an hour or two. The rain felt more like bullets than liquid against his skin, the winds had nearly uprooted several trees and lamp posts, and the lightning sent him jumping in his pace behind Alfred with every split-second of brightness followed by a deafening 'BOOM'.

It was essentially the equivalent of Mother Nature giving the middle finger. 

_Bloody brilliant_, the Brit managed to think as he pushed his body a little further along down the sidewalk of the (now abandoned) Times Square, trying to maneuver his weight properly to prevent himself from slipping. He and Alfred had been running for about ten minutes, starting when they noticed the weather was getting worse and decided to abandon their spot beside The Lake in Central Park, and, while he had been getting considerably better at forcing himself to run (what with the nonsense he had to deal with while masquerading as England), his breath was coming out in shallow pants with every second he spent propelling himself forward when he was chilled to the bone and really tempted to collapse onto the pavement. _First fate, now Mother Nature is out to get me? Did I do something wrong in a past life to deserve such disdain from omnipotent beings?_

Much like his strong belief that he would wake up with a high temperature the coming morning, Arthur was certain of it.

"Alfred!" Arthur managed to shout, following closely behind the American while keeping his movements quick. He was beginning to feel rather lightheaded due to the adrenaline pulsing through his veins and the worrying status of his legs, which felt like someone had hastily duct-taped anvils onto his pelvis and sent him clobbering down a narrow runway. "Do you have any idea where
"I know a place where we can crash for the night!" Alfred hollered in reply, the Englishman cringing when realizing the bespectacled blond's current volume wasn't all that different from his normal one. Frankly, it was a remarkable that neither of them had gone deaf, Arthur in the seventeen years he had known him, Alfred in the twenty-one (Almost twenty-two, the Briton thought with a look of surprise dawning on his features) years he had been alive. "A friend of mine owns a hotel on this street, so we can head there until this storm blows over!"

"That sounds like a good idea, Alfred!" Arthur yelled, biting the inside of his cheek as he had to grab ahold of the American's hand to stop himself from skittering across the slick surface of the sidewalk, his cheeks (already a deep shade of pink from the physical exertion) growing darker at the contact. "A stretch for you, I'm sure!"

A bark of laughter escaped the tall male in front of him. "Yeah, I get that a lot!"

Kiku didn't realize it was storming outside until the soft, warm glow of his bedside lamp abruptly shut off and left him in darkness.

He blinked a few times to register what happened, glancing around warily as he set his laptop to the side and grabbed his phone. He turned up the brightness of his phone to help light his way as he stumbled through the apartment, his senses heightened as this sort of scenario was commonplace in both American and Japanese horror movies: the main protagonist would be lounging peacefully without a care in the world until BAM—the lights go out thanks to a thunderstorm plaguing the outside, forcing the protagonist to leave their literal and figurative comfort zone to find a source of light.

While Kiku wasn't as startled by horror movies as much as, say, Alfred, he still had seen some downright terrifying shit that was enough to make his nerves resemble a ball of wire at the concept of leaving his room during a storm/blackout. Slowly, as if expecting the Grudge to be standing on the other side, he opened the door and peered out into the unknown lurking beyond his bedroom.

After a moment of internal debating (he figured he stood a good chance against the Grudge), he opened the door even further and used his free hand to test the light switch situated on the wall, a small grimace etching itself onto his angular features when his suspicions were confirmed. The storm outside was powerful enough to take down the power for the dormitory, quite possibly for the entire dorm complex as it was unlikely all the other inhabitants possessed generators.

He swallowed as he ventured out into the hall, using his phone to guide his way through the blackness of the residence. Right now, his top priority was getting ahold of a better source of light, as he didn't want to use up the battery on his phone when it could be used for emergencies as opposed to letting him see up to two inches in front of his face.

The brunette swallowed as he continued taking quiet, balanced steps to prevent himself from tripping over uneven carpeting. His brown eyes darted across the vacant living room as he tried remembering where the candles were located, eventually coming across them when he wandered into the kitchen and stuck a hand into the pantry. After a second of fumbling with opening the box (he still had a difficult time using his right hand, as it was still healing after being shot by Department Chief Zwingli two days ago), he found a match and struck it on its side, sending sparks shooting across the air for an instant and setting the thin stick aflame.

I hope Arthur-san and Alfred-san are alright, Kiku thought as he maneuvered his way back to the
main living room, his dark eyes looking lifeless and his figure gaunt in the flicker of the flame. I haven’t received any phone calls from them at all.

He nearly bit his lip to prevent himself from screaming when he heard his phone suddenly go off, 'Enamel' by Sid almost making his life flash before his eyes as it was downright terrifying to be engulfed in darkness during a power-outage only to hear electric guitars and 'Azatoi, KISU wa iranai, fukuju wo meijyou' suddenly ramming into the silence like a jackhammer.

"I REALLY need to change my ringtone." He wheezed, rubbing where his heart was located in his chest with a weary expression on his face. He inhaled and exhaled a few times to steady his pulse, his cheekbones appearing slightly hollow in the luminescence of his iphone. A glance to his caller I.D made him stop in his motions, the name Unknown Caller catching his eye and resulting in a sigh of relief escaping his lips.

It had been several hours since Arthur had taken Alfred out of the dorm for the purpose of allowing Kiku to administer his duties as 'Japan', all under the guise of pursuing some 'oh-so-important' doses vitamin D. Since then, the Briton hadn't communicated with the Japanese in any way, shape, or form. While Kiku knew that it was logical for Arthur to refrain from contacting him while he was supposed to be keeping Alfred distracted, it was still unnerving knowing that his roommate/partner-in-crime was out in the open where he could be ambushed by potential enemies at any given time. Though it was unlikely that such things could happen when Alfred was around, so that was another load off Kiku's conscience. Regardless, it made sense that the Englishman's caller I.D wouldn't register on his phone; he was probably staying the evening at some form of hotel to keep shelter from the rain, therefore requiring him to use an bedside telephone with a wire as he probably used up too much battery power on his iphone.

With that in mind, he used his index finger to unlock the phone, accepting the call and holding the device to his ear. "Yokatta," he began, readjusting his grip on the box of matches in his other hand. "I was worried something happened to you."

"It warms my heart to hear you were worried about me."

Kiku dropped the box of matches at the sound of that voice. That familiar voice that drove his skull apart with paranoia and ground his nerves like a cheese shredder.

No.

No, no, no, NO, NO-!

"It has been so long since we've spoken like this," The voice continued on, as if oblivious to how wide the Japanese's eyes grew and how cold his blood had become. As if completely unaware of the multiple theories running through the Asian's mind and rendering him mute. But Kiku could tell that the speaker was well-aware of his plight. Very well-aware, as a matter-of-fact. "It doesn't cease to amaze me how quickly time flies when one is like a busy worker bee."

Oh God, he dwelled with a sickening drop of his stomach, his hands clammy and twitching faintly at his sides. How could they have gotten ahold of this number?! I made sure to give the information sparingly to prevent others from tracing this location and finding out where we live! This—this isn't good, this really isn't good at all-!

"You're fully aware of how much I hate being kept in the dark, are you not?"

That voice brought him out of his thoughts with his consciousness kicking and screaming.
He swallowed thickly, managing to recover his voice. "I am," he replied, ignoring his stutter and the slight wavering in his voice. He coughed into his hand to clear his throat better. "I am aware of such things. Yes; I apologize. However, as you mentioned, it's easy to lose track of time when occupied by things of varying importance."

A snort of amusement could be heard on the other end. "I wish you wouldn't speak so stiff and formally to me all of the time. It hurts when you act so distrustful, especially taking into consideration all I have done for you."

**You make yourself sound like a martyr.** He noted internally, a frown etched onto his expression. They…they managed to access his information, didn't they? How else would they have been able to get his phone number, if he kept it under tight secrecy with the phone company and close friends? Was it possible that this person was the same person responsible for hacking his computer during the Triple Theft two days ago?! Though wait, he had to be careful. In the instance this was somehow a proxy sent in…he had to make sure they knew what he was talking about. *How disgusting.*

"How do I know you're not an imposter?" Kiku interrogated, his eyes narrowing as he tried narrowing down possible suspects for proxies. "It's not unheard of for there to be holes in the most well-woven of fabrics."

"Because this is all to help the one you love."

The Japanese's breath caught in his throat, shivers caressing Kiku's spine with cold, cold hands and a grip that paralyzed him, wrapping around him as a spider would wrap its prey in silk before drinking its blood.

A soft sigh escaped him when allowing a brief period of time to recollect the fragments of his scattered thoughts. Although it wasn't by any means an easy task, he gathered up the fragments and stapled them together as best as he could, and managed a smirk.

"So, you figured out my phone number and where I live," he confessed with a shrug of his shoulders. "Will you kill me?"

"Of course not. You're quite intelligent, and I wish to help you in your goal. In England's goal."

"What's your agenda?" He questioned, his insides churning as he picked up the box of matches and headed straight for his room, picking up his laptop and turning it on. "I have a hard time believing that all of what you did before was purely-"

"For England's benefit?"

The brunette bit his tongue until he feared the appendage would bleed. "Yes," he spoke steadily, not wanting to further deteriorate his poker face. "I have a hard time believing all of that."

"I wish you had more faith in me, 'Japan'," they confided, their tone unable to be registered as (just in case the call was being traced) they used voice modification software. "Yes, I hacked into your computer and traced your I.P address to the Museum of the City of New York, and gave that information to the NYPD while pretending to be America's sidekick, 'O', but I only went so far to make sure everything worked out in England's favor. While it initially appears that England's plan wasn't as successful as he intended for it to be, the steps that I took were necessary in ensuring England's victory in the long-run."

"So, what do you intend to do with knowing my phone number and where I likely live?" Kiku asked, mentally preparing himself so that he could begin conducting a thorough virus checkup on his
computer. He knew that this person wasn't 'O'—but if they could fool the NYPD into believing they were 'O', he still wanted to keep his guard up around this person at all costs.

"Think of it this way;" the voice began, another flash of lightning making the room seem as bright as the day. "In the instance something—say, the police department manages to track down your location—occurs which requires you to move quickly. I have my men positioned around the building and ready to take down those who stand between you and vacating the premise. The same concept can apply to you wherever you go, as long as your cell phone is on and I can track your location down by using your number. Think of it as having a body guard, or, in this case, an estimated 200,000 guards in the Manhattan area alone who are ready to defend and attack at your every beck and call. Whereas England would refer to it as 'precaution', I refer to it as 'insurance'."

Russia hung up before Kiku could ask what he meant by that.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

"We're sorry; the number you're trying to contact is currently unavailable. If you would like to leave a voice mail—"

Arthur clicked his tongue in mild distaste before setting the wired phone back onto its holder. "That's odd," he remarked to himself as he finished drying his hair with a small hand-towel, droplets of rainwater dripping onto his damp (but not nearly as damp as it was earlier) long sleeve in barely-noticeable amounts. "He usually answers when I call him."

Then again, it's probably due to the weather, he thought with an outward shrug as he stood up from where he previously sat on the edge of the bed, stretching lightly as he did so. It's still pretty hellish out there, so I'm not too surprised that I couldn't reach him. I hope he's alright, though.

The Briton walked over and peeked through the curtains just in time for a large bolt of lightning to rake across the sky, temporarily blinding him and convincing him that Mother Nature definitely had a score to settle.

He and Alfred had arrived and checked in at the World Stars Inn less than half an hour ago, and yet the storm had somehow picked up even further. With the trees barely hanging on by their roots and the wind that making stereotypical 'WOOSH'ing sounds that could be heard beyond the thick walls and glass windows, Arthur (who, between himself and Alfred, was considered to have a better understanding of the English language in comparison to his American companion) could only describe the surreal scene with "Bullocks" and a low whistle.

"Still chaotic out there?" Alfred's voice wondered through the bathroom door, drawing the Englishman's attention away from the weather.

Arthur snorted lightly, closing the curtains. "Yes," he informed. "I'll need to thank Tino for allowing us to stay the evening."

"Tino's so freakin' badass," the American divulged. "Not just in letting us stay for free, but also that he makes the best chocolate-chip cookies ever and if you give him a sniper rifle he can hit a needle from 300 feet away."

The Brit's forehead creased in slight puzzlement. "You sound like you've tried the latter statement."

"I have."

"Of course you have." Arthur drawled, the beginnings of a small smile visible on his facial features.
"Anyway, how much longer are you planning on taking in there? You've been holed up in that bathroom for about ten minutes!"

"It's my hair—it just won't dry properly!"

"You've got to be kidding me," the bushy-browed Briton sighed, holding the bridge of his nose to stem the beginnings of a migraine; while he loved the rain, they brought out his sinuses and made him prone to headaches, some of which could get very distracting/painful after a while. "You mean to say that you've been trapped in the lavatory for 1/3 of the time we've been here, all because your hair is retaining water? You're starting to sound like Francis."

"That teacher's aide you hated when you took French sophomore year?" Alfred recalled, moving around based on the fabric-rustle sounds from behind the door.

"The very same." Arthur addressed, leaning a shoulder against the bathroom door as he inspected his nails to give his brain something to focus on.

"You should have stuck with Spanish, though I don't think that teacher's aide was fond of you, either."

"Yeah, no; Antonio didn't like me very much. I always beat him at Battleship, and the bloke always screamed for his armadAAHHH!"

Suddenly, it was an entanglement of limbs for the two blonds as Alfred deemed it appropriate for him to open the bathroom door, and was oblivious to the fact that Arthur rested a good portion of his weight against the article of wood.

A slew of grumbled (and colorful) curses escaped the males after a moment of silence dedicated to processing whatever the hell just happened.

"Ugh," the Englishman groaned, ignoring the dull pain in his forehead (he must have head butted the American by accident—Alfred really was thick-sketched in more ways than one) in favor of propping himself up on his elbows so that he could get a good look at possible injuries. "Are you alright-

The shorter blond then proceeded to profusely blush at the sight of his American companion, considering said American companion was currently pinned beneath him with blue jeans covering his lower-half and a towel behind his neck.

As in, he was not wearing a shirt.

As in, he was half-naked.

**Good God, Fate definitely has it in for me.**

Arthur blinked once. Then twice, before allowing his gaze to flicker downwards so that he could admire (for a brief instant, dammit!) how fit the American was. He couldn't help himself; for the first ten years of their friendship, Alfred had been like Arthur in that he was slim and gangly, but around the time he turned fifteen, he seemed to undergo physical changes that, at the time were subtle, but were now as clear as day. He had always been tall and lean, yet now he had defined abs and upper-body muscles that rippled beneath his sun-kissed skin with every fluctuation, the sight alone enough to make Arthur's head feel like it was full of helium and his blood (and guilt, can't forget guilt) pool in his stomach.

That guilt increased tenfold when his eyes scanned over the scars that still resided against Alfred's chest, his eyes half-lidded when seeing the one mark that stretched so long and so close to possibly
killing the American. While he had grown more accustomed to those sights considering he had changed the bespectacled blond's bandages while he slept (as awkward conversations/awkward answers in relation to the wounds' origins would arise if he found out, and Alfred slept like the dead anyway), the emotions he would experience whenever he saw the injuries only grew stronger, taking the clay that was Arthur's heart and pounding it until it resembled a flimsy, flat circle.

Arthur lowered his head, his sandy-blond bangs obscuring his face.

_I wish I could be strong enough. Strong enough to protect you from the things that made you this way._

He felt his nerves tug inwardly, coiling up into tight ball of wire. His hands contorted into fists and his gaze grew steely. What was stopping him from becoming stronger? What was restricting him from becoming more powerful? Was there something holding him back, preventing him from accessing his full potential? If so, what was it? He had 'Japan', he had 'Russia', hell, he had England on his side! He had the ability to become better, but he was being reckless and allowing his loved ones to get hurt because of his incompetence as a criminal!

A hand touched his cheek, bringing him out of his chaotic thoughts and into reality with wide green eyes peering into bespectacled blue ones. Eyes that turned his soft sighs crimson and never failed to steal the words from his mouth, eyes that belonged to someone whose smile made the world stop spinning on its axis even if for just half a second, whose laugh brought color into his world that steadily decayed into neutral colors.

That little voice in the back of his head kept jeering, spreading its poisons in spite of how deeply he wished for it to stop, whispering and making its seed sprout.

'He's like this because of you.'

'If you could accomplish your goal sooner, he wouldn't have to be hurt anymore.'

'If you were stronger, he could be safe.'

"Arthur," Alfred began, forcing the Brit to look at him, seriousness prominent in his being from the furrowing of his brow to the unusual frown on his face. "I feel like you've…changed, somehow." _Changed?_

The smaller blond blinked a few times again, surprise dawning on his features. "Changed? How so?"

"I-I don't know," the American acknowledged, quirking a look of confusion from the Englishman. "Please hear me out. It's just—you've become quieter, I don't see you as much, and-"

Alfred abruptly paused in his statement, as he then realized they were still lying on the floor of the bathroom. He turned bright red. "H-hold on a minute, this is really starting to bother me."

The Briton glanced down, remembering their current…predicament and quickly nodded, getting off the taller blond and offering him his hand so that he could stand, which the American accepted and was pulled up by.

"I'm sorry," Arthur disclosed, patting his jeans to remove traces of imaginary dust and to occupy his hands with doing something. "You think I've become quieter, you think you don't see me as often anymore, and-?"

"-And I miss you."
That statement caught Arthur completely off-guard, making him stop in his motions entirely and doing a double-take towards the (still half-naked, he identified with an internal groan) bespectacled blond, who was scratching his head in a sheepish mannerism. "Y-you what?"

"I miss you." Alfred repeated, averting his friend's gaze for unbeknownst reasoning as his features grew flush. His eyes darted to meet the Brit for an instant, his cheeks blooming in a more vibrant hue.

He...misses me?

Arthur forced his mouth shut to prevent himself from saying anything he would wind up regretting later on. In a way, he couldn't bring himself to say anything; he could only stare and listen to what the bespectacled blond had to say, lacking even the strength to move himself. Though if he could have enough courage to move, he would have crossed his fingers behind his back in vain hopes that alone could stop him from possibly doing something stupid-

"W-we've always been together," Alfred continued, biting his lip as he fumbled with his hands, interrupting Arthur's internal dilemma for the umpteenth time that evening. "Always; even when we were kids, we stuck by and supported one another. When I was knocked down, you always came and helped me back up, and vice versa. I can't remember a time when something important happened and you weren't there to help me through it. You've been my best friend for so long, that I can't imagine you not being in my life."

Alfred reached out and took one of Arthur's hands in both of his own. "And I feel like you've become distant. I don't know how or why, it's just a gut feeling of mine, but I like you, Arthur! You're my best friend and I don't want to lose you or end up hurt, so...if there's anything you feel you need to tell me, anything at all, don't hesitate to talk to me about it, you got that?"

Arthur looked away, unable to handle the regret eating at his conscience. Even when it was clear the American had been hurt...Alfred still thought of his well-being first, even if it could result in him being hurt more! Why did he always prioritized Arthur's welfare over his own? He always put other people before himself, something that could be easily taken advantage of in today's society. Alfred wasn't an idiot—far from it, he was actually one of the smartest people Arthur knew when he decided to focus—but it wasn't unheard of for him to let his emotions interfere with this thinking. Opening up the opportunity for his heart to be played with...for him to be exploited.

To be honest, he thought of America. He was a big threat to England and England's cause because he believed that the NYPD was incorruptible; because he wanted to be of any use to the NYPD, even if he was thrown under the bus to cover up the failures and shortcomings of the police. Because he would keep allowing himself to be used and abused if it meant the perceived image of 'right' in the eyes of the law was attained, no matter how big of a price he had to pay.

"You claim to be a hero for justice who handles all criminals without discrimination or personal bias, and yet you work with the NYPD? You follow their orders without question or hesitation, discarding your own conscience for the sake of what is deemed 'justice' by your debauched superiors? Are you stupid enough to follow what they say, or are you just naïve? Are you oblivious to the sins they've committed, or are you just in denial?"

"What is it you hope to achieve by working with them? If you hope to change things through doing their dirty work, you're only encouraging them to act unethical knowing you'll clean up their mess."

"Don't talk like one of them. You're not! Even if you'd like to be. To them, you're just a freak, like me! They need you right now, but when they don't, they'll cast you out, like a leper! You see, their morals, their code, it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the
world allows them to be. I'll show you. When the chips are down, these... these civilized people, they'll eat each other. See, I'm not a monster. I'm just ahead of the curve."

And he didn't want the same things to happen to Alfred. He didn't want him to be exploited, used and abused, and thrown under the bus so that people could save their own skins. Alfred deserved better than the likes of that. And, in a way, America deserved better than the likes of that.

Arthur sighed, his head feeling heavy with his slight migraine, the current situation weighing on his heart. "Okay," he said after a minute of silence, looking back at Alfred. "Though the same applies to you; I feel like you've changed in some way, though I can't discern what is it for the life of me. You've also become quieter and busier—it's been ages since we've been able to spend time together like we have today! I can't help but feel like..."

Like you've been hiding something from me, he confessed in the deepest, darkest corner of his mind. Like something has changed between us, and it's holding us back, somehow-!

He bit the tip of his tongue so that he wouldn't speak his thoughts aloud. He knew that Alfred literally just offered an ear to whatever troubles he had, but he didn't think that he, himself, was ready to inform Alfred of his thoughts. It felt childish and stupid of him, but...call it paranoia or fear, he felt like something bad would happen if he decided to say it.

Arthur shook his head, dismissing his previous sentence. "Anyway, the same applies to you. You...mean a lot to me, so if you want to get anything off your chest, don't hesitate to talk to me about it, okay?"

Alfred blinked once. Then twice. And then he smiled crookedly. "Okay."

Arthur let a small, self-satisfied smirk surface.

"Okay. Though, for the love of God, stop flirting with me, Jones."

"I don't know," Alfred teased, rocking back and forth on the heels of his feet with an impish grin on his face. He leaned forward with that child-like grin on his face. "We still haven't found a phrase that can be our 'always'."

"Jones-"

"Kirkland-"

"Hei Alfred, I baked some chocolate-chip cookies~!"

Tino stopped in his walk when he opened the door, only to see the tall American with a shorter blond (presumably English, what with those thick eyebrows) male, as they held hands and were standing in front of a bed.

The Finnish blond then proceeded to blush when he realized the American had no shirt on.

He laughed nervously in an fruitless effort to distill the uncomfortable atmosphere, and scratched the back of his head. "B-b-but I can see that y-you're busy, so I'll just l-leave them here." Tino indicated as he left the baked goods on the nearest table in the room and quickly retreated, closing the door and enveloping the hotel room in silence.

The only thing that broke that silence was the sound of Arthur's palm colliding several times with his forehead. He had definitely committed a horrendous crime in a past life; that was the only logical explanation for the vast amounts of bullocks he had to put up with.
Author's Note: Another chapter uploaded--thanks again for your hilarious/kind comments, I always love hearing what people have to say about my work so that I can improve my work. Anyway, I'll make sure to upload the latest installment soon. Until then? Stay awesome.
Anxiolytic

Chapter Summary

In which Alfred has a panic attack and some of his past is revealed.

Chapter Notes

Regular font indicates the present.

*Italic font indicates flashbacking or dreaming; whether it's a flashback or a dream will be clarified.*

**Bold italic font indicates thought.**

**Bold regular font indicates writing/typing.**

Trigger Warning: violence, injury, and panic attacks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Alfred cried out in pain when he felt the steel wall connect with his shoulder, saltwater brimming in the corners of his eyes when he heard a loud 'CRACK' emit from beneath his flesh.

He slid down the wall when he lost the strength to stand, moaning from his broken clavicle and the thick rope that burned into his skin whenever he tried moving his bound wrists. He slumped onto the ground, resisting the urge to close his heavy eyelids in favor of looking up towards the shadowy figure standing before him, glaring in spite of his pathetic state.

"T-they'll be c-coming, you know," he wheezed, the blinding pain making it difficult for him to breathe. "T-they'll save me, a-and won't stop 'till every one of you is c-caugh-"

A sharp kick to the chest cut him off mid-sentence as he hit the wall a second time, a deeper 'crunch' resounding sickly through his body from near his collarbone. The back of his head ached, increasing with every pulse.

"Those fools won't make any sudden moves," they chuckled, grinning wickedly based on the cold, cruel tone of their voice. They came closer, removing a black piece of metal from their equally-dark outfit and pointing it towards the American. "Not when they risk losing everything."

Alfred smirked in spite of the soreness in his cheeks. "T-they won't g-give up." He boasted, struggling to sit up against the wall as he felt jabs of white-hot pain spiral up his spine. "J-just as there's always an s-shadow in the light, th-there's always a light in the darkness."

The American spat out blood in the direction of his tormentor. "A-as long as t-there's an h-hero, bad g-guys like y-you won't st-stand a chance."

Whatever semblance of a smile that resided against Alfred's features vanished when the figure
leaned forward and tugged his head upwards by his blond hair, shoving the barrel of their newly-brandished weapon against his forehead.

"Keep in mind that we only need a few of you alive." They growled, digging the loaded gun against his skin until he feared it would rip through his skull without needing the bullet. "Don't test my patience, stupid brat."

"D-don't push your l-luck," Alfred gasped out, narrowing his eyes in the presence of the masked figure, cringing when the gun was pressed further. "P-pride always comes before the fall."

It was his captor's turn to glare, their dark eyes peering at him from behind their black fabric mask. Their finger twitched on the trigger. "Bastard-!"

Their grip on their weapon slackened when they heard windows crash open from outside the enclosed metal room, followed by rapid footsteps-

"ALFRED! ALFRED, WHERE ARE YOU?!"

-And a familiar voice that made Alfred's heart soar with relief.

Realizing that the masked figure would grow desperate and likely kill them all at the prospect of being caught, Alfred dove forward and forced his tormentor onto the ground, effectively catching them off their guard and sending their gun scattering a few feet away.

They wriggled beneath his grip, thrashing wildly like a rabid animal as they tried to escape him. The American's resolve tightened as he maneuvered the figure onto their stomach and pressed down onto the center of their spine with both hands and all of the strength he possessed to keep the captor from moving, as his wrists were still bound together with rope.

He could hear the familiar voice coming closer, the hope surging through his veins as easily as the adrenaline that propelled him to restrain his captor to the best of his abilities. The footsteps came nearer and nearer to the claustrophobic metal room, matching their quick pace to the rhythm of Alfred's heart.

S-soon it'll be okay, he thought, biting his lip as the person underneath him continued to squirm, concentrating every fiber of his being onto keeping them steady, beads of sweat breaking upon his brow as the rope scratched viciously against the raw, tender underside of his wrists. Soon it'll all be over! You can do this, just hang in there for a few more seconds-!

His hold on the tormentor was broken when the mysterious figure suddenly elbowed him in his ribcage, sending violent tremors of pain pain PAIN across his collarbone as they slipped out of his grasp, grabbed their gun again, and fired.

The American fell onto his back as he screamed, an unrestrained, feral howl that barely registered in his ringing eardrums as he could only concentrate on what felt like a boiling knife twisting into his chest. The sheer anguish rendered him mute in terms of describing it—the trauma of actually being hit combining with the chunks of metal breaking and splitting apart in his flesh enough to make his head spin and his stomach churn. He resisted the strong urge to gag so that he could take several mouthfuls of air, unable to muster the strength needed crane his neck upwards and see the monster in front of him.

Oh my God.

He could only hear the thunderous 'click' of their gun, and squeezed his eyes shut.
I'm going to die.

BOOM!

Alfred lunged out of the bed with ragged breathing and adrenaline circulating through his system.

He blinked. Twice, three times, four times as his gaze darted around his surroundings, the split-second of lightning reminding him of the truth.

It was just a nightmare. No, no, a...

He drank in the unfamiliar sight of the hotel room, glancing over the door (closed and locked), the window (a little open to bring in some fresh air), and his phone (for emergencies only and kept on its lowest power settings to save energy) that sat on his bedside table next to his glasses, which he grabbed and wiped clean with the hem of his T-shirt before putting them on.

There was no blood on the lenses. Everything was fine, it was just-

Another rumble of thunder had him hugging his knees to his chest. *Just a memory. It's all in the past and it won't happen again. It can't hurt you.*

More thunder, the particular shout nearly rocking the foundation of the hotel. Maybe he'd feel better if he got some water.

He swung his legs over the side of his bed when he gathered up enough courage to leave the mattress, his feet pattering across the carpeted floor as he slowly walked to the restroom, careful to avoid any squeaky floorboards, and cast a glance to the Brit occupying the bed on the other side of the room.

In spite of his kindling fear, Alfred couldn't help the ghost of a smile that dusted his features at the sight of the Briton safe and secure, facing the wall with his soft, slow breathing an indication that the American hadn't disturbed him. Warmth curled low in his stomach, proud and satisfied for reasoning he could neither comprehend nor explain, the longer he stared at him with the thin blankets tangled around his slim frame and willowy legs, his gold locks turning platinum when the lightning engulfed the hotel room in blinding brightness for a split second.

At least in his dreams he was protected from the things that could hurt him.

"The better question would be what I haven't done to him."

That accursed sentence broke through his mind once again, making Alfred grit his teeth in irritation and continue towards the bathroom.

*T-that one was also just a dream,* he reminded himself as he closed the door with his back and switched on the light, turning one of the sink faucet knobs and allowing the cold water to run for a few seconds while he steadied his heart rate; he felt exhausted, as if all his nerves were frayed despite him having technically fallen asleep. *It can't...they can't hurt me.*

He gingerly touched his left shoulder through his T-shirt and felt the small, barely noticeable bulge beside his left collarbone where the first bullet had shot him. No matter how many years went by, no matter how many operations he had experienced, he still cringed at the sensation.

He had been shot four times: once in his already-injured left shoulder, once in his right shoulder, and twice in his kneecaps. He had undergone a quick surgery in the back of an ambulance to remove the bullets from his shoulders and knees, and had the minor muscles that had been severed in the blows...
re-attached as soon as he reached Mount Sinai Hospital on Madison Avenue. It had taken several hours for everything to be fixed, and thankfully he only had to stay in the hospital for two weeks as the bullets didn't hit major muscles in his knees, although the extensive damage on his wrists from the vigorous rope burns took a lot longer to heal. The fruit of those procedures were still visible even though it had been several years since the incident occurred, or at least they were visible to him. They would always be visible to him.

His world was dazedly dancing on its axis like a ballerina completing pirouettes on an old-fashioned music box; swirling, twirling, melding together to the sound of screams in twisting shades of black and white and color until he swore his skull would collapse in on itself.

Body and mind, they served as a reminder of his incompetence. His inability. His failure.

No matter how much I wish it was, that will never be just a nightmare.

The American scowled at himself in the mirror and took off his glasses as he leaned down and splashed some water on his face. He let the cool liquid drip down his cheekbones and cling to his eyelashes, the bizarre sense of depersonalization that previously hung over him gradually disappearing with every droplet that slipped between his fingers.

He allowed his brain to turn itself off as he became lost in the motions; reaching down and cupping the water, pressing it against his face and letting it soak for an instant, rinse and repeat (literally). After two minutes, he turned the knob a second time to stop the water and grabbed a hand towel, the fabric mellow against his skin as he dried himself off.

The tall blond put his glasses back on and took another deep breath, sneaking a quick glance in the mirror once again. He still looked like he had seen a ghost, his cheeks growing paler when another loud round of thunder shook the building, the shock of the sound startling him into knocking over a set of fancy bottle soaps onto the floor.

BOOM!

"It's okay, it's okay, I'm fine," Alfred mumbled in a mantra, his toes curling with each soul-splitting rumble. "T-there's—there's nothing to be scared of. Nothing at all-"

BOOM!

He wrapped his fingers around the doorknob and twisted it repeatedly, forgetting he had locked it as his mind was too focused on the thudding from the outside. It was growing louder, the room smaller all of a sudden, oxygen harder and harder to gather in his lungs; his sweaty palms were slacking his grip on the doorknob, his pulse a nauseating bass-line to his increasing panic. Nothing was working and he was starting to see colorful dots and was he gonna throw up or was he gonna pass out or what was going on there was nothing to be afraid of why couldn't he concentrate on getting out or was there no way out-

BOOM!

It all sounded like gunshots to him—the brush of death, his life flashing before his eyes, the steel walls of a shut bank safe that had bullets embedded in them-

"Don't," he wheezed, unaware that he was curled up on the ground until he felt the cool linoleum against his temple, his arms and legs asleep and feeling like what TV static looks like. "I need...I need to..."
He wanted to move, but he couldn't. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't. He wanted to think, but he couldn't. There was only the stench of iron in the air.

Oh, when did he start sitting against the door? When did he start crying, when did he start covering his ears? His head was like a helium-filled balloon, everything too real and simultaneously from a third-person perspective, like he wasn't even himself anymore.

In spite of his fears, Alfred couldn't help but find it funny. Even though he was close to becoming twenty-two years old, he was still scared to pieces by a little storm that had been brewing outside all day and hadn't let up in the duration of the night. That, even though he was a superhero, he was as weak in the presence of the noise now as he was when he was younger. And that, even though the scars on his body served as evidence of the horrors he had faced, he still nearly split his lip trying to hold back his sobs.

"A-Alfred, are you in there?"

The American jerked out of his thoughts to the point where the back of his head actually hit the door he was leaning against, bringing him somewhat-back with a dull throb that matched the pace of his pulse. His tongue was a useless chunk of meat in his mouth, but he tried to reply to the best of his ability when he heard the Englishman pounding on the door.

"Y-y-yeah—I-I'm here. I'm h-here, Artie."

"Good God, what happened?! I-I woke up when I heard something hit the floor and I thought—"

Arthur stopped, likely resting his head against the door based on the small amount of pressure added onto the wood. A quiet, trembling sigh escaped the male on the other side. "I…I'm so glad to hear your voice."

Guilt piled on top of Alfred's chest akin to a block of cement. Arthur was outside but how could he reach him? The door wasn't letting up despite his efforts and it was so hard for him to think straight, his brain was moving a mile a minute and he couldn't decide what he wanted—wait, no, he he wanted Arthur there; anything was better than being alone, he didn't want to be alone.

"I-I'm sorry," he murmured, swallowing dryly. He did little things like rolling his arms back and rubbing his hands to remind himself he was still in his body. "I-I had a n-nightmare and the thunder—"

He was interrupted by another crash, resulting in him shielding his eardrums with his palms, cringing all the while. When it died down, he shakily removed his hands and laughed in a false way. "W-well, you know how I g-get around thunder."

"It sounds like gunshots. Like death, death, death."

"Can you come out of there?" Arthur said from behind the door, Alfred shaking his head at the idea and immediately regretting doing so as the sudden motion only made the room spin worse.

"N-not right now," he uttered, physically exhausted and mentally spent as it was. He couldn't imagine doing simple things like standing up and getting out of there, regardless of how badly he wanted to leave. "Sorry. J-just keep ta-talking to me and I'll be fine. I always am."

A sad chuckle protruded from behind the door, the American's regret increasing and eating at his
conscience. "You're a stubborn twat as ever, I see. I can't help but feel nostalgic—you've always been scared of thunder, even when we were younger."

"D-does that surprise you?" Alfred wondered out loud, biting his lip. "K-kids being scared of t-thunder, that is."

"No," Arthur replied, his familiar voice gently easing the rough edge off Alfred's nerves. "But it never failed to surprise me how I was always the first person you came to during a thunderstorm when we were children."

The American stood at the side of the Brit's bed, playing with the hem of his Superman pajama shirt as he contemplated whether the bushy-browed boy would be mad at him if he woke him up in the middle of the night because of the storm currently enveloping New York. He hugged himself and winced when another 'BOOM' exploded around them, as he discarded his conscience and quickly ducked beneath the Union Jack covers, hugging the closest thing to him.

Which, as this was Arthur's bed, was none other than Arthur himself.

As Alfred was a bit stronger than the average six-year-old (if 'bit' constituted as being able to lift a refrigerator over his head without struggling), it didn't take long before Arthur woke up sputtering and a bit blue in the face from Alfred's vice-like grip on his torso.

"W-what is it?" He coughed when he pried himself away, rubbing the sleep away from his green eyes. "Bad dream?"

Alfred yelped and buried his face in a pillow, plugging his fingers into his ears to dull another rumble outside. "N-n-no," he addressed as best as he could with a muffled voice, quirking a look of puzzlement from Arthur. "T-thunder's sc-scary."

A moment of silence protruded between the two, as the thunder and wind seemed to fade away into the background, however temporary it actually was.

"Fine," Arthur conceded, breaking the silence and making Alfred lift his head up from the pillow, his blue eyes widening when seeing Arthur purposely looking away, the frown on his face contrasting against the blush on his cheeks. "I-just don't hurt me, got it?"

The American nodded and took the Brit up on his offer when another 'BOOM' caught the two of them off-guard, sending Alfred engulfing Arthur in a hug that sent the latter spiraling onto his back from the sheer force of the sudden movement.

"T-the world was a better place back then." Alfred spoke, curious at the foreign sensation of warmth tugging his heart, although he had an inkling of where he had experienced it in the past, sites ranging from Bow Bridge to Arthur's own bedroom flashing through his memory and making his pale features blossom into a healthy shade of red. But he shoved those tidbits away as quickly as they had come. "E-everything was b-bright and cheerful in our little world."

The trees cast menacing shapes on the walls, their branches tapping the windows as the wind whistled low melodies through every crack and crevice. The darkness toyed with his youthful imagination, as Alfred would close his eyes and see foreboding creatures masked by shadows, drawing nearer with every blink and glance away. In contrast to the cozy rays of the sun and the sweet chirpings of mourning doves, the nights (particularly during the summer) would bring piercing thunderstorms that would go on for hours without end.

But those times of fear gradually decreased in their length, as he had Arthur at his side to help him...
Quiet, bell-like laughter emitted on the other side. His panic receded slowly as he focused on Arthur, listening to him instead of trapping himself in his own head. It made him feel better.

"We would have sleepovers so much of the time, staying at either of our homes every other night." Arthur continued, sounding like he was smiling; the American wanted to see that smile for himself, but was still (literally) weak in the knees. Though he was a little calmer, he still felt shaky. "We would wake up in the mornings to sunshine and the sound of bird songs, playing shadow puppets with our hands until you demanded breakfast. We would spend the afternoons beneath the trees playing chess, talking about anything and everything that came into our minds until the day grew old. We would spend the evenings star-gazing on the rooftop of the apartment building, counting constellations until we could barely keep our eyes open. And we would do it all over come morning."

It was Alfred's turn to smile, the thunder not as important or startling. "Yeah. We would do all of that. I'd love to be able to do that again with you."

"Well, what's stopping us?"

The bespectacled blond paused, blinking a few times at the peculiar statement. What was stopping them from doing things like that? By what strings were they restrained and being held back from spending time together like they had back then?

*Everything's changed.* He dwelled, his trembling fists clenching at his sides. *We can never go back to the way things used to be. We were blinded by the innocence of youth to the cruelties of reality. We were scared of the monsters that lurked in the dark, oblivious to how close those dangers actually were. While your inner spark has been reduced, it still glows.*

He touched his wrists, wincing in spite of the fact that the burn marks had long-since healed. *Mine, however, has been snuffed out for a long time.*

Alfred laughed as to not worry Arthur. "Well, the thunderstorm for one. What did we used to do whenever those happened, again?"

"You're more thick-headed than I thought, Jones," the Englishman retorted sarcastically, earning an indignant squawk from the American. "Don't you remember? You'd always crawl into wherever I was sleeping, be it a bed or a sleeping bag, and always cling to me for dear life while I told you a story."

Now that he thought of it, he did remember that. The rain would pelt so sharply against the windows that it sounded like daggers were being thrown against the glass, the wind would howl so fiercely against the walls that the building would sway, and the thunder would croon so loudly in their ears that Alfred personally feared both their heads would explode.

He would always try his best to conceal his whimpers and cries considering heroes didn't cry or show any sign of weakness no matter how scared they were. And, just when he sensed that Alfred was close to giving in and letting his tears fall, Arthur would always start telling him a story. That was simply their routine, and Arthur never broke it until one day...he just stopped it entirely.

A genuine chuckle escaped the bespectacled blond. "Y-yeah," he reassured. "I remember that. When we were younger, you'd tell me fairytales like 'The Princess and the Pea' and 'Beauty and the Beast' to keep my mind away from it all. Though you stopped telling stories at one point; I wonder why."
And it's not like I can really remember it, he revealed internally, glad that he was significantly calmer now than he was in comparison to earlier. He really needed to make it up to Arthur for all the trouble he had caused him, today. Not only with what he thought was a panic-attack, but also with his emotional display at The Lake in Central Park, and all the worry he'd probably put the Englishman through with him unconscious and hurt. It was like, six or seven years ago.

"O-once upon a time, there was a boy."

Alfred blinked as that sentence came out of nowhere into his mind, its origin indiscernible.

"There wasn't much special about this boy, to be honest; he liked to read thick novels, he liked to drink tea, and he liked to play chess."

Where have I heard that, before? Alfred wondered, straining his memory as far-back as his subconscious could possibly reach. He kept throwing that fishing line, trying to hold onto some form of fragment that could give him an indication, only to end up empty-handed, much to his confusion. I swear, I've heard that from somewhere, but it doesn't sound like any story I know.

"Although he was content with his life, there was one thing he wanted more than anything else. Something that he would give anything to be able to do..."

"Do you happen to remember the last story you told me?" Alfred questioned, struggling to remember. He slowly gathered the strength in his legs and grabbed hold of the side of the sink, before taking a deep breath and standing upright. He leaned on the sink with a good portion of his weight while his feet re-adjusted, tingly as they had gone numb while he had sat on the floor with his knees to his chest. "Something about a boy, right?"

Wow, I'm so specific. He drawled as he rolled his eyes, shaking his feet to get the blood flowing back into his sleeping limbs. My skills of perception are still flawless, I see.

Arthur remained quiet as the bespectacled blond finished his aforementioned ministrations, perturbing him further. "At least, I think that was what it was about," Alfred notified as he finished with his feet, relinquishing his hold on the sink and standing on his feet again. A victorious grin etched itself onto his features. "I can't be sure; my memory of that time was pretty fuzzy. Do you think you could tell it again, though?"

"Alfred," the bushy-browed Briton expressed as the American knelt down and stacked the shampoo bottles back onto the countertop, considering he knocked them over during his panic attack. "I… don't think you would like it. I-it's a tragedy. You hate tragedies."

Alfred finished with the bottles and stood upright, stretching lightly as he did so since his muscles were still accustomed to him sitting down. He knocked on the door to alert Arthur he was coming out, opening the door after giving the Brit a moment to sit up from where (he assumed) he sat on the ground outside the restroom. Alfred eyed Arthur's rumpled clothes and (permanent) case of bedhead with guilt as he knew he was responsible for waking up the male so late in the night.

"I know," he smiled, ruffling the Englishman's aforementioned case of bedhead much to the irritation of said Englishman. "But it's been years since I heard it the one time. After that, you stopped telling stories to me."

"W-well, yes," Arthur confirmed with pastel-pink cheeks, averting Alfred's gaze as he turned around and sat back down on his bed against the wall, toying with his fingers embarrassedly. "Though…if I may, why the sudden interest aside from all of that?"
"Because I'd love to do this sort of thing with you again," Alfred admitted, following the shorter blond and sitting on the edge of the mattress next to him. He could still hear the sounds crashing outside, but he turned no ear to it. He only focused on the male beside him, and didn't even realize he had entangled their fingers together until he felt a spark of electricity seep through his pores. Until he felt a wave of calm sweep over whatever traces of his anxiety remained, leaving him unafraid of the thunder which resembled the ringing of gunshots. Until he felt long, thin fingers lace themselves between his own after a moment of paralysis.

"And… just as there's always a shadow in the light, there's always a light in the darkness. Even though it's a sad story, I bet it has the potential for a happy ending, no matter how tragic or dark it is."

A pregnant silence hung between the two blonds, eventually broken by Arthur when he exhaled a soft sigh. His eyes grew hooded beneath his thick lashes as he stared into space, deep pools of emerald seeming darker all of a sudden.

"Alright," Arthur whispered, Alfred dismissing the familiar (though he couldn't determine where he had seen it before) look in Arthur's eyes and the slight tightening of the Briton's hand in his own as figments of his tired mind. "I'll tell it to you again. For the first time since your fifteenth birthday in the hospital."

"Deep inside, the boy yearned to protect those he loved. Even at the cost of his own life."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: As you can well-imagine, this chapter was very...personal and terrifying to write. Not because of the violence and graphic description of injury (although that certainly was difficult to word and even more so to imagine), but given the fact that Alfred's panic attack is heavily based on my own, countless experiences. As someone who used to have multiple panic attacks every single day, I tried my hardest to convey what happens during such a situation, although I know that everyone's experiences are different and this chapter should be taken with a grain of salt. Nonetheless, thank you all so much for your kind, hilarious comments and constructive criticisms, it's so nice to hear from my readers and to know what they think of the work I put into each of these chapters. I'll try to update soon with the next installment, which hopefully shouldn't take long. Until then? Stay awesome.
Epiphany of the Self

Chapter Summary

In which a story is told.

Chapter Notes

Regular font indicates the present.

*Italic font indicates flashbacks or dreaming; whether it's a flashback or a dream will be clarified.*

*Bold italic font indicates thought.*

*Bold regular font indicates writing/typing.*

Warning: mentions of violence, injury, semi-panic attacks, and hospitalization.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"His trek back home felt both too long and too short. It was long in the aspect that he craved nothing more than to crawl beneath his bedcovers and let this wretched day be over with, and it was short in the aspect that he didn't want to face his mother when he returned home. His momentum was already slow from the weak state of his body and the patriotic crowds swelling up the streets of New York, so in relation to the previous aspect, he was grateful for such things prolonging his inevitable fate.

None of those things deterred the sharp sting on his right cheek when he arrived on his apartment's doorstep, steam practically blowing from his mother's ears.

"Arthur. James. Kirkland. Where were you?" Alice Kirkland spoke in a low voice as she retracted her hand from his face and let it fall to her side. She was a thin woman with blonde hair that fell to her waist, green eyes that were narrowed like daggers, and, although she was short in stature, a serious aura emanating from her that made her seem as if she were looming over Arthur's form like a giant. "I tell you to lie low for a while, turn my back for five minutes, and what happens? Suddenly you vanish without a trace! I searched all over the apartment complex, yet you didn't show! I received no calls, no texts, and no messages indicating whether you were even alive!"

She forced herself to pause there in her rant, taking a deep breath. "So, now that you've gone and scared me within an inch of my life, are you ready to tell me where the bloody hell you disappeared to for God-knows how long?"

"He averted his mother's gaze and hid his hands in his pockets, hoping the fabric wouldn't chafe the bandaged wounds on his wrists. As if they didn't hurt enough.

"Out." Arthur shrugged, his brow furrowing as he realized how harshly his head was pounding in
tune with his pulse.

His parent's stance remained unperturbed by his inadequate answer. Arthur figured he inherited his stubbornness from her, somehow.

"Out where?" She questioned, crossing her arms over her chest. "I've asked all around in hopes someone would know of your whereabouts, and yet none of them had the slightest inkling."

"I went out, mother." Arthur venomously retorted, much to Alice's distain. His body was disintegrating from fatigue and he was finding it difficult to concentrate; he swore he could still see blinding-white bandaging and cheekbones speckled with crimson whenever he blinked. "Something happened and I had to leave. But I'm back, so is this really a big deal?"

The blonde woman scoffed. "You fail to realize how much of an issue this is, young man!" She notified, following behind her son even as he speed-walked his way to his room. "Do you have any idea how worried I was? How much I panicked that my only child didn't contact me, couldn't be found no matter how often I looked, and left even though I forbade him from leaving the premises?"

"I took precaution into account, mother!" Arthur exclaimed, regret nibbling at his stomach when acknowledging his blatant lie. He hadn't been paying much attention when he received the initial call from the hospital; there was no telling whether or not he had now put both himself and his mother in danger due to his own negligence. But he refused to admit his mistake since he had already made an abundance of failures today (not to mention how reluctant he was to speak aloud what had happened, as speaking it aloud meant he had accepted it), so he wretched open his bedroom door in hopes of getting some space from her. "Trust me when I say that!"

"I don't know if I can trust you!" Alice declared, grabbing the metal knob from behind him and slamming his bedroom door shut to prevent him from escaping so soon. "You deliberately disobeyed me and went outside even though I told you not to, after all!"

Arthur gritted his teeth and leaned against the door with a scowl on his face, mimicking her earlier pose by crossing his arms over his chest. "Why don't you believe me when I say I made sure nobody was following me?! I'm not an idiot, you know—I definitely would have known if someone was trying to shoot me!"

"I don't care about whether you made sure no one was following," his mother asserted, keeping her hand tightly wrapped around the doorknob in case her son still had hopes of absconding their strife. "The fact remains that you're in my house, so you follow my rules; when I tell you to live up to your father's motto by staying home where it's safer instead of getting gunned down on the streets, you had better stay home!"

The regret from before was now taking huge bites out of the British boy's insides, alongside the irritation and rage spiraling up within him and threatening to explode. "I wouldn't have disobeyed you if I had a choice, mother!"

"You had a choice and you know it!" Alice accused, her nails digging into the metal of the doorknob as her fair face grew red with anger. "Nobody was forcing you—the decision was entirely your own!"

"I'm fifteen years old, mother!" He notified, his toes curling in his shoes with each falter in his voice, wishing that she would just understand and leave him alone-.! "I'm not a child, anymore! I have a good understanding of how the world works!"

"Then tell me, Arthur," Alice countered in a deathly-calm voice, removing her hands from the door
and placing them on her hips, her gaze narrowed in doubt. "Why did you have to risk getting yourself killed?"

The male stiffened when that sentence was spoken, quietude born between them. His parent looked fixedly at him, an eyebrow raised in distrust as she awaited his answer.

His skin turned pale and clammy as the irritation and rage went away, replacing his adrenaline with the culpability that had ripped him, earlier. Fear clawed its way up his throat, choking his speech and rendering him mute. Fear not towards his mother, but towards something that, while he wanted to forget ever happened, he also wanted to keep in the back of his mind as a constant reminder of his various faults.

The Briton turned away from his mother as he dwelled deeper, remembering all of it. "I...I'm sorry," he uttered, shaking his head over and over again the further back his memories played, missing the startled look on his parent's face. He tried and failed to open the door to his bedroom, yet his fingers were unable to latch around the metal as they suddenly felt boneless. "I'm so sorry, mum."

A somber look dampened Alice's features. "Arthur?" She started in a quiet, tentative way. She reached out and gently cupped his face, tilting his head up and stroking his cheek with her thumb. "Darling, what happened?"

The British teen bit his lip, tongue-tied in the presence of his parental figure. After a moment, Arthur gave up on skirting around the truth and buried his face in his mother's shoulder, much to her surprise.

"I failed."

The statement spoke for itself, leaving a thick silence in its wake. The only sound that pervaded the atmosphere was the distant shout of Fourth-of-July fireworks.

Alice exhaled a quivering breath and slowly wrapped her arms around Arthur's body in spite of how taller he was compared to her. She closed her eyes as she felt the saltwater on her blouse and listened to his muffled sobs. As she felt him slump into her embrace, weak-kneed and shaking. As she watched and heard her son—her strong son who had always tried his best to keep his emotions at bay—breaking in her arms like a chipped porcelain doll.

As his fingernails dug into her spine, rendered psychologically-exposed and emotionally-unstable for the first time in a long while, Alice Kirkland was reminded of how young Arthur really was.

It wasn't long until the teen exhausted his tears and mustered enough strength to pull away from his mother, mentally preparing an onslaught of apologies to deliver for putting her in an awkward position. When that happened, his parent lifted his face up and brushed aside his bangs, noting his weary features with woe. "I'm sorry, love; I'm sorry for yelling at you and bringing it up while the wounds are still fresh."

"N-no," the British boy managed to say, making the woman blink in surprise. "You don't n-need to apologize. If anyone should be sorry, I should for disobeying you."

Alice sighed once more, before enveloping him in another hug.

"You're a good lad," she murmured, pecking the top of his head when he gradually slipped his arms around her back, raking her gaze over his form. He had grown in height and had begun developing muscles over the past few months in particular since puberty had a late start, yet before he had seemed as small and frail as a young child in her arms, something rather rare for him to outwardly
show. "I was…I was just so worried about you, Arthur. I couldn't find you no matter how hard I looked and could only hope you were alright. I felt so frightened and helpless, especially given all that's happened, today."

He stiffened up again, but he didn't interrupt her.

"At least here you have people who are willing to protect you." She apprised as she glanced out the window. The sun had long-since set, allowing the moonlight to filter in through the white window curtains and shadows to engulf the apartment complex given how paranoid she was of turning on lights in the house as of that day; she wanted to keep up the appearance that they weren't at home for as long as possible. "But, out there…"

Out there, it wasn't as guaranteed.

The blonde swallowed thickly, her focus lingering on his wrists pressed against her back with soul-swallowing remorse deepening her gaze. She would need to change the bandages shortly as they were already stained with dirt and blood, meaning he had probably tripped and aggravated his injuries while he was out and about.

Even knowing she would have to change them soon made her chest feel heavy. He was too young to deal with these sorts of things.

"These wounds of yours were just a warning." She reminded in a small, sad tone, combing through his hair locks with her fingers as she cradled his head to her chest. "And even then, those horrible people didn't finish the job. They wanted to kill you, Arthur; who's to say that they haven't stopped looking for you?"

"Yes," he croaked out, burying his hurt cheek into the crook of her neck. His nerves uncoiled when his brain registered the scent of earl grey tea and old books, something so achingly-familiar that reminded him he was safe and secure for now, that he was home. Away from the guilt, the madness, all of the chaos that felt like it had conspired over the course of a thousand years as opposed to one day. "I know I could have been kidnapped. I know I could have been hurt. I know I could have been killed, mum. And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, mum, for worrying you and being cause for your anguish, your fear, your suffering. But I had to."

"Why?" She spoke in barely a whisper, pulling back and rubbing the tearstains from the teen's face with the hem of her sleeve.

He dared to look at her, and the British woman was shocked at how his eyes were half-lidded and dark, a stark contrast to the bright emerald hue they normally pervaded until today. He looked emotionally-detached and vacant, as if a stranger had overtaken him.

"Alfred's in the hospital, mum. And it's all my fault." It said in a lifeless voice.

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

In truth, Arthur had been awake for a long time. From the moment that he and Alfred had bade goodnight and the lights flickered off, the Englishman had been plagued by horrible memories that left him tossing and turning between the sheets, trying and failing to ease his nerves until the moments stretched to minutes, minutes stretched to hours, and so on.

Dammit, he remarked internally as he rolled onto his stomach, his face buried into his pillow as his hands gripped the covers. Why is it so difficult to fall into a dreamless sleep?
The pillows were soft and provided satisfactory cushioning beneath his head, the blankets (while thin) were entangled pleasantly around his build, and the raindrops fell against the windows in a way that was soothing to his ears. His breathing was slow and steady, and yet, due to his reluctance to see those macabre sights loop mercilessly through his head, he was unable to succumb to his weariness in spite of his heavy eyelids and sore limbs.

**By all means, I should have no problem,** he thought with an inward sigh as he lay on his back, staring at the ceiling with fatigued green eyes. He closed his eyes, hoping that the repetitive tapping of the rain (which had significantly diminished over the past few hours in comparison to the outright chaos that was its predecessor) would lull him into the embrace of Morpheus once again. **The last few days have been hectic, what with Russia's proposal, Matthew's wedding rehearsal, and the Triple Theft at the MCNY, all of that not even including the time tending to Kiku and Alfred's injuries. I've been so busy and I'm extremely tired, but…**

*Think of the one you love brimming with happiness.*

His gaze became pained, as he sat up and leaned against the headboard with his arms wrapped around his knees. His fingernails dug into the sides of his legs, leaving red crescents in their wake.

*Now, imagine the one you love…suffering.*

He exhaled aloud, blowing some blond hair strands aside in the process.

It wasn't unheard of for him to dream of those times. For the past seven years, those few memories in particular were a burden on his conscience, leaving him limping as if he were attached to a ball and chain. It always damaged his pride and made him feel vulnerable, like an infant in need of constant care. If time supposedly healed all wounds, then his wounds must have been horribly infected for him to take so long in recovering.

Since he clearly wouldn't be able to wind down for the night as he'd probably see those things if he tried falling asleep again, he figured he might as well evaluate the past few days and strategize his next move. Alfred was sleeping soundly (though he occasionally mumbled strange things like 'they'll be coming' and 'won't stop'), so he wouldn't have any interruptions for the most part.

His brow furrowed as he pieced together all that had conspired over the past couple of days, finding it hard to believe that so little time had passed and yet so much had happened.

**With Russia's business proposal, Kiku and I have been given a list of all the rare artifacts he desires,** the Briton dwelled with a ghost of a smile dancing upon his pale features, recalling how he had asserted England's position in their agreement and had earned more respect in Russia's eyes. **To spare us the long process of auctioning the artifacts off one by one, skirting around the police to send the artifacts, waiting even longer to receive the money, all of that. He acts as a guaranteed customer who will take the items off our hands and quickly give us money without the unnecessary trials or complications one would normally experience. So far, there have been five items stolen that he requested: the Ganymede artifacts, the Etruscan artifacts, and the three pieces from Tiffany & Co (the two necklaces of gold and the necklace-brooch made of diamond). I'll make sure to arrange a rendezvous-point with Russia for the purpose of exchanging the items for the money, though it'll be tricky pinpointing a good time that won't attract the police's attention and won't interfere with the date for Matthew's wedding.**

Arthur groaned and hid his face when he remembered that. That Matthew's wedding would be in a few weeks, and he would take the place of a bridesmaid from Seychelles whose flight to New York
had been delayed. That he would have to play the part of the dress-in-drag bridesmaid, relinquishing whatever traces of his masculinity so that Matthew's special day could go by smoothly and devoid of anything bad happening. And that he'd have to walk down the aisle with Alfred (who was a groomsman), almost as if they were the ones getting married.

Just that thought made Arthur's cheeks don a vibrant hue against his will, but he shook it aside and frowned as he reminisced the theatric way he had suddenly left the rehearsal with Kiku's text message pertaining to their next heist. *I'll need to come up with a believable alibi to excuse my abrupt leave, for I have no doubt in my mind that Matthew will ask me about it the next time we talk. I am surprised that Alfred hasn't yet asked me anything, considering he was present during the whole affair and seemed the most reluctant to let me go.*

Annd just like that, his blush had returned full-force. Fantastic.

He buried his face in his arms in a futile effort to conceal himself even though nobody was around (well, nobody conscious around; Alfred was still mumbling things like 'push your luck' and 'pride always comes' under his breath), cringing as he could feel warmth crawling up from the nape of his neck to the tips of his ears. Just the thought of being wanted by someone (even in a platonic sense) made him feel butterflies in spite of his resolve to remain focused.

*And then, there's the matter involving the MCNY,* Arthur mused to further distract himself from the previous topic, lifting his head up from his arms when the rose-like shade of his facial features had toned down significantly. He extended his right hand, his fingertips grazing the lightning when its luminescence filtered through the slightly-ajar window. His gaze grew sharp like daggers, his fingers curling into a fist as he recalled punching America in the jaw during the Triple Theft, as he recalled the confusing outcome of that night. *Or moreover, the matter involving America.*

"England-san!"

Arthur faltered in his pace for half a second on the last step at the sound of the familiar voice, the American behind him using that to his advantage by grabbing his wrist and pulling him close. The Brit looked ahead and saw Kiku, wondering why the Asian's right hand was covered in blood and why he was standing there when he had a katana and a shuriken instead of attacking.

A dull 'click' registered in his ear, followed by the feeling of cold metal being pressed against his temple, was what made the criminal realize that the superhero had a gun near his head.

His breath caught in his throat at the realization, his eyes tearing up behind his mask without his consent. His knees grew wobbly beneath his weight as he bit his lip to prevent from crying out. He didn't hear America tell Kiku to not make any sudden moves; he only heard his pulse reverberating through his brain. The chill of the weapon so close to his skull—the power to kill him so close to his skull—made him want to break into tears. His wrist trembled in the grip of his enemy, terror sinking its teeth into his mind.

'He wanted to move, but he couldn't. He wanted to scream, but he couldn't. He wanted to think, but he couldn't. There was only the stench of iron in the air.'

"P-please don't," he managed to say, hating the stutter in his voice. He couldn't muster enough courage to look at America, out of fear the hero's trigger finger would slip and he'd be dead.

"Please."

Maybe it was from the shock of seeing the prideful supervillain who kept a poker face as often as possible to prevent others from predicting him, in such a pathetic state. Maybe it was from the pity of
seeing the prideful supervillain who kept a poker face as often as possible to prevent others from predicting him, in such a pathetic state. Maybe it was from the heroic morals the superhero boasted himself having. Maybe it was from the acknowledgement that, in keeping a gun trained on the thief's head, it would make him no better than the criminals he imprisoned.

Whatever the reason, not even Arthur was able to determine what precisely went through America’s mind that made his hold on him relinquish, allowing the Brit to slip free.

Arthur nearly tripped over his own feet as he backed away from the masked blond, still staring at his enemy with wide, wide eyes. He was at a complete loss of words to say.

America averted his gaze, and slowly removed the ammo from the gun. "I can't do it," he murmured, his voice so low Arthur strained his ears to hear him. "No matter what, I won't do it. I won't become like you, England."

It doesn’t make sense no matter how you look at it. Arthur noted, cradling his hand to his chest as he swore he could still feel the dull ache he initially experienced when he struck America’s face. His back met the mattress again and he turned on his side so he could see the room, scanning over the unfamiliar location out of habit. Even if you take away his ties with the NYPD, the fact remains that he's taken it upon himself to rid New York of criminals. He knows he's not a uniformed member of the police, but he goes out of his way to help them out whether by throwing people in jail or acting as their mascot.

He scowled. Not only am I the one criminal whose evaded his capture for so long (as he usually catches his targets within a short amount of time), but I've made sure to become a tremendous thorn in his side by ridiculing, humiliating, and overall complicating his relationships with the public, media, and NYPD.

The Englishman turned on his other side so that he could face the wall, pebbles of dread dropping into his stomach and sending ripples throughout his body, growing larger and spreading further against the his will as he contemplated. In the four months I've acted as 'England', he's always wormed his way into my plans and tried to stop me. Even back before my debut at the Metropolitan Museum, back when I was committing small thefts to build up my credibility, he always showed up and wouldn't have hesitated to turn me in. So why would he let me go when it was clear the advantage was his? He had me right where he wanted me—what was stopping him from ending things right there?

His gaze softened, though he blamed it on his mental/physical drowsiness. Though it's not like I'm...ungrateful to him for that. Letting me go, I mean. If I had been imprisoned, Kiku would probably be caught or go into hiding, my parents' deaths wouldn't be avenged, my plans would be ruined, the NYPD would remain as corrupt and cowardly as ever, and I would never see Alfred again. If he hadn’t had the sudden change of heart, I honestly have no idea what would happen or what I would do.

A rock of apprehension dropped into his stomach and sent a wave coursing in him. While I’m unable to predict his actions since his thoughts and outward conduct don’t correspond, I pride myself on being able to at least anticipate his mindset. But I would have never expected him to willingly set me free, not when he had a gun to my head. If he caught me and turned me in with my current reputation, the NYPD would regain its foothold in the public’s eye and America would be viewed as a hero again.
His eyes grew wide as the fear sunk into his psyche. REALLY sunk in, not just the brief flashes of panic that would strike him between acting as Arthur Kirkland and England, but genuinely registered into his head. The evening of the Triple Theft, America was acting unlike the adversary I'm used to facing. He actually used my own tactics against me by making my emotions run wild, like I had done to him during the Second Metropolitan Heist! Alongside him decoding my message to the NYPD and discovering the purpose behind egging him on, I didn't expect him to keep it in mind and deliver the same blows later! While he only employed those maneuvers for a short period of time, he gutted a brash reaction out of me, so there's no guarantee that he won't try employing my own (or even some new) tactics when we meet again to gut another brash reaction he could use to his advantage!

In the midst of his anxiety, he failed to hear the songs of thunder reaching their crescendo. In the furthest corner of his mind, he remembered how petrified Alfred was of storms.

Oh God. Has he gotten to the point where I can't predict him at all, anymore? Where I'm… helpless against him?

Another crack of thunder broke through his thoughts, making him stiffen up underneath his blanket and his eyes squeeze shut against his better judgment. He briefly summoned up 'England' so that he could force himself to take slow, deep breaths to ease the fight-or-flight hormones running circles in his (already-haphazard) skull.

Calm yourself. Even if he did act in a way that was uncharacteristic, it could have been under the direction of 'O'. For all we know, America only let us go to throw you off-guard and send you in a frenzy. Why would he show us, the villain archetype to his 'hero' archetype, any kind of mercy aside from gaining a life debt out of it?

Arthur touched his lips absently, thinking of his first kiss.

"No matter what, I won't do it. I won't become like you, England."

That hypocrite. Arthur growled, anger burning a hole in his stomach. At least I acknowledge that I manipulate emotions; he has the audacity to do the same thing and call himself a 'hero for justice'. How arrogant of him to assume that it's fine if he undertakes the same maneuvers I do because he's considered 'good'. And to think I said I owed him one.

England covered the rest of his mouth with his hand, repressing the urge to laugh. But even he wasn't expecting his enemy to say that. Therefore, the ball resides in my court considering America will be rendered as confused and conflicted as I was before I found him out just now. I'll have to make a move before he can figure out my true intentions like I figured out his, that way he'll be too deep in his own brain to properly focus on catching me.

Arthur's heart skipped a beat when he heard an earsplitting strike of thunder reverberate through the room, the sudden piercing 'CREAK' of the second bed in the room and the sound of ragged breathing following shortly thereafter.

The Briton made his body grow limp and reverted his pulse back to a slow rhythm without his persona's help, his ears tuned in on the American situated opposite him. He faced the wall with his eyes open, listening intently as Alfred's inhales and exhales regulated. Another shout of thunder interrupted the calm, provoking a series of squeaks that indicated the taller blond was getting up.

I forgot how scared of thunderstorms he is, Arthur reflected, attributing the gentle rustle of
carpeting to Alfred walking around barefoot. He tried determining where the American was going based on his footsteps, but considering he was unfamiliar with the hotel room's layout, he didn't have much luck. After stopping for a few seconds, the Englishman determined that Alfred stepped into the restroom as the sound of running water seeped under the closed door. It's been so long since we've spent time during the evening together; we used to sleep over all the time back when we lived in the same apartment building, yet we haven't done it recently as we live on different floors and don't share a dorm.

He wished his skin wasn't so pale, that way his blushes could be less-noticeable. That was probably for the best. If we lived together, I don't know how long I'd last until I'd end up ruining our friendship with my feelings. At least, even more than I already have.

The Brit kept his sleeping position when he heard the water stop, his hearing focused on the bathroom in case Alfred had a panic attack (though even acknowledging such things was the equivalent of his heart being massaged by a cheese-shredder). I feel so bad for him—he lives in a dorm all by himself and he rarely comes to visit Kiku and I during the night, meaning that-

A particularly loud round of thunder rocked throughout the building, ringing painfully in his ears and resulting in (what sounded like) plastic bottles being knocked onto the bathroom floor.

He's been dealing with his fears all by himself, with no one to help him through it.

Arthur sat up immediately with that last thought, adrenaline pumping his cells as his brain registered that Alfred was in distress. His bare feet touched the ground and he crept towards the door, seeing the doorknob wriggling and hearing low mumbles protrude from the bathroom. Arthur strained his hearing so that he could try deciphering what Alfred was saying, but he was powerless in attempting to discern it. Whenever Alfred was experiencing a panic attack, he tended to be extremely jumpy and emotionally unstable towards things he was unfamiliar with, therefore making it essential for Arthur to reach him fast.

His incentive increased all the more when a 'THUMP' emitted from the bathroom. The Englishman pressed his ear against the lavatory door to try hearing something, anything to indicate whether or not the American inside was okay. He sat on his knees and cleared his mind to the best of his abilities (never an easy feat as the gears in his head were constantly whirling) to listen better. In spite of his panic, he couldn't help but be reminded of the nightmares that plagued him earlier—no, the memories that plagued him earlier.

"Now, imagine the one you love...suffering."

This time's different, the Briton dwelled adamantly, his eyes narrowing in concentration. Another strike of thunder caused another crash from the restroom's confines, sending Arthur's heart leaping in his throat.

"A-Alfred, are you in there?" Arthur asked, the blood draining from his face when he received no reply aside from another 'thump'. He began pounding on the door to try getting the blond's attention on the off-chance he had hit his head and was clinging to consciousness, the sight of Alfred bleeding and broken burned into his memory, just as (if not more) vivid than it was seven years ago.

This time, he could help him, right? Like he used to when they were children and the American would always cling to him for dear life? Like he was unable to do seven years ago, even though it was probably his fault? Like he's wanted to do for so long, whether helping him through a thunderstorm or taking up a villainous façade?
"Answer me, he thought as he sat on his knees with his head and hands pressed to the side of the door, trying to stay strong like he hadn't been back then. Please, please be okay.

"Y-y-yeah—I-I'm here. I'm h-here, Artie." A soft voice wheezed, the sound sending the invigorating chill of solace spreading through his nervous system like an injected drug.

"Good God, what happened?!" The shorter blond fretted, scooting closer. The remnants of adrenaline still coursed through his veins as both he and his companion weren't entirely out of the woods yet, only the flow wasn't nearly as severe as it was beforehand. Much to his relief—he had undergone extreme levels of stress in the past few weeks, therefore he had no idea how much more his body could take. "I-I woke up when I heard something hit the floor and I thought--"

Arthur bit his lip to stop himself from blubbering, as he rested the back of his head against the door and exhaled a shaky sigh of relief. "I…I'm so glad to hear your voice."

"I-I'm sorry," the bespectacled blond murmured, regret now seeping into Arthur's chest. "I-I had a n-nightmare and the thunder--"

Another crash interrupted their conversation, causing the Englishman to cringe. When it died down, a laugh reverberated against the tiled walls of the restroom. A fake, nervous laugh. "W-well, you know how I g-get around thunder."

"Can you come out of there?" Arthur asked warily, peering at the door with caution. It seemed likely that Alfred had locked himself in there at the height of his anxiety. The fact that he was trapped within a small, enclosed space during a thunderstorm wasn't to be overlooked; hell, it was probably a lot scarier in there than out.

"N-not right now," Alfred uttered, regret weighing Arthur down like bags full of sand. "S-sorry. J-just keep ta-talking to me and I'll be fine. I always am."

Again, he divulged within his subconscious, sadness prevalent in his form from the uncharacteristic slump of his shoulders to the fatigued drop of his eyelids. **Again, it's out of my hands. I can only watch and hope for the best.**

A sad chuckle escaped him. **Though this time I won't be as helpless; I can do at least a little something, even if it's something as simple as talking to him. Talking to him will keep him grounded.**

"You're a stubborn twat as ever, I see," he teased, hugging his knees to his chest as he rested his back against the door, staring out the window across the room. Although it was quite the downpour, it wasn't nearly as intense as it was earlier in terms of rainfall. He expected that it would be a light drizzle come dawn, meaning that he and Alfred could return to NYU without much difficulty. He only hoped that Kiku had accomplished a great deal of what he wanted to do during their elongated absence. "I can't help but feel nostalgic—you've always been scared of thunder, even when we were younger."

"D-does that surprise you?" Alfred wondered, making Arthur roll his eyes. Of course that wouldn't surprise him. "K-kids being scared of thunder, that is."

"No," he replied, his voice becoming softer as he reminisced. A ghost of a smile danced upon his angular features the further he dwelled. "But it never failed to surprise me how I was always the first person you came to during a thunderstorm when we were children."

*One minute, Arthur Kirkland was sleeping contently in his bunny-onesie pajamas, the next, he was*
tackled and nearly suffocating in the embrace of a Superman-clad Alfred F. Jones he had befriended from across the hall.

"W-what is it?" He coughed, a bit blue in the face as he had to literally pry himself away from the unnaturally-strong blond, rubbing remnants of sleep from his eyes. "Bad dream?"

Another rumble arose from outside, provoking the American to plug his fingers in his ears and bury his face in a Union Jack-themed pillow. "N-n-no," he addressed, the wavering of his muffled tone revealing his blatant lie and quirking a bemused look from the Brit. "T-thunder's sc-scary."

Silence enveloped them in a blanket, only broken by the thunder and the rain pattering unceasingly against the glass of his window. Those sounds, nothing out of the ordinary to the bushy-browed Briton, melded into background noise as he internally weighed the pros and cons of the current predicament.

On one hand, Alfred was (obviously) scared of thunder and would rest easy in the presence of another person, not to mention it'd be just like another one of their sleepovers, only during a storm. On the other hand...he risked getting killed in his sleep if Alfred happened to be a notorious cuddle-monster. Which he knew he was, based on the many times he'd caught the bespectacled blond glomping the feathers out of his pillows during the night.

Life or death. Sleepover or suffocation. Helping out a friend, or preventing an early demise. It was a difficult choice, or as difficult of a choice a six year-old could possibly fathom.

In the end, with a deep sense of 'this isn't a good idea' on par with the deep sense of 'this is the right thing to do', Arthur conceded with a "fine" and looked away out of self-awareness. "J-just don't hurt me, got it?"

He saw Alfred nod quickly out of the corner of his eye, another 'BOOM' sending him spiraling on his back from the force of the American's sudden hug.

Arthur didn't sleep well that night, but, based on the large smile and words of gratitude that escaped Alfred the morning after, he decided that he wouldn't mind doing it again.

Arthur laughed again, a happier laugh unlike its predecessor downtrodden by wistfulness. He remembered and was glad he had those memories to cherish, unlike the memories that had haunted him before in his dreams.

"We would have sleepovers so much of the time, staying at either of our homes every other night." He smiled, leaning his head against the door and closing his eyes as he replayed those blissful moments of his childhood. Remembering those moments undeterred by the hardships the world would eventually dish out to them all, those moments that have driven him to do so much as 'England'. In the back of his mind, he wondered how his younger-self would react if he knew the times he took for granted as a child would motivate him as an adult. He wondered dearly.

"We would wake up in the mornings to sunshine and the sound of bird songs, playing shadow puppets with our hands until you demanded breakfast. We would spend the afternoons beneath the trees playing chess, talking about anything and everything that came into our minds until the day grew old. We would spend the evenings star-gazing on the rooftop of the apartment building, counting constellations until we could barely keep our eyes open. And we would do it all over come morning." Arthur finished, his head resting on the knees held to his chest, his cheeks hurting from how much he was smiling. The storm was still going, but it had calmed down significantly, or at least it seemed to the Brit. Alfred sure-as-hell seemed calmer, which lessened the regret piling up in his stomach and untangled his wound-up nerves.
"Yeah," Alfred spoke up after a moment of silence, sounding like he was smiling too. "We would do all of that. I'd love to be able to do that again with you."

A pebble of hope dropped, sending ripples spreading through his body against his will. Just hearing that made his smile grow and his insides flutter.

Alfred would love to do that all again, to experience that all again, that happiness…and with him, of all people. He knew he meant it only in a platonic sense, but he couldn't help himself as that brief feeling of being wanted by someone he cared for felt so foreign and new to him.

Usually it was so one-sided; he loved Alfred yet kept it all hidden inside, only outwardly showing opaque glimpses of his love through wandering glances and lingering touches. But for Alfred to want to relive those moments with him of his own free will…Arthur couldn't stop himself from feeling immense happiness that he wanted to cup in his hands and never let go of, even though he hated how selfish that concept was.

For the first time in a long while, Arthur let himself speak with his heart instead of with his head. "Well, what's stopping us?"

Which is probably why Alfred went silent.

As soon as the last syllable had hit the air, Arthur covered his mouth with his hand, red behind his fingers as he realized what he just said and how he said it. He was probably overthinking it—he had the tendency to do that, much to his chagrin—but his tone sounded much softer and affectionate than his normal voice. Regardless of the fact that he and Alfred had been best friends for years, it was unusual for him to respond with tenderness. But then again, the last few weeks in particular had made him exceptionally paranoid, in both his alter-ego as England and keeping his feelings for Alfred as inconspicuous as possible, so chances were likely that he was looking too deeply into things. In those instances, he was relieved to have England help reel him back in when he was about to drown, considering he couldn't afford to lose his sense of logos because of the whirlwinds of pathos; he was supposed to be the voice of reason in him and Alfred's duo, and didn't want to result in the American getting hurt a second time possibly because of him.

Though…was it wrong for him to cherish whatever time he and Alfred could spend together, even though Alfred likely thought nothing of it? Was it wrong for him to view their interactions with romance in the back of his mind, even though Alfred likely viewed it as platonic? Was it wrong for him to have a microscopic fraction of hope that maybe, by some far-off, Hell-is-more-likely-to-freeze-over chance that…Alfred could feel the same brand of love for him, even if just a little bit?

A laugh disturbed his thoughts, dumping reality onto his shoulders like cold water. "Well, the thunderstorm for one," Alfred reminded. "What did we used to do whenever those happened again?"

The blond struggled for a second to find his voice, and retaliated with a sarcastic "You're more thick-headed than I thought, Jones," to hide his somewhat-resurfacing relief, as it seemed Alfred didn't notice the warmth in his earlier statement. His relief surfaced more when he heard an offended squawk from the American from his mild mockery, but he still remained cautious considering it had taken Alfred a minute to respond. "Don't you remember? You'd always crawl into wherever I was sleeping, be it a bed or a sleeping bag, and always cling to me for dear life while I told you a story."

A genuine chuckle escaped the blond still in the bathroom. "Y-yeah," Alfred reassured, probably concealing his mouth with his hand to stem the noise. "I remember that. When we were younger, you'd tell me fairytales like 'The Princess and the Pea' and 'Beauty and the Beast' to keep my mind away from it all. Though you stopped telling stories at one point; I wonder why."
Yes, that was always their routine, but…after what happened seven years ago, he stopped entirely.

*Because I simply couldn't bear it anymore.* He confessed internally, guilt creeping up once more. *No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't do it. I always ended up thinking of that day when I weaved a story as a method of coping, among other horrible things that happened.*

Arthur touched his wrists absentmindedly, wincing out of habit.

"Do you happen to remember the last story you told me?" Alfred questioned, likely standing up based on the sounds of rustling fabric emerging from the restroom. "Something about a boy, right?"

A heavy feeling settled in the bottom of Arthur's stomach, leaving him cold and nervous at the mentioning of his 'creation' against his better judgment.

*That's impossible,* he thought as he stood up and walked a good distance away from the door since it sounded like the American was getting up and moving around. *He was unconscious when I visited him for the first time and talked to him. There's no way he could have been able to hear me, much less remember after so many years. But just to be on the safe side…*

"At least, that's what I think it was about," Alfred resumed, as if oblivious to the Brit's silence. "I can't be sure; my memory of that time was pretty fuzzy. Do you think you could tell it again, though?"

"Alfred," the bushy-browed Briton expressed, preparing a convincing lie as he couldn't distill the heaviness of dread from his being. "I…don't think you would like it. I-it's a tragedy. You hate tragedies."

Well, sort-of a tragedy; the story (in its own egotistical way) was based off himself during his ultimate time of weakness, but as the tale could still be applicable to the criminal-related activities that had conspired over the past four months, he had no idea whether it could be considered a tragedy or not. Was it to be considered a tragedy if he delved into a life of crime, but it was for a good cause?

Even though fools like America couldn't see it, he had good intentions in mind.

*"They're shallow and pathetic, valuing things like 'reputation' and 'public image' over what is justice and truth. You cannot change them, but they possess the potential to be reborn."*

Even though fools like America couldn't see it, he was doing all of this for the betterment of New York, quite possibly the world if everyone saw the corruption he dismantled and strived to change their own law enforcements.

*"So the new beginning lies at the police's end. New York's Police Department is destined for greater chaos."

Even though fools like America couldn't see it, he was actually the hero.

*"I can't do it. No matter what, I won't do it. I won't become like you."

*And yet you have the audacity to employ my own tactics against me? Your hypocrisy and naivety creates quite a bubble of obliviousness.*

The bespectacled blond stepped out of the lavatory after he knocked to verify his exit, eyeing the shorter blond’s wrinkled bedclothes and (impossible-to-tame) bedhead with what seemed like guilt before ruffling up his aforementioned bedhead.
"I know," he smiled, the Englishman putting up an expression of irritation to conceal his content. "But it's been years since I heard it the one time. After that, you stopped telling stories to me."

"W-well, yes," Arthur confirmed with pastel-pink cheeks, averting the American's gaze as he turned around and sat back down on his bed against the wall, toying with his fingers embarrassedly. "Though…if I may, why the sudden interest aside from all of that?"

"Because I'd love to do this sort of thing with you again," Alfred admitted, following the shorter blond and sitting on the edge of the mattress next to him. Arthur didn't realize that the man of his unvoiced affections had entangled their fingers together until he felt a spark of electricity seep through his pores, making his hair stand on end. After a moment of mentally debating what his best course of action would be, he returned the gesture and hoped that his pounding pulse couldn't be felt.

"And…just as there's always a shadow in the light, there's always a light in the darkness. Even though it's a sad story, I bet it has the potential for a happy ending, no matter how tragic or dark it is."

Surprise briefly made itself known within Arthur's expression as he allowed his gaze to flicker towards the male beside him, unable to hide his bemusement.

_A shadow in the light and a light in the darkness? I could have sworn I've heard that from somewhere. And potential for a happy ending…?_ He wondered, settling his line-of-sight anywhere else but on Alfred, his brow slightly furrowed as he contemplated. _That's both a peculiar and typical thing for him to say—believing in such things as a happy ending even if a majority of the story supposedly pertains to tragedy. Although I cannot deny that I wouldn't have expected such an unusually perceptive statement from him, given how unstable he previously was._

Just thinking of that made another uncomfortable feeling stir through his stomach, twisting up his nerves like a ball of wire.

_A lot of horrible things have happened to him that I wouldn't have expected. Even though I want to…stop such things from happening in the first place._

That notion made him exhale a soft sigh and break the pregnant silence, his eyes hooded beneath his thick lashes as he stared into space, deep pools of emerald darker to verify his negative mental state.

His head ached, reminding him that he hadn't had a proper night's sleep. It probably explained why, this evening in particular, his moods seemed to switch even more rapidly than normal.

"Alright," Arthur whispered, wanting the day to be over with as it had been a bombardment of unpleasant experiences, memories, and realizations throughout its entirety. "I'll tell it to you again. For the first time since your fifteenth birthday in the hospital."

~ na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na na~

_He had grown accustomed to the feel of the pavement against the soles of his shoes. He had grown accustomed to the noxious burn of his lungs with every intake of breath he desperately gasped for. He had grown accustomed to the fight-or-flight mindset his brain had taken on, one that made him do brash things like sneaking out of his apartment when his mother's back was turned and running frantically through Madison Avenue on the Fourth of July._

_He tripped over his own feet and fell onto the sidewalk, grimacing as he scraped his arms and cheek. He touched his wrists from where they still bled from the bandages, wincing at the fire-like pain that spread on his appendages from the contact of the pavement and his hand._
He bit the inside of his mouth and ignored the groaning agony of his legs, standing up on his wobbly knees and pressing onward. He waded his way through the throngs of pedestrians, unaware of how many he squeezed between and blatantly ran past, only focusing on getting to his destination as quickly as he could.

He pushed open the doors and darted inside, uncaring of the puzzled stares he received as he reached the front desk and forced himself to stop, panting heavily and earning a panicked look from the receptionist.

"Are you in need of medical attention, sir?!" She exclaimed in a worried tone, standing up from her chair and resting a hand on his shoulder.

He shook his head rapidly, hating how dizzy the mere motion made him. "I," he started, wracked coughs interrupting him for a few seconds. "I-I need t-to see someone. P-please, it's an emergency!"

The receptionist withdrew her hand, eyeing him worriedly. "Which person are you visiting?"

"Jones," Arthur informed, blaming the salt water poking at the corners of his eyes on his previous fit of coughing. "Alfred F. Jones."

The employee scanned over a clipboard resting on her desk. "He came out of surgery three hours ago," she disclosed, glancing up at the bushy-browed boy again. "He's in the surgery recovery ward, room 215."

The blond nodded, managing a 'thank you' before dashing towards the nearest open elevator and pressing the appropriate buttons. He leaned against the wall to regain some of his strength when the doors closed with a small 'ding', his disheveled reflection staring back at him from the confines of the metal walls.

A trembling exhale escaped his pale lips as he stood up straight (or as straight as someone with unsteady legs and knees could stand) and wiped beads of sweat from his brow. The Brit cringed as he saw the crimson seeping through the bandages on his wrists; he probably aggravated the wounds when he tripped and fell, as if they weren't painful enough before.

"I last saw him around eleven, and it's about six o'clock right now, Arthur was able to think in a semi-logical manner undeterred by disequilibrium and exhaustion, practically sprinting out of the elevator when the metal doors opened up once again. Meaning it'll be hard for me to uncover what happened as it could have occurred at any point during that seven-hour period!

His sense of time became particularly discombobulated as he ventured towards the recovery ward and roamed through the countless white hallways to find Alfred's specified room. The numbers blended together in a haphazard mess within his mind, making it difficult for him to properly search. He paused in his endeavors when he heard and saw people standing near a door labeled 215, his ears picking up pieces of their conversation as a gesture of familiarity; when he was a young child, he learned rather quickly that having a detective for a father usually promised interesting cases and stories, as long as he kept quiet and listened closely when it was late at night and his parents assumed he was asleep.

"-It's been five hours since he arrived. How much longer do you think he'll be staying here?"

"For someone his age, he was in terrible shape when I first saw him. And yet, taking what he went through into consideration, I'd say he was extremely lucky; his surgery only took about two hours to reattach the muscles that got severed. Regardless of how long it took, we'll take all the necessary measures to ensure he recovers properly, this including setting him up with a physical therapist. As
his muscles are surprisingly strong and mendable, I estimate he'll be here for at least two weeks until he's good enough to leave."

"I see. Thank you, sir."

"If you don't mind my asking, officer, will you be here for long or will you be returning to the station?"

"Right now, it's my responsibility to keep watch over him until visiting hours are over."

Are these people talking about Alfred? He observed internally, walking towards them with wariness present in his being from the straightness of his posture to the clenching of his fists at his sides. He counted four people total; a surgeon dressed in mint-green medical scrubs, two hospital security guards dressed in black with the Mt. Sinai Hospital insignia on their shoulders, and a police officer who looked to be in his early twenties. At any other time when he didn't feel like his head was a bumbling, pathetic excuse for 'coherent thought', he would probably have an easier time piecing together everything, but right now? Arthur was finding it confusing to even attempt such things. It would make sense for the surgeon to be around, but why the other three, of all times?

The Briton looked around see if there were other people present in the hallway aside from the four he could see, to verify whether this actually was the room Alfred supposedly resided in (as he couldn't trust himself to remember whether 215 was the room Alfred supposedly resided in). By the looks of it, it was a single room logically reserved for important patients, explaining the security guards. Though why Alfred would have reason to be in this section was (for the most part) unknown to Arthur.

I think he once mentioned how his father is with the police, like mine is, Arthur recalled as he drew near, the previous thought probably explaining the male police recruit. Though both Alfred and my father haven't really mentioned what section of the NYPD Mr. Jones' is with. Must be pretty high-standing if his son gets this kind of maintenance.

It was then that the police officer took notice of Arthur with a raised eyebrow and a vague expression of intrigue gracing his features.

"Are you here to see this patient?" The blond officer asked, giving the English teen a precautionary once-over. The surgeon and security guards did the same, making Arthur feel a bit intimidated as they stood between him and reaching Alfred, as weird and surreal a concept it was to grasp that the American actually resided behind that door.

Is he...is he there? Arthur found himself wondering, swallowing thickly. Is he really in there?

Arthur nodded. "I'm a close friend of Alfred's," he began as he kept his head held high, his desire to preserve at least a fragment of his dignity making him refuse to back down. "My name is Arthur Kirkland."

The officer's poker face fell for a split-second, a stunned look briefly visible in his green eyes. But that look was gone as quickly as it had come as he regained his composure and wordlessly stepped to the side, clearing the Brit's path to the hospital door (much to the confusion of the surgeon and the two security guards).

A strange sense of relief flooded Arthur's veins as he maintained his proud demeanor (a complete opposite to the light-headedness he was experiencing, what with how far he had traveled in such a short span of time and the sheer absurdity of this entire situation) and resumed his pace, trying to
slow down his mile-a-minute mindset and abandon the adrenaline that had fueled his drained body while keeping up his façade. While his curiosity had been piqued by the odd behavior of the young policeman, Arthur decided against trying to come up with logical explanations as he had more pressing matters to deal with.

And yet he still stopped right in front of the door with his hand hovering over the knob. He sucked in a quivering breath to ease his frayed nerves and drumming pulse, feeling the eyes of the four people practically burning holes in his back while his conscience berated him for being so foolish. He hated to waste time when he had already wasted so much of it dawdling, but the thought of what lurked behind the door injected fear into his veins and made him reluctant to bite the bullet and go inside. He wanted—no, needed to know what happened to Alfred that landed him in a hospital, but there was a part of him that was completely petrified when considering his potential findings.

*I'm being irrational,* the Briton conceded. *The surgeon himself said that Alfred was lucky and would be getting top-notch medical treatment. But-

That didn't stop the worst-case scenarios from popping up in his psyche like ads on a virus-infested computer.

*Alfred, please be okay. Please, please be okay.*

He exhaled loosely, twisted the handle, and pushed forward so that he could enter the room-

-Only for his eyes to widen at what he saw before him.

Aside from the repetitive ‘beep’ of a heart monitor and the sound of the door closing behind him, the space was embedded in silence that was entirely deafening to Arthur's ears. It was calm and serene in the hospital room, an unfitting environment for the Englishman's state-of-mind as he gaped over the unconscious patient. At first, Arthur had a hard time believing that this person was Alfred. They looked like Alfred, but they were too quiet, too pale, too hurt to be Alfred. Yet the longer he stared, unable to accept this but unable to look away, the more the person seemed familiar.

Medical gauze covered their torso, tubes slithering around and into their frame as they rested on their bed. Their skin was sickly and pale instead of healthful and sun-kissed, traces of black and blue visible around their cheekbones and nose. They inhaled and exhaled slowly, carefully, as if it physically hurt them to do so much as breathe, and even then their respiration seemed empty. Although it was apparent that they were lanky and muscle was beginning to bud on their adolescent body, they looked so small and weak when swallowed by the hospital blankets and medical gauze; limp and pathetic, like a puppet with its strings cut. An IV drip was nestled beneath one of their bandage-clad forearms and a pair of black-rimmed glasses lay on the bedside table, their lenses cracked and coated thickly in blood.

There was no doubt in his mind that those were Alfred's glasses.

*What's going on, here?*

Arthur took a step forward, too focused on observing the patient than he was on walking.

*I don't…understand this at all.*

He didn't register the fact that his distance between the door and the hospital bed had significantly diminished until his foot bumped the empty chair positioned beside Alfred.
Is this—is this you? Is this really you?

Until he felt his hand tenderly brush aside some of the male's blond bangs away from his fatigued face.

There's no way that you would…that you would be hurt like this, right?

Until he felt something sticky and pulled his hand back, his irises somehow dilating in horror when seeing the crimson on his fingertips.

Oh my God.

"No, n-no," Arthur hiccupped as he wiped his hand on his pants, glancing over the gauze that trailed from Alfred's shoulders to his wrists with shock and disbelief swimming in his expression. His throat closed up, making it difficult for him to speak properly. "N-no, it's impossible. T-this can't be really ha-happening."

This can't be real. There's no way this is real. Who would be heartless enough to hurt you?

"This isn't right," he mumbled, rubbing furiously at his cheeks to prevent himself from crying, slapping on a smile even as his shoulders began to shake with unvoiced sobs, as his breathing came in quick inhales and exhales, as his legs became like Jell-O. His pride was the only thing keeping him together, even if it was as poor of an adhesive as scotch tape would be to a cracked dam. "Th-there's no way you could be h-hurt like t-this—t-there's no way that anyone would deliberately hurt you like this!"

There's no way this is really happening to you.

He gulped in lungfuls of air to stop himself from hyperventilating and drank in the sight of Alfred with his torso wrapped in thick layers of linen like it was a second layer of skin, with his breathing tubes stuck up his nose and twisting around his body like snakes, and with his face ridden with bruises and cuts like birthmarks and freckles. Each second he spent burning that image into his memory seemed as harsh and agonizing as a white-hot iron pressed to his psyche.

"Y-you're...you'll be okay." He whispered, running a trembling hand through his own blond locks, still wearing a smile even as his heart deteriorated and his mind struggled the longer he forced himself to look at his best friend—his best friend who had done nothing to deserve such hardship—reduced to an unrecognizable vegetable. "Y-you'll be okay, I know it because..."

Because I don't want to imagine you experiencing this when you've done no wrong. When you've never wanted to do any wrong.

Because I believe in you. That you can overcome this and come out stronger than before.

Because I...

He lowered his head, questioning the warmth and butterflies pooling in his chest cavity he was experiencing in spite of the current predicament. Although it felt like said warmth and butterflies only emphasized how cold and hollow he was feeling, inwardly. "B-because I don't w-want us to be torn apart like this. I-I mean, we've always been around for each other, and we a-always will be, right?"

Please wake up.

His grin faded when he was met with no reply after a few solid minutes. "Right?"
Please wake up and say yes to my face.

"Alfred," his voice cracked, taking one of the American's hands in both of his own. "Please."

Please don't leave me hanging like this.

Please, just…wake up and smile, you idiot.

Silence pervaded the room, undeterred by the heart monitor. Unyielding, unrelenting, unmerciful to his pleas, whether voiced or kept to himself. Arthur had a feeling he would grow to loathe and despise this brand of silence, though he had no idea where this foreboding sense had originated from. All he knew was that he could feel the bubbles of hatred brewing with no intent on ceasing soon, alongside the rising goose bumps upon his skin and the overwhelming awareness of how incredibly lonesome he felt in the hushed hospital.

Smile like you always have, even as my world has suddenly begun turning on a new axis.

He removed one of his hands from Alfred's, opting to shield both of his eyes with his palm in a venture to hide his shame. His emotional strength dwindled down to single digits, the walls surrounding his heart threatening to snap beneath the strain.

Because when you smile…you remind me that happiness still exists in the world. And you, yourself, make me happy. So very much.

There was nothing.

There was absolutely no sign of Alfred coming to consciousness and answering him at all, and that realization dug deeply into him.

That, no matter how much he begged and pleaded, Alfred couldn't hear and reply to him.

He didn't want this.

It was all too sudden, too scary—too real.

"Y-you were fine w-when I last saw you," he gasped out, raking both of his trembling hands through his blond locks to stop experiencing depersonalization, forcing himself to stay strong. He had already spent so much valuable time letting his emotions get to him; he couldn't afford to lose more thanks to his capriciousness. But his grip on logos was slipping through his fingers like water, pathos replacing all semblance of reason. "You were perfectly fine! What could have happened that...that-!"

His mouth ran dry as he suddenly found himself reluctant to speak it all aloud. Speaking it aloud meant that he was accepting that this had occurred. He didn't want to accept this. He didn't WANT to! Not when it meant accepting that something horrible had happened to the last person who deserved a trip to the hospital and a not-too-distant future of physical therapist visits. Not when it meant accepting that something horrible had happened to someone he had spent so much of his life with. Not when it meant accepting that something horrible had happened to someone he genuinely…cared for.

And Arthur had probably been one of the last people to see him before he got injured, right? Arthur had seen him seven hours ago, he had supposedly arrived at the hospital five hours ago, and the doctor said that he was lucky when taking into consideration what he experienced. For Alfred to end up so mangled in the course of one hour…was it possible that it wouldn't have happened if Arthur
had been there? If he could have done something to stop it? If he could have been there to possibly protect him?

In spite of how arrogant such contemplations seemed, they had their foundation of reason; the bespectacled blond was notorious for acting with his heart instead of with his head, to the point of going to extreme lengths to help people out. He was smart, of course, but his passion and drive to take part in something he believed in had a tendency to override his common sense and regard for personal safety, which could have dangerous consequences if given the wrong ingredients. That's why it was good for him to know someone like Arthur, who (for the most part) was grounded and could keep him from accidentally hurting himself.

The Brit's eyes widened in understanding, only for them to grow hooded as the truth stabbed and sunk its jagged teeth into his chest, leaving deep holes into his core.

This is all my fault.

Arthur cast his gaze back to Alfred, lingering on the bruises, the wounds, the blood. The bruises that would fade, the wounds that would heal, the blood that would wash away, yet would likely remain in Alfred's memory for the rest of his life in the form of mental scars.

All of this would happen to someone he loved because of him.

Tears welled up and blurred his vision, but he bit his lip and refused to cry. He wasn't supposed to be the emotional one in their little duo; he was supposed to be the one that could keep Alfred safe by providing logic and raising safety awareness. And how could he do that if...if he allowed something like this to get to him? Knowing that he was unsuccessful in taking precaution into account? Knowing that he might have stopped this from happening to him if he had somehow anticipated the situation accordingly and went with him? Knowing that he had failed to be there the one time Alfred might have needed him?

He's likely hurt because of me. He's probably suffered because of me. Myself and my incompetence, my failure.

And what managed to slash even deeper into his heart was knowing that now, he couldn't do anything. He had to sit back and watch while those he loved suffered, even though he could have possibly prevented such horrendous things from occurring in the first place.

He hated this. This feeling of...complete and utter helplessness. If only he had some way of anticipating it—a way to predict what would happen, even if it was a miniscule glimpse, even if that guess was wrong. Some way to expect the unexpected and properly prepare for it, like the motto his father always recited and the motto he didn't live up to. Maybe somehow, he could use it to help and protect his loved ones.

But Arthur was unable to recall abilities he possessed that could possibly benefit him in those aforementioned ways. He liked to think he had some skills that could aid him in those aspects, yet he couldn't imagine how those skills could be applied outside of chess.

So this...this is really happening, then?

In the furthest corner of his mind, he knew the answer even though it hurt so much. Yes.

At this point, Arthur's tears streamed freely down his cheekbones, banishing the remnants of his pride and driving a wrecking ball through one of the walls surrounding his heart in the process. What was the point in trying to remain strong when no one was watching or listening? What was the
point of trying to keep his emotions under check to save time, when he had already wasted so much because of his incompetence? What was the point in wasting so much energy to hope, when something like 'hope' was ineffective in regards to making Alfred come to?

The rouge sun dipped past the horizon and left swirls of indigo and navy in its wake, those colors obscured by vibrant Fourth-of-July fireworks that filtered through the windows and engulfed the hospital room in cheerful hues, although their loud sounds were too far for him to hear.

He felt empty and gelid, as if the life was sucked out of him and left only a husk of a shell behind. The sadness and guilt swept over him like a tidal wave in a tsunami, leaving him struggling under the weight and suffocating under the sheer vastness of it. And in the dissolution, his bottled-up emotions flowed free from their confines and submerged him in sorrow.

So, Arthur opened his mouth, and began to improvise a story in a (fruitless, meaningless, overall stupid idea, he was well-aware) effort to distill the silence, much to his chagrin. It wasn't that he was bad at story-telling—in fact, when they were younger, Alfred always snuck into his bed and clung to him whenever a thunderstorm rolled around, and would only have his cries consoled whenever Arthur told him a tale—it was simply the matter that he couldn't stand the silence any longer; he felt like he would go mad if it persisted with only the heart monitor to keep him company.

He was useless in this situation, and no matter how much he wished he could do something to help Alfred, he could only watch and hope for the best outcome while his loved ones ended up getting hurt and needlessly suffered.

"O-once upon a time, there was a boy." Arthur started, unaware of what he was even saying as long as it was noise. Aside from his voice, his chaotic mind was only somewhat-soothed by the slow metronome of the heart monitor. Along with serving as background noise, it also served as his primary source of comfort; the technical reminder that Alfred was still alive. "There wasn't much special about this boy, to be honest; he liked to read thick novels, he liked to drink tea, and he liked to play chess."

I hate this, Arthur thought with contempt, his knuckles white with anger. Unable to do anything worthwhile to help my loved ones, regardless of whether or not I contributed to their cause for pain. Unable to change the cruel fates dealt to them. Unable to be anything aside from helpless.

"Although he was content with his life, there was one thing he wanted more than anything else," he continued, feeling something—anger, rage, but primarily determination—grow inside him. Those three sentiments mixed and blended together, forming something he couldn't quite put his finger on, but could tell it was strong. "Something he would give anything to be able to do."

He knew he wanted to change things and prevent his loved ones from experiencing unnecessary sadness, hardship, and pain. He knew he wanted to make the world a better place for them, for all of them, so that they could find happiness. He knew he desperately wanted those things, but he felt something else was missing.

And, in the furthest, darkest corner of his mind, he knew what the piece to the puzzle was. But that furthest, darkest corner of his mind was content to let the rest of himself come up with and speak aloud another conclusion, one that wasn't entirely fake, but one that wasn't entirely true either. One that could serve as a good motivation for a while, but wasn't just right.

"Deep inside, the boy yearned to protect those he loved. Even at the cost of his own life."

He only left the hospital when the police officer from earlier had come to tell him that visiting hours were over. After that, he began his trek back home so that he could face his inevitable confrontation
"Once upon a time," Arthur began, sitting against the headboard of the bed with Alfred at his side, staring at his hands folded on his lap to avoid looking at the aforementioned American. "There was a boy."

"I figured as much." Alfred said sarcastically, shutting himself up when the Briton shot him a deadpan look.

"There was a boy," the shorter blond resumed, still peering at the taller blond beside him in case he had any more smart-ass comments to make, returning his gaze elsewhere when no such comments were present. "And there wasn't much special about him; he had interests that some would view as boring, he had a family that always wanted the best for him, and he had a friend who had always stuck around for him. But if there was one thing that was special about this boy, it was his determination to protect those he loved."

Arthur paused for a moment, eyeing the bespectacled blond in case he had any more remarks to make. "Throughout his whole life, he had been the one who had been taken care of by his loved ones. By his family who always wanted the best for him, and by his friend who had always stuck around for him. When he was younger, the boy was oblivious to the true nature of the world and the cruelties it had to offer."

He looked at his hands again, amazed at how fast they had clenched into fists in such a short span of time. "But when he grew older, he saw the worry and suffering his family and friend experienced because of reality's horrors. He saw the pain other people caused them, and was nearly driven mad with the belief he couldn't do anything to help."

"So what did he do?" The American wondered out loud as he pulled his legs to his chest, his head sitting atop his knees. He stared at the Englishman beside him, intrigue and a unique brand of attentiveness bubbling to the surface of his sapphire irises; a brand Arthur couldn't put a name on for unbeknownst reasoning.

"Deep inside, he yearned to protect those he loved," Arthur continued, a flash of lightning flushing the room with blinding-white for a split-second. "Even at the cost of his own life."

Alfred's eyes widened a bit at that, but he remained quiet.

"He spent the next couple of years trying to do all he could to help change the world into a better place for his loved ones," the Brit expressed as he tucked some sandy locks of hair behind his ear, completely missing how the American's eyes grew a bit larger. "But he always felt that, no matter what he did, he couldn't protect them from evil. There was always going to be another threat that stood in his way, another obstacle to overcome. He felt...helpless."

Alfred swallowed thickly, still staring at Arthur. "So...what did he do?"

Arthur stared back, betraying no emotion in spite of the unpleasant sensation of his insides twisting into nervous little knots. "If the king was in checkmate, the game would end. So, he decided to confront the evil directly with no means of backing down. He would face the threats and obstacles that would come his way; he wouldn't stop until he had achieved his goal for the sake of those he loved. And, in turn-"

*He would be considered a villain.*
"He would be considered a hero." Arthur finished, being the first one to break their visual connection by glancing away towards the window a second time. The rain had diminished to the point of drizzle over the course of ten minutes, the lightning still prevalent but the thunder long-gone, no longer tormenting the ears of his tall companion with whom he held dear. "The end."

"The end?" Alfred repeated, tilting his head in puzzlement. He readjusted his position from holding his knees to sitting on them as he properly faced the Englishman, catching the latter off-guard. "You said it was a tragedy, though. Why would it be sad for him to be considered a hero?"

"T-to be honest, that's the extent of my knowledge about the story," the bushy-browed Briton fibbed, him being the one to pull his legs to his chest. "All I remember was up to that point, and that it was a tragedy. I assume you wouldn't consider it sad?"

Alfred scratched the back of his head sheepishly, not meeting Arthur's line-of-sight. "Not really." He admitted, quirking a skeptical look from the male opposite him. "I mean, how could it be sad if he's considered a hero? If anything, it'd be sad if he had good intentions in mind but people constantly kept thinking of him as the villain."

Arthur was relieved Alfred wasn't looking at him, given he would have undoubtedly noticed how much blood had drained out of his face. Oh my God.

"You have a point there," he managed to say in a semi-normal manner, trying to think of a way to send the conversation into a different direction before it ventured into very, VERY unstable territory. "But…wouldn't it be tragic to assume that, because of his determination to topple over the evil that threatened his loved ones, he ended up pushing away the people he fought so hard to protect?"

Arthur wasn't sure whether he was even remotely referring to himself, anymore; his current goal was to spout random nonsense that could deter Alfred from potentially discovering his secret, something he should have originally done in hindsight. Regardless of his sleep-deprival and slight mood swings caused by said sleep-deprival, he shouldn't have so hastily jumped into playing storyteller when the story Alfred requested was the one that could hint the most at things that shouldn't be hinted at.

I'm probably overthinking things again, the Brit internally sighed, looking back towards the American who had scooted back a few feet, toying with his fingers and unable to mask anxiety from his overall body language. But I definitely want to get the topic elsewhere. How could I do that without seeming odd, though?

"Arthur," Alfred addressed, the equivalent of a slap to the face for the blond's thoughts. For what felt like the millionth time that evening, Arthur met his gaze and was shocked at what was clear as day across his expression. He looked really nervous and scared, wearing the same look the Englishman could remember associating with thunderstorms. "I…"

"Are you alright? You look like you're going to be sick," Arthur mentioned, raising a thick eyebrow when the American shook his head quickly in disagreement.

"N-no, it's not that," he sputtered, waving his hands around like a stereotypical Italian. He took a deep breath and buried his face in his hands, provoking apprehension to dig into the shorter male's chest. "It's just…I…I want—no, I need to tell you something. Something that's really important since I…"

"Since you what?" The Englishman inquired, removing his arms from around his knees so that he could sit Indian-style on the bed and lean against the wall. His pulse had reduced in its earlier speed given how close he might have been to having his identity revealed, but it still maintained a quicker-than-normal pace given how odd his best friend was acting all of a sudden.
He really has been acting more and more odd, as of late, Arthur thought, his toes curling at the bitter acknowledgement while Alfred tried/failed to look nonchalant while taking deep breaths to prevent himself from hyperventilating. In ways I can't expect, in ways that confuse me. He's like America in that he's become a bit more of an enigma than he previously was, to the point where his mindset isn't as determinable as it used to be.

Just that thought made his insides churn again, almost as if they had never left.

Arthur rolled his eyes when fully realizing the bespectacled blond's antics, curious as to what was getting him so worked up all of a sudden. He leaned forward and laid a hand on his shoulder, dragging him out of his thoughts as he had earlier done. "Alfred?"

Emerald met sapphire, and the American let out a heavy sigh that made the Briton's heart feel heavy. "Arthur," he vocalized, holding his friend's hand steady on his shoulder. "I wanted to tell you, s- since I don't want to push you away, that I'm actually...

The sound of 'Harry Potter in 99 Seconds' blaring out of nowhere nearly gave Arthur a heart attack as both himself and Alfred jolted at the unexpected ringtone.

"S-sorry about that," Arthur apologized, moving to the side of the bed and retrieving his iphone from the table. He grimaced on the inside when noticing how low his phone's battery was (hence why he had tried calling Kiku earlier on the hotel room's wired phone), but his brow furrowed when seeing the caller I.D. "Would it be alright if I take this?"

Alfred nodded quickly, still pale and a bit shaken, but oddly relieved.

Arthur swiped his thumb across the screen to accept the call, held it up to his ear, and listened intently with a dubious air about him. "Yes," he spoke after a moment, his eyes narrowing and his caution increasing all the more. "You have the correct number. Who is this?"

He went silent for about a minute, the crease in his face diminishing and replaced with understanding, then slowly, astonishment. "I see," he agreed in a dazed tone, him being the one to nod. "I'll be over as quickly as time allows. Thank you for your time, and goodbye."

The blond swiped his thumb a second time to end the call before sitting on the edge of the bed again, his phone dangling limply between his fingers as he blinked several times.

In spite of his previous bout of nervousness, Alfred was the first to speak.

"Are you okay?" He murmured, evoking the Brit to return his focus back to the current situation at hand (if there even was one, unborn from overthinking and unspoken confessions). "Who was that, anyway?"

Arthur raked a hand through his tousled sandy locks, making it somehow wilder. He exhaled a sigh, his mind already grinding and calculating his next move as both himself and as his criminal persona.

He glanced up at Alfred and cracked a small smile.

"Would you like to come with me to England?"
Author's Note: Another installment successfully updated; you know, this originally took me an entire summer to research, type, revise, edit, and read before publishing on fanfiction.net, so I hope that this chapter was particularly enthralling. Anyway, thank you all so much for reading and commenting on this work, it's so great to hear from people regarding my stories so that I can evolve and incorporate certain elements I may not have otherwise considered. I'll be sure to upload another segment soon, so hopefully you won't have to wait long.

Until then? Don't do anything, as you are already awesome.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!